

# Rural Development: Putting the Last First

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Rural poverty unperceived

The past quarter century has been a period of unprecedented change and progress in the developing world. And yet despite this impressive record, some 800 million individuals continue to be trapped in what I have termed absolute poverty: a condition of life so characterized by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality, and low life expectancy as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency.

Robert S. McNamara, 1978, Foreword to *World Development Report*

The latter-day ease with which officials, businessmen and international 'experts' can speed along highways has the effect of almost entirely divorcing the rural sector from its urban counterpart; no longer must 'dry season' earth roads be negotiated and preparations made for many night stops in villages. It is now possible to travel 100 kilometres or more through the countryside (in limousine comfort) during the morning, and get back to the city in time for lunch having observed nothing of the rural condition. Why the hurry (one may ask)? Can there be no digression from the superhighway path? But account has to be taken of the age-old motive for human action, *fear of involvement*. Time does not change human behaviour so very much, and still today what might be unpleasant or personally demanding, but is not actually seen, is often ignored.

Margaret Haswell, 1975, in *The Nature of Poverty*, pp. 213-14

What the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve about.  
Old English Proverb

Outsiders are people concerned with rural development who are themselves neither rural nor poor. Many are headquarters and field staff of government organisations in the Third World. They also include academic researchers, aid agency personnel, bankers, businessmen, consultants, doctors, engineers, journalists, lawyers, politicians, priests, school teachers, staff of training institutes, workers in voluntary agencies, and other professionals. Outsiders underperceive rural poverty. They are attracted to and trapped in urban 'cores' which generate and communicate their own sort of knowledge while rural 'peripheries' are isolated and neglected. The direct rural experience of most urban-based outsiders is limited to the brief and hurried visits, from urban centres, of rural development tourism. These exhibit six biases against contact with and learning from the poorer people. These are *spatial* – urban, tarmac and roadside; *project* – towards places where there are projects; *person* – towards those who are better off, men rather than women, users of services and adopters of practices rather than non-users and non-adopters, and those who are active, present and living; *seasonal*, avoiding the bad times of the wet season; *diplomatic*, not seeking out the poor for fear of giving offence; and *professional*, confined to the concerns of the outsider's specialisation. As a result, the poorer rural people are little seen and even less is the nature of their poverty understood.

## We, the outsiders

The extremes of rural poverty in the third world are an outrage. Faced with the facts, few would disagree with that statement. The outrage is not just that avoidable deprivation, suffering and death are intolerable; it is also that these coexist with affluence. Most of those who read this book will, like the writer, be immeasurably better off than the hundreds of millions of poorer rural people, living in this same world, who have to struggle to find enough to eat, who are defenceless against disease, who expect some of their children to die. Whatever the estimates of numbers – and endless scholastic argument is possible about definitions, statistics and the scale and degree of deprivation – there are so many people who are so poor, the prospects of future misery are so appalling, and present efforts to eliminate that misery are so inadequate, that numbers are almost irrelevant in seeing what to do next. So much needs to be done, so much more radically, that no estimates, however optimistic, could undermine the case for trying to do much more, much better, and faster.

But who should act? The poorer rural people, it is said, must

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help themselves; but this, trapped as they are, they often cannot do. The initiative, in enabling them better to help themselves, lies with outsiders who have more power and resources and most of whom are neither rural nor poor. This book has been written in the hope that it will be of some use to these outsiders, especially but not only those directly engaged in rural development work. Many of these are headquarters, regional, district and subdistrict staff in government departments in Third World countries – in administration, agriculture, animal husbandry, community development, cooperatives, education, forestry, health, irrigation, land development, local government, public works, water development, and the like. They also include all others, from and in both rich and poor countries, whose choices, action and inaction impinge on rural conditions and the poorer rural people – including academic researchers, aid agency and technical cooperation personnel, bankers, businessmen, consultants, doctors, engineers, journalists, lawyers, politicians, priests, school teachers, staff of training institutes and voluntary agencies, and other professionals.

We, these outsiders, have much in common. We are relatively well-off, literate, and mostly urban-based. Our children go to good schools. We carry no parasites, expect long life, and eat more than we need. We have been trained and educated. We read books and buy newspapers. People like us live in all countries of the world, belong to all nationalities, and work in all disciplines and professions. We are a class.

The puzzle is that we, the people of this class, do not do more. If any of us had a sick or starving child in the room with us, we imagine we would do something about it. A child crying from pain or hunger in a room is hard to shut out; it pins responsibility onto those present and demands, impels, action. Yet we live in a world where millions of children cry from avoidable hunger and pain every day, where we can do something about it, and where for the most part we do little. There are some exceptions: they include those who live with, work with, and learn with the poorer rural people. A very few have chosen to reject the privileges of our class for themselves and their children and live lives which reflect their convictions. Yet most of us manage to evade those choices. What is the difference between the room and the world? Why do we do so much less than we could?

There are many explanations. One is the simple fact of distance. The child is not in the room with us, but in Bihar, Bangladesh, the Sahel or a nameless camp for refugees, out of sight, sound and mind. Time, energy, money, imagination and compassion are finite. People deal first with what confronts them.

Rural poverty is remote. It is even remote, most of the time, for those outsiders who are 'working in the field' but who are urban-based, like government and other professionals in regional, district or subdistrict headquarters. One starting point is then to examine, as this first chapter does, the nature of contact or lack of contact between urban-based outsiders concerned with rural development and the poorer rural people.

But distance is only the easy part of the explanation. There is also a wilful element of choice. Outsiders choose what to do – where to go, what to see, and whom to meet. What is perceived depends on the perceiver. Outsiders have their own interests, preferences and preconceptions, their own rationalisations, their own defences for excluding or explaining the discordant and the distressing. Selfishness is a powerful force. Putting one's family first seems natural and good, and 'charity begins at home' is a great let-out. Disillusion with development failures and a knowing cynicism about 'where the money goes' are given as reasons for doing nothing. Outsiders are often ignorant about rural poverty but do not want to know what they do not know. The less they have of direct and discordant contact and learning, and the less they know, so the easier it is for myth to mask reality. Outsiders as a class need comforting beliefs: that rural deprivation is not so bad; that their prosperity is not based on it; that the poorer people are used to it and like life their way; or that they are lazy and improvident and have brought it on themselves. Such convenient beliefs about social ills are suspect. They present a challenge for analysis. Critical self-examination is not easy. What follows in this book is only one beginning. It invites outsiders concerned with rural development to analyse the ways they learn, think, feel and act, and to see how these might be changed to make things less bad especially for the more deprived of those who are rural and poor.

