

Comments on summary of days 5 and 6 on "values"

by R.G. Lowe

I apologise for my interventions being somewhat off key, and hope that I may be forgiven. However, I get an uneasy feeling that the wheel is being invented all over again, and very heavy weather is being made of it. In speaking of different cultural "values", I am reminded of what I was told by a Dutch rural sociologist in Yaound' (Cameroon) in the 1970s: that the villagers in their project regarded wealth as something finite, and therefore when someone's crops grew better because they began to put fertiliser on them, it followed that fertility had been stolen from someone else's fields. In fact the idea of limited wealth is quite recently dispelled in our own society (but may remain ossified in some trade union organisations!). Even in the 1950s if someone repeated the Biblical aphorism that the poor are always with us, it would have seemed a truism -- which it does not to us today.

For some years I taught "Multiple Land Use" to forestry students at a West African University. With reference to land tenure, the experience with Land Enclosure in my own village and neighbourhood in England (which occurred in 1829), and from what I had seen in Kenya, made me realise the importance of converting from communal to freehold land tenure, and how in Kenya, forestry extension work and political support had encouraged general planting of trees. However, from reading examination answers, I realised that my own students had heard what I said, but not really grasped its implications because freehold tenure was so alien to their thoughts. Conversely, when developing projects, I have perceived how inappropriate the conceptions of expatriate experts may be, because of their failure to take properly into account the consequences of African land tenure.

African Governments seem to have the same problem as African students. In Nigeria the 1978 Land Use Decree essentially froze the traditional system of tenure, but made the State the Trustee for land in place of the traditional authorities. (What could be worse?). This brought to a halt what had been occurring especially during the 1970s because of increasing wealth from oil money: the development of freehold tenure in rural areas due to "strangers" buying land from traditional land owners. This freed the land of its traditional rights. The strangers were often from neighbouring communities and knew whom to approach. They obviously could not buy land from their own community as they were already a member of that land-owning group. Thus freehold tenure was coming into being naturally for economic reasons without people having any clear conception of what it was.

In the 1950s I was helping to establish forest reserves in northern Nigeria. I was sent to a place where a year or so previously, the local people had driven off a government surveyor who began to cut a survey line through their "Tsafi" (sacred) grove by threatening to shoot him with poisoned arrows. This forest outlier contained many huge mahogany trees on which timber contractors were beginning to cast covetous eyes. The people were anxious, and I persuaded them to let me constitute it into a forest reserve, which would give it some protection, and I wrote their concerns into the reserve settlement. With misgivings they agreed. I felt guilty afterwards because I realised that although this might give temporary protection, it would ultimately put them at the mercy of the local authority who could one day ignore their wishes. But perhaps they have since all converted to Christianity or Islam and the matter no longer troubles them -- but that did not occur to me at the time.

Alley cropping was developed at IITA in Ibadan, Nigeria, using *Leucaena leucocephala* as an inter-row between arable crops in order to help maintain soil fertility. The method worked satisfactorily, but despite considerable proselytising by IITA, peasant farmers soon abandoned it because of reduced crop yields and the extra work and time needed to keep the hedges cut back. At the time I thought it was a good idea, but the peasant farmer, because of the small area he can cultivate, needs to get maximum yield/income from minimum area -- and is discouraged by techniques which cause a reduction in yield. I had been organising Taungya farms for ten years, and knew this, but did not put two and two together.

What is the moral of all this, if any? People tend to be in favour of "progress", and generally want to improve the condition of their lives; when they are living at near subsistence level, this is of considerable importance to them. We may be in a better situation than they to see where circumstances are heading, because we have already been there. However correct we are, we may be unable to persuade them; or because rural Africans may have undue faith in the perspicacity of Europeans, they may agree even though they do not properly understand the implications. It has to be said that anyone interfering in other people's lives, even with the best of motives, carries a heavy moral responsibility; we have no right to experiment with them. Many (most?) projects that I have seen actually left local people worse off than they were before. In the Dutch (FAO) project I first referred to, after seven years the people actually asked for it to be removed. The fertilisers increased the yield of yams but harmed their storage properties -- in an area where yams constituted the staple diet. For people living at or near the subsistence level it was a disaster. Even where the consequences are not so serious, dashed hopes can be hard to bear.

Ultimately rural people judge a project by the degree to which it betters their lives, whether they were enthusiastic initially or not. "Values" do not necessarily enter into it. We must also remember that our own attitudes are largely acquired from a situation of considerable communal wealth which to a large extent cushions each of us from free fall into ultimate disaster.