

Appreciating the Hidden Values of Paddy Cultivation Towards a New Policy Framework for Agriculture

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Paddy cultivation forms the basis of traditional Southeast Asian societies and the livelihoods of the people who comprise those societies. Historically speaking, paddy cultivation has always (at least for several millennia) been multi-functional – providing not only the raw material for subsistence and trade, but also serving as the central focus for family and community life as well as spiritual and religious expression. While times have certainly changed, this paper suggests that the multi-functional nature of paddy cultivation continues to be important, and that our concept of rural “livelihood” should incorporate these cultural dimensions.

Traditional vs. Modern Paddy Cultivation

Twentieth Century economic developments changed the well-integrated world of paddy farmers and imposed new pressures while offering new options from modern agriculture. In Bali, for example, farmers no longer had to follow the traditional cropping calendar imposed by the temple priests. Thanks to new crop varieties from IRRI and new infrastructure from the ADB-financed Bali Irrigation Project, farmers were encouraged to adopt modern methods that treat farming more as *agri-business*, rather than

agri-culture.

The Balinese case has become a symbol of the dangers of ignorantly tinkering with a carefully evolved agricultural system. The disruption of coordinated planting times allowed insect populations to spike causing severe crop losses (Lansing 1991). The project-imposed diversion weirs were incompatible with customary water rights resulting in conflicts among farmers (ADB 1998). The lesson from Bali, and from many other cases of externally imposed agricultural strategies, is that traditional farming systems are often highly evolved, socio-technical systems, and the introduction of any improvements must be attempted very carefully, taking into account the potential cascade of multiplier effects from seemingly small changes.

Respect for the technical sophistication of traditional farming systems has now become an accepted tenant within the current paradigm of agricultural development. Indigenous technical knowledge even has its own acronym (ITK). And the concept of rural *livelihoods* goes even further in capturing the complex interactions of the farming system with the larger economic context of handicrafts, wage labor, remittances from abroad, etc. The legitimacy that the development profession has grudgingly accorded to the economic strategies of rural farm families, however, has not been extended to the overall cultural lifeways of the people themselves. Traditional beliefs in river spirits and rice gods are dismissed as superstitions. Local customs about diet, nutrition, and health are viewed with suspicion, if not ridicule. And traditional values about time and money are met with exasperation by Western advisors preaching the virtues of market-based capitalism.

The Conventional Model

According to the conventional model of development, traditional family and

community-based modes of paddy cultivation are doomed to an eventual demise in the face of competition from industrial-style producers. While many observers of economic development – myself included – are uncomfortable with the social and cultural costs of economic change, the process is generally accepted as both necessary and inevitable. After all, the growing population of the world needs to be fed, and the most efficient arrangements for producing food must be followed.

This conventional model of development is applied to paddy cultivation and rural livelihoods as a sort of economic determinism which requires changes in cultural values towards more economic thinking. Traditional societies are advised to “get with the program”; give up your traditional customs, and adopt Western-style materialism. The only alternative is poverty.

Another Approach: Happiness

The message of this paper is that there is a middle way, and it is a far more interesting way to live than the materialistic extremism advocated by conventional development experts. Life is more than money, and livelihoods are more than economics. Paddy cultivation is not only an *economic* strategy; it is a part of a way of life which needs to be considered in those very broad terms.

The concept of *Gross National Happiness (GNH)*, which forms the center-piece of Bhutan's development policies, captures the broad dimensions of life which I feel need to be incorporated into our concept of *livelihoods*. There are four pillars to the concept of GNH as defined in the Bhutan context: (1) economic development; (2) cultural heritage; (3) preservation and sustainable use of the environment; and (4) good governance. It is significant that economic development is listed first. The dominance of economics is natural and justified, but as a means, and not an end in itself. The

dimension I will focus on in this paper is that of cultural heritage. The dimension of environment is addressed in other conference papers. The governance dimension is also relevant to paddy cultivation (e.g., irrigator associations as a type of local governance) but is omitted from the present discussion in the interest of maintaining focus. Let me now turn to cultural heritage, which I will gloss with the more general term, “culture”.