## Cores and peripheries of knowledge

The argument is set in a context of cores and peripheries of knowledge. Globally, these reflect a gradient from extremes of wealth to extremes of poverty. At one end there coexist rich, urban, industrialised, high status cores, and at the other, poor, rural, agricultural and low status peripheries. In the cores there is a mutual attraction and reinforcement of power, prestige, resources, professionals, professional training and the capacity to generate and disseminate knowledge. Both internationally and within individual third world countries, centripetal forces draw

resources and educated people away from the peripheries and in towards the cores. Within third world countries, skills migrate from rural to urban areas, and from smaller to larger urban centres, feeding in turn the international flows of the brain drain. The centripetal system is self-reinforcing. Staff and resources drawn to the rich, urban, industrial cores add to the mass which generates prestige and rewards and attracts yet more staff and resources.

At the very centre are the black holes of professionalism – space programmes and defence in the United States and the USSR – sucking in staff and resources which are then lost to sight. Research points where the rich and powerful direct it – to arms, rockets, chips, cars, minerals, chemicals, diseases of the affluent and ageing, and the mechanised agriculture of temperate climates. Trained and drawn towards these cores are those professions which directly touch rural life, like medicine, engineering and agriculture, looking inwards to the establishments of the rich world as their arbiters of priorities and excellence. At the other extreme, there are government staff, voluntary workers, and researchers pushing out into, clinging to, or stuck in the rural periphery. Some have failed to move inwards into the system; some have rejected it; and some are trying to change it.

The allocation of resources to research is a measure of the imbalances of the system. Overwhelmingly, research and development (R and D) expenditure in the world is concentrated in the industrialised countries. It might have been thought that rural poverty deserved a higher priority than defence, yet we find over 50 per cent of the research scientists in the world engaged in defence work (DF 1979). In 1980, although there was a stockpile of nuclear weapons with one million times the destructive power of the Hiroshima bomb, the USA and USSR were spending well over \$100 million per day on upgrading their nuclear arsenals, compared with a recent figure of a derisory \$60 million per year devoted to tropical diseases research (Sivard 1980, p. 5; Walsh and Warren 1979, p. 20). Over a wide range, there remains deep ignorance about many researchable physical and social aspects of rural life – soil erosion, the diarrhoeas, the political economy of pastoralism, drudgery-reducing technology for rural women, the management of canal irrigation systems, levels of human calorie requirements, seasonal interactions between nutrition work, sickness and indebtedness, the relative importance of different contingencies which make poor people poorer, forms of organisation to overcome the tragedy of the commons – to make but a quick, short list which could be extended many times over.

A tiny diversion of resources to increase sensitive research on topics such as these might mitigate the misery of many millions of people. But the mainstream of the R and D system flows in another direction, passing by on the other side, and drawing resources away after it.

Why this should be so can be understood partly in terms of how education and professional training articulate with the preoccupations, power and prestige of the cores. Prolonged professional conditioning has built biases of perception deep into many of those concerned with rural development. These direct attention towards whatever is urban, industrial, 'high' technology, capital-intensive, appropriate for temperate climates, and marketed and exported; to the neglect of what is rural, agricultural, 'low' technology, labour-intensive, appropriate for tropical climates, retained by the household and locally consumed. Many interlocking influences shape ambitions, mould ways of seeing things and sway choices of where in the world one is to work. These include textbooks, curricula, examination questions, professional journals, academic awards, national and international distinctions, professional values and ideas of sophistication, the media, the priority accorded to armaments and security, the desire of elites for international mobility. Most professionals face away from rural areas; most live in towns. And even among that minority who face the other way, or who live in rural areas, their conditioning has often disabled them. They direct their attention to those with whom they have most in common – the less poor rural people. They see and link in with whatever they can find which is familiar and prestigious – with whatever is modern, marketed, urban in origin, and sophisticated. They prescribe for only that specialised part of the diverse rural reality for which their training has prepared them.

At its ugliest, such professional training inculcates an arrogance in which superior knowledge and superior status are assumed. Professionals then see the rural poor as ignorant, backward and primitive, and as people who have only themselves to blame for their poverty. Social Darwinism then lives again in the ideologies of the prosperous and therefore virtuous elites looking out on the rural mass, the poverty of whose members reflects their lack of virtue. The very phrase – 'the rural mass' – fosters stereotypes, convenient glosses hiding ignorance of the reality. Not only do urban-based professionals and officials often not know the rural reality; worse, they do not know that they do not know.

## The urban trap

It is by no means only the international system of knowledge and prestige, with its rewards and incentives, that draws professionals away from rural areas and up through the hierarchy of urban and international centres. They are also attracted and held fast by better houses, hospitals, schools, communications, consumer goods, recreation, social services, facilities for work, salaries and career prospects. In third world countries as elsewhere, academics, bureaucrats, foreigners and journalists are all drawn to towns or based in them. All are victims, though usually willing victims, of the urban trap. Let us consider them in turn.

For academics, it is cheaper, safer and more cost-effective in terms of academic output, to do urban rather than rural research. If rural work is to be done, then peri-urban is preferable to work in remoter areas. Rural research is carried out mainly by the young and inexperienced. For them rural fieldwork is a rite of passage, an initiation which earns them the right to do no more, giving them a ticket to stay in the town. But the fieldwork must first be performed in the correct manner as prescribed by custom. The social anthropologist has to spend a year or so in the village, the sociologist to prepare, apply, analyse and write up a questionnaire survey. The ritual successfully completed, the researcher is appointed and promoted. Marriage and children follow. For women, pregnancy and child care may then dislocate a career and prevent further rural exposure. For men, family responsibilities tie less, but still restrain. Promotion means responsibility and time taken with teaching, supervising, administration, and university or institutional politics. The stage of the domestic cycle with small children means accumulation of responsibilities – driving children to school and picking them up again, family occasions, careful financial management to make ends meet, moonlighting and consultancies to supplement a meagre salary – all of which take time.

