

'Do development planners learn from experience? Experts reflect upon the first generation of Green Revolution programmes'

Jonathan Harwood
University of Manchester

As is well-known, the first generation of Green Revolution programmes came under criticism from the late 1960s for failing to serve smallholders. The response during the 1970s and '80s was partly to devise a number of new approaches to development which were designed to remedy this deficiency (eg, participatory plant-breeding, farming systems research). But the criticism also generated a large body of writing in which green revolutionaries reflected upon what had gone wrong and what would be necessary to fix future programmes. Three fundamental issues were raised:

- (1) More effort needed to be directed toward decentralising programmes and organising the peasant-farmers whom one wanted to reach.
- (2) Field staff needed to be informed about the problems of peasant agriculture, willing to learn from farmers as well as local experts and, at the most basic level, sympathetic to the plight of their resource-poor clients.
- (3) More thought needed to be devoted to which measures would be politically feasible under the circumstances.

The odd thing about these recommendations is that all three of them characterised successful development programmes already before World War Two: in some European colonies from the 1930s, in Japan from 1880 to 1930, and in various peasant-oriented plant-breeding stations in Central Europe from ca. 1900. It looks, therefore, as though the first generation of Green Revolution planners paid little attention to the successes and failures of previous programmes (and some evidence suggests that not much has changed since then).

Why has this occurred? I will suggest that the answer may depend on which level of a development organisation one examines. At least some of the natural and social scientists in the field do seem concerned to learn from the mistakes of past programmes. Planners in Washington or London, however, probably lack the time (and perhaps the motivation) to do so. And top-level officials who authorise such programmes are generally indifferent to the issue since development projects are often politically useful - in both donor and recipient countries - whether or not they make any impact upon poverty.