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USAID TOMORROW

An Interview with Duane Acker



➤ Americans strongly disagree about U.S. assistance to lower income countries. Some oppose it because they believe that it creates competition for U.S. farm producers. Others see it as an essential part of creating a more equitable world. Legislators, national government officials and organization leaders reflect these diverse opinions. In some cases they are important contributors to the opinions.

Disagreements relate to program goals, as well as organizational arrangements for carrying out the programs. Duane Acker, former President of Kansas State University and a part-time assistant to USAID administrators has had a unique opportunity to consider the role of U.S. international assistance in the 1990s. As chairman of the 1988/89 Task Force, "Food and Agriculture In Developing Countries: Some Goals and Directions for U.S. Efforts in the 1990s," he was challenged to reflect on USAID's record and to chart a course for the Agency.

Major conclusions of the Task Force report are summarized on pages 15 and 16. In addition, Dr. Acker shares his responses to questions posed by *CHOICES'* Editor Lyle Schertz in an interview in Washington, DC on September 15, 1989.

CHOICES: Your report calls for a stronger role for food and agriculture people in USAID. Why should we expect the response to this admonition to be any different in the coming years than it has been to the same admonition in the past 30 years?

Acker: A very important principle for an organization that delivers products over a wide geographic area is that it have both strong geographic and strong subject matter structures, the latter to insure product development, research, quality control, supporting the product in the field, and relating the product to central management, funders, and the public. USAID has a very strong geographic structure, but expertise in food and agriculture is scattered, with no visible or effective organizational focus.

This is really, then, a management issue, and I am optimistic that Agency leadership will address it.

CHOICES: It is commonly thought that AID program officers and mission directors gain their promotions by writing big checks for visible projects. Most agricultural projects are considered "poor cousins." Why should the AID program type people yield their power to a bunch of "Aggies" or even go along with the suggested shifts in program priorities?

Acker: Your question discloses some biases. It is true that the promotion system tends to reward those who start new projects and highly visible projects. That, plus the rapid staff turnover in missions, is costly. It also works against some food availability efforts because most of these must be long-term.

Let me illustrate. A child immunization project is visible and quickly yields a dramatic 90 to 100 percent success rate. A child vaccinated is generally protected. But it is rare for even a concentrated effort in a food system to yield more than a three percent increase per year. Yet, the food system must be enhanced, including the government policies, agribusinesses, animal agriculture, and food processing, if the vaccinated children are to be productive and the total economy is to grow.

On the program direction shifts there generally has been full agreement. The task force made several recommendations for program continuity, including giving high marks in personnel evaluation for continuing projects that are productive.

I have also urged capable young agriculture staff to set their sights on becoming program officers or mission directors.

CHOICES: Why not put the USDA-Land Grant system in charge of the food and agricultural international assistance program?

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Acker: That is an option, especially if USAID doesn't move aggressively. LDC economic growth is certainly critical to the future of U.S. agriculture, which has to export 30 to 60% of some of its major commodities, and the USDA-Land Grant system is closer to U.S. agriculture leaders.

AID's predecessor development agencies did well in the 1950s and 1960s; witness the economic growth and stabilization of Taiwan, South Korea, India, and others that resulted in part from U.S. help in food and agriculture research and training, including the building of experiment stations, extension, and policy expertise in government ministries. Then there was a period when our development efforts appeared to try to bypass the economic development sequences and be looking for the quick fix.

In 1975, Congressman Findley and Senator Humphrey led a bipartisan effort to get development back on track. A part of that was Title XII of the Foreign Assistance Act, which emphasized building food and agriculture expertise and institutions, and using the U.S. land-grant universities more.

I take heart that this Task Force effort was *initiated internally*, and that both of the last two AID Administrators, Peter McPherson and Alan Woods, moved aggressively in these areas. McPherson lengthened the average country assignment, admonished missions to carry through projects, called for focusing agriculture programs, and urged using food aid more for development. Woods named and charged the Task Force. Before his untimely death, he had approved 14 of the 29 recommendations and was studying the rest.

CHOICES: Who, in and out of government, is supportive of the Task Force Report?

Acker: There is widespread support for the goals, the directions, and the areas of investment, both inside and outside the agency. There is less unanimity on the recommendations of how to implement, and that is understandable. External people are little concerned about internal organization; internal people may worry about how a change will affect them.

CHOICES: What are the implications for U.S. agricultural institutions?

Acker: U.S. agriculture and natural resources leadership need to support and help guide U.S. foreign aid. Most U.S. farm leaders are reticent about vocally supporting LDC development because so many of their organization members still look at foreign aid as building export competition. But LDCs must develop economically, consume more nutritious food, and export, if they are to have the money to import, to make our export markets grow. U.S. agricultural leadership, *for the sake of U.S. agriculture*, must play an active role, in educating their clientele to the importance of foreign aid, and in helping AID do its job right.

One of my personal goals has been to see leaders of major agricultural groups, when they come to Washington to pressure USDA, EPA, or members of Congress, stop at AID to "pound the desk" of the AID administrator to achieve more economic development in the LDCs.

CHOICES: Your report also emphasized food aid. Do you visualize changes in how the U.S. food aid programs are operated or who



administers them? How does food aid relate to your vision of food and agricultural assistance programs and international assistance in general?

Acker: First, there should be some legislative simplification of the many different and overlapping food aid titles. Also, the GSM, Export Enhancement Program and Targeted Export Assistance programs have some similarities to food aid that is sent on credit. There is sentiment for considering all credit type programs to be related and separating them from long-term development/humanitarian/emergency programs, with the latter to be all grant. That has many advantages, and could allow streamlined management.

USDA and AID should manage food aid. Treasury, State, and OMB must be involved in policy, guidelines, country relationships, and budget, and that can be accommodated in the interagency Development Coordinating Committee. But a committee cannot administer or manage. That role belongs with USDA and AID, which have line linkages to field staff.

Most important: Food aid, like money is a development resource. Though food is bulky, and expensive to ship and manage, it does have some advantages. In food-for-work programs, low income families are paid in food for building roads or other work. The result is both better infrastructure and income transfer. Research by the International Food Policy Research Institute suggests we *haven't even approached* the volume of food aid that could be constructively used in food-for-work efforts in those LDC areas with high development potential.

Another advantage is potential political support. We'll likely have continued tight U.S. budgets and continued U.S. grain surpluses. Political support to move U.S. surplus grain *for development* can help make more of the food resource available, and increase the total development impact.

CHOICES: With the criticism that U.S. agriculture is bespoiling the environment, why should we presume to help LDCs in agriculture?

Acker: Recent surveys say U.S. farmers are deeply concerned about the effect of pesticides and fertilizer on ground water. If these farmers were to write out the goals for their farming operations, they would likely include the same phrase, "while maintaining and enhancing the natural resource base," that is in USAID's food and agriculture program goals. That phrase expresses the level of sensitivity and determination that exists among USAID food and agriculture staff. C