The researcher has now learnt enough to make a contribution to rural research. He or she has the confidence and wit to explore new ideas and to pursue the unexpected. There is evidence enough of this in the books by social anthropologists who have undertaken second and subsequent spells of fieldwork. But it is precisely at this time that the able academic is chained to desk, lectern and home. If the university rewards ability, then the more able persons are likely to be most trapped. Ageing, ability, promotion and the domestic cycle conspire to prevent further rural contact.

The amalgam which glues these forces together and finally

immobilises the would-be rural researcher in mid-career is overcommitment. It is a mystery why so many of the presumably intelligent people who do research are so miserably incompetent at managing their own lives. Academics can be found who are simultaneously supervising half a dozen theses (if their students can get near them), managing a major research project (actually managed by a junior administrator and by field staff), lecturing (from old notes or off-the-cuff), sitting on a dozen committees (or sending in, or failing to send in, apologies for absence), writing a couple of books (or adding notes to the draft by the junior author), developing a new curriculum or course (which for lack of time ends up much like a previous one), and carrying out a consultancy for an aid agency (which, for inescapable financial reasons, takes priority over all else). To judge from a limited and scattered sample, I suspect a positive correlation between overcommitment at work and size of family, though whether this reflects a lack of restraint and planning in both domains may be an idle speculation. But for such people, overcommitment is an addiction. In extreme cases, they take on more and more and complete less and less, complete it less and less well and, as they become more eminent, are less and less likely to be told their work is bad. Needless to say, there is also less and less time for any direct rural exposure: for the demands of students, researchers, administrators, committees, new curricula, books and consultancies all require presence in town. Ambition, inefficiency, and an inability to say no, tie the academic down, as an urban prisoner. Parole is rare and brief: rural contact is restricted to hectic excursions from the urban centre where the university or institute is sited.

For government staff, there are similar pressures and patterns. On first appointment, when ignorant and inexperienced, technical or administrative officers are posted to the poorer, remoter, and politically less significant areas. Those who are less able, less noticed, or less influential, remain there longer. The more able, and those who come favourably to attention or who have friends in headquarters, are soon transferred to more accessible or more prosperous rural areas, or to urban centres. Administration is, anyway, an urban-based and urban-biased activity. So with promotion, contact with rural areas, especially the remoter ones, recedes. If a serious error is committed, or a powerful politician offended, the officer may earn a 'penal posting', to serve out punishment time in some place with poor facilities – a pastoral area, an area without irrigation, an area distant from the capital, an area which is hot and unhealthy – in short, a place where poorer people will be found. But the pull of

urban life will remain: children's education, chances of promotion, congenial company, consumer goods, cinemas, libraries, hospitals, and quite simply power; all drawing bureaucrats away from rural areas and towards the major urban and administrative centres.

Once established in offices in the capital city, or in the regional or provincial headquarters, bureaucrats too are trapped. Unless they are idle and incompetent, or exceptionally able and well supported, they are quickly overcommitted. They are tied down by committees, subcommittees, memoranda, reports, urgent papers, personnel problems, financial management, and the professional substance of their work. There are political demands to which they must be able to react swiftly and efficiently. There are times of the year, during the budget cycle, when they cannot contemplate leaving their desks. The very emphasis on agricultural and rural development creates work, which holds them in their offices. If the government is inactive, they may be relatively free. But the more the government tries to do, so the more paperwork is generated, the more coordination and integration are called for, the more reports have to be written and read, and the more inter-ministerial and inter-departmental coordination and liaison committees are set up. The more important these committees become, so the more members they have, the longer their meetings take, and the longer their minutes grow. The demands of aid agencies are a final straw, requiring data, justifications, reports, evaluations, visits by missions, and meetings with ministers. More activity, more aid, more projects, more coordination – all these mean more time in the office and less in the field.

Foreigners are also urban-based and urban-biased. Foreigners in third world countries who are concerned with rural development and rural poverty include staff in voluntary agencies and aid organisations, technical cooperation personnel of various sorts, and consultants. Many voluntary agency workers and a few technical cooperation staff do live in rural areas. But most of these foreigners are also urban-based, many of them in capital cities, and have the familiar problems of paperwork, meetings and political and family pressures which tie them there. In addition their rural movements may be restricted by a suspicious government, or smothered in protocol. Their perceptions vary from the acute and correct to the naive and mistaken. They often labour under the notorious difficulties and distortions of having to rely on interpreters, of being taken on conducted tours, and of misleading responses from those met.

A final group, neglected yet vital for the formation of opinion

about rural life, are journalists. They combine the most direct access to mass media with the severest constraints on rural exposure. Journalists who wish to visit a rural area have three problems. First, they must persuade their editor that the visit is worthwhile. This is difficult. In terms of news, it is almost always quicker and cheaper to look for and write up an urban story; moreover a disproportion of newspaper readers are urban dwellers interested in urban news. Second, journalists must be sure to get a story. This usually means a visit either in special company (for example, the Prime Minister's visit to a region) with an official entourage and all that goes with it, or to an atypical rural place where there is either a project or a disaster. Third, journalists cannot hang around. They must find out what they want quickly and write it up quickly. Checking information is difficult, and with rural people who are unlikely to read what is written let alone sue, the incentive to check it is low. It is the one-off rushed and unconfirmed interview which appears in quotation marks in the newspaper article. Like academics, bureaucrats and foreigners, journalists are both actors and victims in the brief rural visit.

## Rural development tourism

For all these urban-based professionals, the major source of direct experience of rural conditions is, then, rural development tourism, the phenomenon of the brief rural visit. This influences and is part of almost all other sources of information. It is extremely widespread, with perhaps tens of thousands of cases daily in third world countries. In spite of its prevalence, it has not to my knowledge been seriously analysed. This omission is astonishing until one reflects on the reasons. For academic analysis, rural development tourism is too dispersed and ephemeral for convenient rigour, not neatly in any disciplinary domain, and barely conceivable as the topic for a thesis. For practical professionals engaged in rural development, it is perhaps too near the end of the nose to be in focus. Rural development tourism is, moreover, a subject of anecdote and an object of shame. It generates stories for bar gossip rather than factors for comparative study, and evokes memories of personal follies one prefers not to expose to public ridicule. In any case, self-critical introspection is not one of the more prominent characteristics of rural developers. Yet it is through this rural development tourism, if at all, that 'core' (urban-based, professional, powerful) visitors see and meet those who are

'peripheral' (rural, uneducated, weak). The brief rural visits by 'core' personnel can scarcely fail to play a key part in forming their impressions and beliefs and influencing their decisions and actions.