Culture and Livelihoods

How does paddy agriculture contribute to the cultural dimensions of rural life? I will sub-divide these dimensions into four categories: (1) rural social structure at family and community-level, (2) cultural identity, (3) spiritual and religious life, and (4) aesthetic beauty.

Social Structure. The irrigation systems used for paddy cultivation largely determine the location of village settlements. In Sri Lanka, villages grew up around the reservoirs (tanks) constructed for irrigating paddy and other crops. In Bali, village lands are defined by irrigation canals that are linked to larger networks supervised by priests. In Bhutan, the villages typically take water from a stream diversion built and maintained by farmers from that village. The paddy irrigation infrastructure serves as a physical representation of the village community. Family and community life is organized around the cultivation cycle, with periodic labor exchange for transplanting and harvesting, and social gatherings tied to agricultural rituals. This dimension can be thought of as the social capital of paddy agriculture. The organizational depth of these social interactions serves multiple functions beyond paddy cultivation (e.g., credit circles, political action, etc) while also providing social “happiness” directly through the satisfaction of social interaction.

Cultural Identity. The interconnectedness of food, farming, and identity is

fundamental to traditional societies as well as modern ones. An American Indian farmer explained this relationship in kinship terms: “The [traditional crops of] corn, beans, and squash plants are like our children. We don't have to live with our children, but life is much richer and happier when we do.” Traditional cultural identities are often seen as a luxury that modernity can no longer support, or even as a threat to national integration. The importance of traditional identity is typically appreciated only under the looming cloud of cultural extinction. Yet from a psychological perspective, cultural identity is fundamental to emotional balance and personal happiness. Traditional foods and crop varieties are a key part of this happiness. What is a Sri Lankan – or Bhutanese – or Balinese -- meal without rice? And more specifically, local varieties of rice, prepared in certain traditional ways? Even in many industrial societies (such as Japan and France) where the farming population has been reduced to a fraction of the work force, the identity with particular foods and farming practices continues to be valued.

Religion. The tasks of farming itself can be a spiritual practice. The interaction with plants and animals, the preparation of the soils, diverting of water, all have meanings that are systematized through rituals and ceremonies throughout Asia. The Water Temples of Bali are famous examples of merging religion and paddy cultivation, but less dramatic illustrations are everywhere, from the Hanuman deity guarding a tubewell in India to prayers on the threshing floor in Sri Lanka. The daily experience of spiritual life is tied to the cultivation process.

Aesthetics. The landscape value of paddy fields is important to both rural producers and urban consumers. In some cases, these values may be harnessed through eco-tourism (as some resorts in Bali have attempted to do), but in most other cases, the agrarian beauty of the landscape is a type of common resource provided free to the

observer. Another type of aesthetic benefit provided by traditional paddy cultivation is the rice itself, which may be valued for its culinary qualities (taste, texture) as well as for its cultural heritage value (as a symbol of a particular region or ethnic group). This is why farmers often grow one variety of rice for selling, while growing lower-yielding traditional varieties for home consumption.

Implications for Agricultural Policy

Both farmers and urban food consumers share an interest in the preservation of certain dimensions of traditional paddy cultivation, for the simple reason that these aspects contribute to their happiness. Is this a valid basis for selecting among development options? The idea that development is exclusively the domain of economics has emerged for historical reasons, not logical ones. What would development policies look like if psychologists, or priests, were employed as the advisors? The policies would probably be quite similar to Bhutan's policy of Gross National Happiness, which closely reflects the Buddhist heritage of that country.

Happy paddy farmers? Happy rice consumers? Are these realistic objectives for agricultural policy? Perhaps we should turn the question around: If agricultural policy is NOT oriented toward increasing general happiness, then what is its purpose? And if policies are indeed oriented to increasing happiness, then the dimensions of happiness need to be addressed.

References

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