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Social Science and Related Implications

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What we are discussing is a U.S. public policy document. Its message reinforces and is complemented by the rising concerns of non-farm groups. The right to food is discussed as a component of the human rights package. The World Food Council, some think, may become a serious forum for North-South dialogue. There is hope that Public Law 480 may become a food for development program with decreased emphasis on surplus disposal and diplomatic leverage. More importantly, international interdependencies among nations and societies are increasingly understood. Thus a variety of forces is at work to place at least part of the study's recommendations on the national policy agenda.

In an effort to improve the performance of development aid, donors are demanding more sophisticated and rigorously prepared projects and programs. The capacity of many LDCs to meet these standards is still limited. As a result, there has developed an increasing flow of development aid searching for suitable programs and projects. Equation of demand and supply cannot rely in the long term on transitory expatriate expertise. Rather, domestic LDC capacity to meet this need and tap into the global community of science, technology and governance must increase. Much of what the WFNS recommends is intended to speed this process. But the new aid resources coming on stream will have to show at least some results rather soon if desired momentum is to be sustained.

Against this background, four observations:

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First, as agricultural economists we may well be challenged to provide more than we are prepared to deliver. Scientific and technological advances of biophysical and engineering types, while exciting, critically important, and likely to be forthcoming, are in themselves insufficient to the task. Non-technological constraints may well be the critical ones. Involved are proper public policies in the rich as well as in the poor countries and development of the institutions, programs and projects they foster. Biophysical scientists frequently speak with conviction when they say: "We have the technological package right. All that is holding it back is wrong-headed price, trade, tax, land tenure, exchange rate, or investment policies". Often economists are the first to agree. We also know, however, that much technology has been unsuccessfully promoted because it was not well tailored to the agro-climatic and socio-economic circumstances of the intended users.

Second, what we seek and what our fellow social and biophysical scientists are urging upon us is joint involvement in capacity building and research. In this connection the experience of the International Agricultural Research Centers is instructive. Through high-quality biophysical research, much of it adaptive, some key technological advances are identified. At the national level, however, changes in the non-technological components of the production/distribution system are required in order to take full advantage of the improved technology. At the invitation of national programs, the centers' social and biophysical scientists work with the nation's scientists and policy makers to put the non-technological components into the total package. Thus the initial technological advance catalyzes

institutional and policy changes. Such technology-led changes are part and parcel of an imperfect institutional development process. They often make it easier for the right questions to be asked, heard, and acted upon. Effective participation by social scientists requires familiarity with the technology at hand and understanding of what is in the pipeline.

Third, for effectiveness, agricultural economists and social science colleagues need to enter the scene on an ex ante rather than an ex post basis. Biophysical scientists seldom take kindly to the social scientist who, absent at pre-implementation stages, comes in for the evaluation and tells everyone else what they did wrong. Of course, social scientists are involved in diagnosis, planning, and ex ante assessment of the consequences of change, but my plea is for even greater ex ante responsibility bearing and involvement.

Fourth, as social scientists we almost instinctively invest heavily in self-examination. Generally the outcome is constructive. But to my view we should not let this process deter us from getting on with the job. Given the inadequacies of development theory and our limited knowledge of how to induce desired institutional change, we still have to learn by trying, by ferreting out what works and why.

Concluding, I view the study as a successful interdisciplinary effort. Having worked on the PSAC World Food Study of 1967, I've learned not to expect miracles. I do think, however, that international food and nutrition R&D is being made more legitimate--mostly for the right reasons. As this occurs, we may have to run to catch up. That's precisely what I'd like to see happen.