Let us examine the phenomenon. The visits may be for one day or for several. The 'tourists' or visitors may come from a foreign country, a capital city, a seat of regional or provincial government, a district headquarters, or some smaller urban place. Most commonly they are government officials – administrators, health staff, agriculturalists, veterinarians, animal husbandry staff, educators, community developers, engineers, foresters, or inspectors of this and that; but they may also be private technical specialists, academic researchers, the staff of voluntary agencies, journalists, diplomats, politicians, consultants, or the staff of aid agencies. Differing widely in race, nationality, religion, profession, age, sex, language, interests, prejudices, conditioning and experience, these visitors nevertheless usually have three things in common: they come from urban areas; they want to find something out; and they are short of time.

Rural development tourism has many purposes and many styles. Technical specialists concerned with physical resources may in practice have little contact with rural people, and there may be little formality about their visits. Others – those concerned with administration and human development in its various forms – may in contrast be involved in many meetings with rural people. It is with these kinds of visits that we are primarily concerned. It is tempting to caricature, and exaggeration is built into any process of induction from anecdotes which are repeated and remembered because they make good stories. There are also differences between cultures, environments and individual tourists. But it may hold generally that the older, more senior, more important, and more involved with policy the tourist is, so the larger will be the urban centre from which he leaves, and the more likely his visit is to be selective and formally structured. The more powerful professionals are, the less chance they have of informal learning.

A sketch can illustrate the problems<sup>2</sup> of such visits by the powerful, important, and distinguished. The visitor sets out late, delayed by last minute business, by colleagues, by subordinates or superiors anxious for decisions or actions before his departure, by a family crisis, by a cable or telephone call, by others taking part in the same visit, by mechanical or administrative problems with vehicles, by urban traffic jams, or by any one of a hundred forms of human error. Even if the way is not lost, there is enough fuel, and there are no breakdowns, the programme runs behind

schedule. The visitor is encapsulated, first in a limousine, Landrover, Jeep or car and later in a moving entourage of officials and local notables – headmen, chairmen of village committees, village accountants, progressive farmers, traders, and the like.

Whatever their private feelings, (indifferent, suspicious, amused, anxious, irritated, or enthusiastic), the rural people put on their best face and receive the visitor well. According to ecology, economy and culture, he is given goats, garlands, coconut milk, coca-cola, coffee, tea or milk. Speeches are made. Schoolchildren sing or clap. Photographs are taken. Buildings, machines, construction works, new crops, exotic animals, the clinic, the school, the new road, are all inspected. A self-conscious group (the self-help committee, the women's handicraft class), dressed in their best clothes, are seen and spoken to. They nervously respond in ways which they hope will bring benefits and avoid penalties. There are tensions between the visitor's questions and curiosity, the officials' desire to select what is to be seen, and the mixed motives of different rural groups and individuals who have to live with the officials and with each other after the visitor has left. Time and an overloaded programme nevertheless are on the officials' side. As the day wears on and heats up, the visitor becomes less inquisitive, asks fewer questions, and is finally glad to retire, exhausted and bemused, to the circuit bungalow, the rest house, the guest house, the host official's residence, or back to an urban home or hotel. The village returns to normal, no longer wearing its special face. When darkness falls and people talk more freely, the visitor is not there.

Shortage of time, the importance of the visitor, and the desire for information separately or together influence what is perceived. Lack of time drives out the open-ended question; the visitor imposes meanings through what is asked. Checking is impossible, and prudent, hopeful, or otherwise self-serving lies become accepted as facts. Individually or in groups, people are neglected while formal actions and physical objects receive attention. Refugees in a rural camp in Tanzania said of UN and government officials that 'They come, and they sign the book, and they go', and 'They only talk with the buildings'. A villager in Senegal said to Adrian Adams concerning visitors: 'Ils ne savent pas qu'il y a ici des gens vivants'<sup>13</sup> (Adams, 1979, p. 477). Above all, on such visits, it is the poorer people who tend not to be seen, far less to be met.

## Rural poverty unobserved: the six biases

Many biases impede outsiders' contact with rural poverty in general, and with the deepest poverty in particular. These apply not only to rural development tourists, but also to rural researchers and local-level staff who live and work in rural areas. Six sets of biases stand out:

### i) Spatial biases: urban, tarmac and roadside

Most learning about rural conditions is mediated by vehicles. Starting and ending in urban centres, visits follow networks of roads. With rural development tourism, the hazards of dirt roads, the comfort of the visitor, the location of places to visit and places for spending the night, and shortages of both time and fuel dictate a preference for tarmac roads and for travel close to urban centres. The result is overlapping urban, tarmac and roadside biases.

Urban bias concentrates rural visits near towns and especially near capital cities and large administrative centres. But the regional distribution of the poorest rural people often shows a concentration in remoter areas – north-eastern Brazil, Zambia away from the line of rail, lower Ukambani in Kenya, the Tribal Districts of Central India, the hills of Nepal. In much of the developing world, some of the poorest people are being driven from those densely populated areas better served with communications and are being forced, in order to survive, to colonise less accessible areas, especially the savannahs and forests. Hard to reach from the urban centres, they remain largely unseen.

Tarmac and roadside biases also direct attention towards those who are less poor and away from those who are poorer. Visible development follows main roads. Factories, offices, shops and official markets all tend to be at the sides of main roads. Even agricultural development has a roadside bias: in Tamil Nadu agricultural demonstrations of new seeds and fertilisers have often been sited beside main roads; and on irrigation systems, roads follow canals so that the farms seen are those of the topenders who receive more water and not those of the tailenders who receive less or none. Services along roadsides are also better. An improved tarmac or all-weather surface can bring buses, electricity, telephone, piped water supply, and better access to markets, health facilities and schools. Services near main roads are better staffed and equipped: Edward Henevald found that two schools near a main highway in Sumatra had more than their

quota of teachers, while a school one kilometre off the road had less than its quota.

When roads are built, land values rise and those who are wealthier and more influential often move in if they can. In Liberia, new rural roads were followed by speculators rushing to acquire deeds and to buy or to displace local farmers (Cobb *et al.* 1980, pp. 12–16). For part of Western Kenya, Joseph Ssenyonga had described a similar tendency for the wealthier and more influential to buy up roadside plots, creating an 'elite roadside ecology' (1976: p. 9). So the poorer people shift away out of sight. The visitor then sees those who are better-off and their houses, gardens, and services, and not those who are poorer and theirs. Ribbon development along roadsides gives a false impression in many countries. The better the road, the nearer the urban centre, and the heavier the traffic, so the more pronounced is the roadside development and the more likely visitors are to see it and be misled.

Nor does spatial bias apply only to main roads. Within villages, the poorer people may be hidden from the main streets and the places where people meet. M. P. Moore and G. Wickremesinghe, reporting on a study of three villages in the Low Country of Sri Lanka, have this to say about 'hidden poverty':

In retrospect at least, one of the most obvious aspects of poverty in the study villages is the extent to which it is concealed from view... the proportion of 'poor' households... varies from 14 per cent in Wattegama to 41 per cent in Weligalagoda. Yet one could drive along all the motorable roads in the villages and scarcely see a single 'poor' house. Here, as in most of rural Sri Lanka, wealthier households use their social and economic power to obtain roadside homestead sites. Not only do these confer easier access to such tangible services as buses, electricity connections or hawkers, but they provide such intangible benefits as better information and gossip from passers-by. Equally, the roadside dweller has a potential site for opening a small shop, especially if located near the all-important road junctions, which provide the focus of commercial and social life in almost all rural areas. To even see the houses of the poor one often has to leave the road. Many visitors, including public officers, appear not to do so very often.

(1980, p. 59; emphasis added)

The same can be said of Harijan colonies in or near villages in

South India, and of Basarwa (Bushmen) in or outside the villages of the Kalahari. Peripheral residence is almost universal with the rural poor.

It is not just the movements of officials that are guided by these spatial biases of rural development tourism. Social science researchers are far from immune. There are honourable exceptions, but urban and tarmac biases are sometimes evident in choices of villages to study. Of all specialists, social anthropologists are perhaps the least susceptible, but even they sometimes succumb: as they have grown, Bangalore and Bangkok have each swallowed up a social anthropologist's village.<sup>4</sup> Again, when Indian institutions were urged to adopt villages, two research and training organisations in Bangalore, unknown to each other, included the same village: it can scarcely be a coincidence that it was close to the main Bangalore-Mysore road, a decent but convenient distance from Bangalore itself. Within villages, too, the central, more prosperous, core is likely to attract researchers.

Moore, again describing three villages in Sri Lanka, writes:

Apart from the roadside issue, the core can exercise a great pull on the outsider who decides to do a few days' or a week's fieldwork. Apart from the facilities and the sense of being at the strategic hub of local affairs, it can claim a sense of history and tradition, to which sociologists especially appear vulnerable.

(1981, p. 48)

He considers that sociologists writing on Sri Lanka have mostly focussed on core areas and completely ignored the peripheries. One may speculate about how generally the location of good informants and of facilities at the cores of villages prevent perception by social scientists of the peripheral poor.

Urban bias is further accentuated by fuel shortages and costs. When fuel costs rise dramatically, as they have done in recent years, the effect is especially marked in those poor countries which are without oil and also short of foreign exchange. The recurrent budgets of government departments are cut. Staff are difficult to shed, so the cuts fall disproportionately on other items. Transport votes are a favourite. Rural visits, research and projects shrink back from more distant, often poorer areas to those which are closer, more prosperous, and cheaper to visit.<sup>5</sup>

In Zambia, the travel votes of the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Development could buy in 1980 only one fifth of the petrol they could buy in 1973 (ILO, 1981, p. 74) and senior agricultural



extension staff were virtually office-bound. In Bangladesh, similarly, district agricultural officers have been severely restricted in their use of vehicles. In India, cuts have occurred in transport allocations for staff responsible for supervising canal irrigation: the likely effects include less supervision leading to less water reaching the already deprived areas and less staff awareness of what is happening there. Every rise in oil prices impoverishes the remoter, poorer people by tilting the urban-rural terms of trade against them, and at the same time reduces the chances of that deprivation being known. Visits, attention and projects are concentrated more and more on the more accessible and more favoured areas near towns.

## ii) Project bias

Rural development tourism and rural research have a project bias. Those concerned with rural development and with rural research become linked to networks of urban-rural contacts. They are then pointed to those rural places where it is known that something is being done – where money is being spent, staff are stationed, a project is in hand. Ministries, departments, district staff, and voluntary agencies all pay special attention to projects and channel visitors towards them. Contact and learning are then with tiny atypical islands of activity which attract repeated and mutually reinforcing attention.

Project bias is most marked with the showpiece: the nicely groomed pet project or model village, specially staffed and supported, with well briefed members who know what to say and which is sited a reasonable but not excessive distance from the urban headquarters.<sup>6</sup> Governments in capital cities need such projects for foreign visitors; district and subdistrict staff need them too, for visits by their senior officers. Such projects provide a quick and simple reflex to solve the problem of what to do with visitors or senior staff on inspection. Once again, they direct attention away from the poorer people.

The better known cases concern those rural development projects which have attracted international attention. Any roll of honour would include the Anand Dairy Cooperatives in India; the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit in Ethiopia; the Comilla Project in Bangladesh; the Gezira Scheme in Sudan; the Intensive Agricultural Districts Programme (IADP) in India; Lilongwe in Malawi; the Muda Irrigation Project in Malaysia; the Mwea Irrigation Settlement in Kenya; and some *ujamaa* villages in Tanzania. These have been much visited and much studied.

Students seeking doctorates have read about them and then sought to do their fieldwork on them.<sup>7</sup>

Research generates more research; and investment by donors draws research after it and funds it. In India, the IADP, a programme designed to increase production sharply in a few districts which were well endowed with water, exercised a powerful attraction to research compared to the rest of India. An analysis (Harriss, 1977, pp. 30–34) of rural social science research published in the *Bombay Economic and Political Weekly* showed an astonishing concentration in IADP districts, and an almost total neglect of the very poor areas of central India. In a different way, the Comilla Project may also have misled, since Comilla District has the lowest proportion of landless of any district in Bangladesh. Research on *ujamaa* in Tanzania in the clusters of villages (the Ruvuma Development Association, Mbambara, and Upper Kitete) which were among the very few in the whole country with substantial communal agricultural production, sustained the myth that such production was widespread. Research, reports and publications have given all these atypical projects high profiles, and these in turn have generated more interest, more visitors, and yet more research, reports and publications.

Fame forces project managers into public relations. More and more of their time has to be spent showing visitors around. Inundated by the celebrated, the curious, and the crass – prime ministers, graduate students, women's clubs, farmers' groups, aid missions, evaluation teams, school parties, committees and directors of this and that – managers set up public relations units and develop a public relations style. Visitors then get the treatment. A fluent guide follows a standard route and a standard routine. The same people are met, the same buildings entered,<sup>8</sup> the same books signed, the same polite praise inscribed in the book against the visitors' names. Questions are drowned in statistics; doubts inhibited by handouts. Inquisitive visitors depart loaded with research papers, technical evaluations, and annual reports which they will probably never read. They leave with a sense of guilt at the unworthy scepticism which promoted their probing questions, with memories of some of those who are better-off in the special project, and impressed by the charisma of the exceptional leader or manager who has created it. They write their journey reports, evaluations and articles on the basis of these impressions.

For their part, the project staff have reinforced through repetition the beliefs which sustain their morale; and their projects take off into self-sustaining myth. But in the myth is the

seed of tragedy, as projects are driven down this path which leads, step-by-step to self-deception, pride, defensiveness, and ultimately debunking.

### iii) Person biases

The persons with whom rural development tourists, local-level officials, and rural researchers have contact, and from whom they obtain impressions and information, are biased against poorer people.

a) *Elite bias* 'Elite' is used here to describe those rural people who are less poor and more influential. They typically include progressive farmers, village leaders, headmen, traders, religious leaders, teachers, and paraprofessionals. They are the main sources of information for rural development tourists, for local-level officials, and even for rural researchers. They are the most fluent informants. It is they who receive and speak to the visitors; they who articulate 'the village's' interests and wishes; their concerns which emerge as 'the village's' priorities for development. It is they who entertain visitors, generously providing the expected feast or beverage. It is they who receive the lion's share of attention, advice and services from agricultural extension staff (Chambers, 1974, p. 58; Leonard, 1977, Ch. 9). It is they who show visitors the progressive practices in their fields. It is they too, who, at least at first, monopolise the time and attention of the visitor.

Conversely, the poor do not speak up. With those of higher status, they may even decline to sit down. Weak, powerless and isolated, they are often reluctant to push themselves forward. In Paul Devitt's words:

The poor are often inconspicuous, inarticulate and unorganised. Their voices may not be heard at public meetings in communities where it is customary for only the big men to put their views. It is rare to find a body or institution that adequately represents the poor in a certain community or area. Outsiders and government officials invariably find it more profitable and congenial to converse with local influentials than with the uncommunicative poor. (1977, p. 23)

The poor are a residual, the last in the line, the most difficult to find, and the hardest to learn from: 'Unless paupers and poverty

are deliberately and persistently sought, they tend to remain effectively screened from outside inquirers' (*ibid.*, p. 24).

b) *Male bias* Most local-level government staff, researchers and other rural visitors are men. Most rural people with whom they establish contact are men. Female farmers are neglected by male agricultural extension workers. In most societies women have inferior status and are subordinate to men. There are variations and exceptions, but quite often women are shy of speaking to male visitors. And yet poor rural women are a poor and deprived class within a class. They often work very long hours, and they are usually paid less than men. Rural single women, female heads of households, and widows include many of the most wretched and unseen people in the world.

c) *User and adopter biases* Where visits are concerned with facilities or innovations, the users of services and the adopters of new practices are more likely to be seen than are non-users and non-adopters. This bias applies to visitors who have a professional interest in, say, education, health or agriculture, to local-level officials, and to researchers. They tend to visit buildings and places where activity is concentrated, easily visible, and hence easy to study. Children in school are more likely to be seen and questioned than children who are not in school; those who use the health clinic more than those who are too sick, too poor, or too distant to use it; those who come to market because they have goods to sell or money with which to buy, more than those who stay at home because they have neither; members of the cooperative more than those who are too poor or powerless to join it; those who have adopted new agricultural, health or family planning practices more than those who have not.

d) *Active, present and living biases* Those who are active are more visible than those who are not. Fit, happy, children gather round the Jeep or Land Rover, not those who are apathetic, weak and miserable. Dead children are rarely seen. The sick lie in their huts. Inactive old people are often out of sight; a social anthropologist has recorded how he spent some time camping outside a village in Uganda before he realised that old people were starving (Turnbull, 1973, p. 102). Those who are absent or dead cannot be met, but those who have migrated and those who have died include many of the most deprived. Much of the worst poverty is hidden by its removal.

#### iv) Dry season biases

Most of the poor rural people in the world live in areas of marked wet-dry tropical seasons. For the majority whose livelihoods depend on cultivation the most difficult time of the year is usually the wet season, especially before the first harvest. Food is short, food prices are high, work is hard, and infections are prevalent. Malnutrition, morbidity and mortality all rise, while body weights decline. The poorer people, women and children are particularly vulnerable. Birth weights drop and infant mortality rises. Child care is inadequate. Desperate people get indebted. This is both the hungry season and the sick season. It is also the season of poverty ratchet effects, that is, of irreversible downward movements into poverty through the sale or mortgaging of assets, the time when poor people are most likely to become poorer.<sup>9</sup>

The wet season is also the unseen season. Rural visits by the urban-based have their own seasonality.

Nutritionists take care to plan  
to do their surveys when they can  
be sure the weather's fine and dry,  
the harvest in, food intake high.

Then students seeking Ph.D.s  
believe that everyone agrees  
that rains don't do for rural study  
—suits get wet and shoes get muddy

And bureaucrats, that urban type,  
wait prudently till crops are ripe,  
before they venture to the field  
to put their question: 'What's the yield?'

For monsoonal Asia, which has its major crop towards the end of the calendar year, it is also relevant that:

The international experts' flights  
have other seasons; winter nights  
In London, Washington and Rome  
are what drive them, in flocks, from home

since they then descend on India and other countries north of the equator in January and February at precisely the time of least poverty and when marriages and celebrations are to be seen and heard.

Some opposite tendencies, however, deserve to be noted:

And northern academics too  
are seasonal in their global view  
For they are found in third world nations  
mainly during long vacations.

North of the equator this means visits at the bad time of the monsoon in much of Asia and of the rains of West Africa. There are also professionals like agriculturalists and epidemiologists whose work demands rural travel during the rains, for that is when crops grow and bugs and bacteria breed.

But the disincentives and difficulties are strong. The rains are a bad time for rural travel because of the inconveniences or worse of floods, mud, landslides, broken bridges; and getting stuck, damaging vehicles, losing time, and enduring discomfort. In some places roads are officially closed. In the South Sudan there is a period of about two months after the onset of the rains when roads are impassable but when there is not yet enough water in the rivers for travel by boat. Many rural areas, especially those which are remote and poor, are quite simply inaccessible by vehicle during the rains. The worst times of the year for the poorer people are thus those that are the least perceived by urban-based outsiders.

Once the rains are over such visitors can however travel more freely. It is in the dry season, when disease is diminishing, the harvest in, food stocks adequate, body weights rising, ceremonies in full swing, and people at their least deprived, that there is most contact between urban-based professionals and the rural poor. Not just rural development tourism, but rural appraisal generally is susceptible to a dry season bias. A manual for assessing rural needs warns of an experience when 'Once, the jeeps needed for transporting the interviewers were recalled for a month *during the few precious months of the dry season*' (Ashe, 1979, p. 26; my emphasis). Whole institutes concentrate their field research in the dry seasons; the rains are for data analysis and writing up with a good roof over one's head. Concern to avoid inconveniencing respondents when they are busy and exhausted with agricultural activities provides a neat justification, both practical and moral, for avoiding research during the rains. Many factors thus conspire to ensure that the poorest people are most seen at precisely those times when they are least deprived; and least seen when things are at their worst.

v) *Diplomatic biases: politeness and timidity*

Urban-based visitors are often deterred by combinations of politeness and timidity from approaching, meeting, and listening to and learning from the poorer people. Poverty in any country can be a subject of indifference or shame, something to be shut out, something polluting, something, in the psychological sense, to be repressed. If honestly confronted, it can also be profoundly disturbing. Those who make contact with it may offend those who are influential. The notables who generously offer hospitality to the visitor may not welcome or may be thought not to welcome, searching questions about the poorer people. Senior officials visiting junior officials may not wish to examine or expose failures of programmes intended to benefit the poor. Politeness and prudence variously inhibit the awkward question, the walk into the poorer quarter of the village, the discussion with the working women, the interviews with Harijans. Courtesy and cowardice combine to keep tourists and the poorest apart.

vi) *Professional biases*

Finally, professional training, values and interests present problems. Sometimes they focus attention on the less poor: agricultural extension staff trained to advise on cash crops or to prepare farm plans are drawn to the more 'progressive' farmers; historians, sociologists and administrators, especially when short of time, can best satisfy their interests and curiosity through informants among the better-educated or less poor; those engaged in family welfare and family planning work find that bases for the adoption of any new practices can most readily be established with better-off, better-educated families. But sometimes, in addition, professional training, values and interests do focus attention directly on the poor. This is especially so in the fields of nutrition and health, where those wishing to examine and to work with pathological conditions will tend to be drawn to those who are poorer.

More generally, specialisation, for all its advantages, makes it hard for observers to understand the linkages of deprivation. Rural deprivation is a web in which poverty (lack of assets, inadequate stocks and flows of food and income), physical weakness and sickness, isolation, vulnerability to contingencies, and powerlessness all mesh and interlock.<sup>10</sup> But professionals are trained to look for and see much less. They are programmed by their education and experience to examine what shows up in a bright but slender beam which blinds them to what lies outside it.

Knowing what they want to know, and short of time to find it out, professionals in rural areas become even more narrowly single-minded. They do their own thing and only their own thing. They look for and find what fits their ideas. There is neither inclination nor time for the open-ended question or for other ways of perceiving people, events and things. 'He that seeketh, findeth.' Visiting the same village, a hydrologist enquires about the water table, a soils scientist examines soil fertility, an agronomist investigates yields, an economist asks about wages and prices, a sociologist looks into patron-client relations, an administrator examines the tax collection record, a doctor investigates hygiene and health, a nutritionist studies diets, and a family planner tries to find out about attitudes to numbers of children. Some of these visiting professionals may be sensitive to the integrated nature of deprivation, but none is likely to fit all the pieces together, nor to be aware of all the negative factors affecting poorer people.

Specialisation prevents the case study which sees life from the point of view of the rural poor themselves; but where such case studies are written (e.g. Gulati, 1981; Howes, 1980; Ledesma, 1977; Lewis, 1959) their broader spread helps understanding and points to interventions which specialists miss. In contrast, narrow professionalism of whatever persuasion leads to diagnoses and prescriptions which underestimate deprivation by recognising and confronting only a part of the problem.

## The unseen and the unknown

The argument must not be overstated. To all of these biases, exceptions can be found. There are government programmes, voluntary organisations, and research projects that seek out those who are more remote and poorer. Some projects and programmes, such as those for the weaker sections and vulnerable classes in rural India, have an anti-poverty focus. Person biases can work the other way: women's groups and women's programmes attract attention; doctors see those who are sick; nutritionists concentrate on the malnourished; agriculturalists and epidemiologists alike may have professional reasons for travel during the rains; and during an agricultural season, a daytime visit to a village may provide encounters with the sick, aged and very young, and not with the able-bodied who are out in the fields. Such exceptions must be noted. At the same time, there are dangers of underestimating the force of the biases by failing to see how they interlock and by underestimating their incidence.

The way in which spatial, project, person, dry season, politeness/timidity and professional biases interact can be seen by analysing almost any example of an urban-based outsider investigating rural conditions. With many 'insights' and beliefs about rural life, the several biases can and do reinforce each other. The prosperity after harvest of a male farmer on a project beside a main road close to a capital city may colour the perceptions of a succession of officials and dignitaries. The plight of a poor widow starving and sick in the wet season in a remote and inaccessible area may never in any way impinge on the consciousness of anyone outside her own community.

Nor are those professionals and rural staff who originate from rural areas, who have a home, second home, or farm there, or who live and work there, immune from these tendencies. Three examples can illustrate that their perceptions too can be powerfully distorted by the biases.

The first example is from a densely populated part of western Kenya. Junior agricultural extension staff and home economics workers were each given a random sample of 100 households to survey. The households were in the area where they worked. After the survey, those who had conducted it all considered that the sample had been unfairly weighted against the more progressive and better educated households, over-representing those that were poorer. One of the agricultural staff complained that of his 100 households, only one had an exotic grade cow, and that there would have been several more if the sample had been truly representative. In reality, however, in that area there was only one exotic grade cow for every 200 households, so each sample of 100 had only a 50 per cent chance of including one at all. A home economics worker said that she was appalled at the poverty she had encountered among her sample. On two occasions she had burst into tears at what she had found. She had not known that there was such misery in the area. 'These people,' she said, 'do not come to my meetings.'

For the same area, David Leonard (1977, p. 178) has documented the marked tendency for extension staff to visit progressive farmers, and not to visit non-innovators (57 per cent of visits to the 10 per cent who were progressives and only 6 per cent to the 47 per cent who were non-innovators). Thus, it is not only outsiders who are affected by anti-poverty biases. Local-level rural staff are also affected, and unless there are strong countervailing incentives, they too will underperceive deprivation in the very areas where they work.

The second example is from a study by Moore and Wickremesinghe (forthcoming, p. 98) in Sri Lanka. After

observing how the houses of the poor are physically hidden from the core of the villages they studied, and how public officers appear not to see them very often, Moore and Wickremesinghe noted:

Although most of the rural population... are poor and dependent in part or whole on wage labour, one hears comments of the nature: 'Of course, most of the people around here have some job or little business in Colombo'.

The implication of such comments was that most people in the villages had other incomes and a modest well-being. This might be true of those who lived at the centres of the villages, who were better off and with whom there was contact; but it was unlikely to be true of many of those who lived on the peripheries, who were poorer, and with whom there was no contact.

In the third example, a senior official in a ministry in a capital city stated that in his rural home area no one ever went short of food. But a social anthropologist working in the area reported families seriously short of food during the annual hungry season; twice women were interviewed who said they had not eaten for three days. There was, however, food in the shops nearby, giving the impression that there was no reason for anyone to go hungry.

Perhaps this phenomenon is world-wide, as marked in rich urban as in poor rural agricultural society. Compared with others, the poor are unseen and unknown. Their deprivation is often worse than is recognised by those who are not poor.

Finally, we may note additional factors often missed by rural development tourists, local-level staff and even researchers. It is not just a case of the invisible poorer people. There are also other invisible dimensions: international influences on rural deprivation; social relations (patron-client, indebtedness, webs of obligation and exploitation); and trends over time. The very act of being in a rural area and trying to learn about it creates biases of insight and interpretation towards what can be seen; and the observer's specialisation increases the likelihood of one-sided diagnoses, explanations and prescriptions. Poor people on disaster courses may not be recognised. A nutritionist may see malnutrition but not the seasonal indebtedness, the high cost of medical treatment, the distress sales of land, and the local power structure which generate it. A doctor may see infant mortality but not the declining real wages which drive mothers to desperation, still less the causes of those declining real wages. Visibility and specialisation combine to show simple surface symptoms rather than deeper combinations of causes. The poor are little seen, and even less is the nature of their poverty understood.

## Notes

- 1 The male-biased syntax is deliberate and descriptive. Most rural development tourists are men.
- 2 Another problem is the cavalcade. The more the layers of hierarchy – international, national, regional, district, subdistrict – and the more the departments and institutions involved, so the number of vehicles increases. This adds to dust and mud if the tarmac is left, and to delay even if it is not. The record is held by a visit in Indonesia to inspect a road being financed by USAID. Douglas Tinsley reports that there were 47 vehicles involved. Ferries had to be used where bridges were not complete. At one ferry it took three hours to get the whole procession across. But there was a positive side, one supposes. The christening of the road was substantial, and the visitors cannot have been too rushed in their inspection of the quality of the roadwork, at least near the ferries.
- 3 'They do not know that there are living people here.'
- 4 This does not necessarily reflect adversely on the choice of villages, since peri-urban villages, like any others, are a legitimate subject of study.
- 5 An early example is provided by Zambia's fuel shortage which led to fuel rationing, following Rhodesia's unilateral declaration of independence in 1965. One effect was that the Universities of Nottingham and Zambia joint research project concerned with the productivity of agricultural labour was restricted to work in two areas instead of three, and these were areas which were relatively well-developed agriculturally, having had large inputs of education, extension and communication (Elliott, 1970, p. 648).
- 6 Or close to the famous tourist site for the VIP, such as the Taj Mahal at Agra in India. J. K. Galbraith has written that as hopes and enthusiasm for rural community development in India waned, 'A number of show villages continued to impress the more susceptible foreign visitors'. He records this incident:

In the spring of 1961, Lyndon Johnson, then vice president, was taken to see one of these villages in the neighbourhood of Agra. It was, of the several hundred thousand villages of India, the same one that Dwight D. Eisenhower had been shown a year or two before. It was impressive in its cleanliness, simple cultural life, handicrafts, and evidence of progressive agricultural techniques. Johnson, an old hand in problems of agricultural uplift and difficult to deceive, then demanded to see the adjacent village a mile or two away. After strong protesting words about its lack of preparation to receive him, he was taken there. This village, one judged, had undergone no major technical, cultural, or hygienic change in the previous thousand years.

(1979, pp. 106–7)

- 7 *Mea culpa*. In the 1960s so many of us students and other researchers were attracted to work on the (well-documented, well-organised and

- well-known) Mwea Irrigation Settlement in Kenya that farmers complained about interview saturation.
- 8 In February 1979, two British Members of Parliament visited the Anand Cooperatives in India. They saw and were impressed by the delivery of milk from small producers to one centre. Inside hung a photograph of James Callaghan, the British Prime Minister, taken during his visit to the same centre. Asked if they would like to see a second centre they readily assented. Once inside they found another photograph, this time of the visit to that centre of Judith Hart, the British Minister of Overseas Development.
- 9 For the statements in this paragraph see Longhurst and Payne, 1979; Chambers, 1979; and Chambers, Longhurst and Pacey, 1981.
- 10 See Chapter 5.