



Rural Progress Societies

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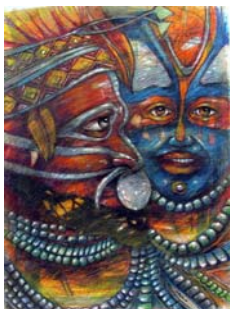
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Rural progress societies.

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The Cooperative Societies which were originally arranged along the lines of a producer's co-operative, operating in the Australian colonial Territory of Papua New Guinea, have been well documented. The formation and operations of Cooperatives whether for a political or economic rationale in agricultural development, has been well "dissected" by McAuley (1952), Morris (1958) Nicholls (1972), Guines (1976), Snowden (1981), Vele (1981), and others. However, I am going to discuss the development *Rural Progress Societies* as grass root rural organisations that were perceived by the Department of Agriculture Stock and Fisheries as forerunners to Co-operative Societies. They were seen as "initially transitory ... which may develop into private companies or continue as registered producer Co-operative Societies" (*DASF Manual of Procedures*, 1967, Section G (I) A1). *Rural Progress Societies* were not conceived in opposition to DDS/NA Cooperatives but were to be established in primitive areas lacking saleable cash crops, transport facilities and commercial and banking facilities (Stace, 1961, p.55.).

Rural Progress Societies and their significance to agriculture reform in the Territory, seems to have been overlooked in literature on agricultural development especially as an aid in the economic development policy of the Australian Administration. This can be substantiated by the fact that Brown (1966) noted the lack of detailed studies of *Rural Progress Societies*. Much of the literature being presented in this paper has been sourced from the Department of Agriculture Stock and Fisheries (DASF) Annual Reports, the DASF Extension and Procedures Manual, Annual Reports on the Trust Territory of New Guinea to the United Nations, District Officers' Conferences, DASF Circular Memorandums, and DASF Extension Officers' in-service training papers.

Keywords: agriculture; reform; grass root rural organisations.

Rural Progress Societies

The innovation of *Rural Progress Societies* was pioneered by the first Director of the Department of Agriculture Stock and Fisheries (DASF), William Cottrell-Dormer. The first of these societies was formed in the Mekeo Region of Papua in 1948, as an experiment in social and economic development. They were envisaged by Cottrell-Dormer as “a first step in the development of the true producer cooperative” (1949, p.1). Speaking at the Conference of District Officers in Port Moresby in 1949, he stated;

While the registered Co-operative Society is the ideal form of organisation for native enterprise, it has been my view that many of our native people need to be guided through a simple form of organisation before they are able fully to understand cooperative principles.

The *Rural Progress Societies* established within the Mekeo region were to be the blueprint for all *Rural Progress Societies* formed throughout the Territory. The most salient point of the *Rural Progress Societies* was that they were to:

“encourage the people towards self-reliance in a changing world in which their native concepts were gradually being replaced, to a greater or less extent, by those of the West ... and must provide the villagers with the opportunity of gaining experience in commercial and technological endeavour” (Cottrell-Dormer, p. 9).

Cottrell-Dormer claimed *Rural Progress Societies* had a special value in agricultural extension. Accordingly, DASF began to incorporate the aims and objectives of *Rural Progress Societies* within their Extension Division as early as 1949 and they became an integral part of their extension policy. The aims of *Rural Progress Societies* were, “to undertake ventures as an organisational device to solve a local production problem. These ventures were to be within the capabilities of the indigenous people and were only to be formed in the case of Indigenous communities wishing to pool their resources which “necessitated the purchase of relatively costly equipment, such as rice, cocoa, rubber and coffee processing plants, copra driers or the provision of marketing services, that is the purchase, assemblage, processing and sale (DASF *Extension Manual* (1967, Sec. G (I) A1). *The Annual Report on the Trust Territory of New Guinea to the United Nations* (1959-60) stated that DASF reorganised the Extension Division for the purpose of accommodating *Rural Progress Societies*, co-operative societies and local government councils within the extension program. The Extension Division was renamed the Division of Extension and Marketing and was to develop specialized sections dealing with agricultural training, crop processing and marketing, and mechanization in cultivation and processing.

Rural Progress Societies were not to be dependent on Local Councils as Cooperative Societies. A major problem learnt through the lessons of the *Tolai*

Cocoa Project was that “by tying processing facilities to Local Councils, no service was provided outside council areas” and as Fingleton stated, “this disadvantaged producers who did not wish to join the councils” (Fingleton, 1985, p.40). *Rural Progress Societies* were only formed when “the Cooperative Registry sponsored societies were not operationally in the area concerned or were not catering for the particular need in respect of producer groups” (*Co-Operative Societies Ordinance 1965* (commenced on the 31.3.67), *DASF Manual of Procedures*, 1967). However, DASF encouraged a relationship between Cooperative Societies and Local Government Councils. The reasoning behind this was that it was felt essential for Indigenous farmers to be represented by leaders or spokespersons who were authorized to discuss matters with the Government representative on their behalf (Cottrell-Dormer, 1949, p. 3).

The *Rural Progress Societies* throughout the Territory of Papua New Guinea were not only an organisation for economic development but also were seen as a form of community development that included the individual and the community.

Embedded in the creation of *Rural Progress Societies*, was the idea that community development would be encouraged at the same time as economic development. In the past, extension was purely agricultural and was largely task oriented. It was found the system had little effect on changing attitudes of communities and the approach was accordingly changed to one of involvement of the Indigenous people themselves in program-planning and in decision-making (Cottrell-Dormer, n.d., 2.). This suggests that a form of agrarian social engineering operated under the guise of community development.

DASF felt that the creations of Rural Progress Societies were not to be instigated by the Agricultural Extension worker but by the villagers. In fact as Cottrell-Dormer pointed out, based on his original findings in the Mekeo, the “people were anxious to participate in economic development but not if it was to be done through the agency of the digging stick and the pestle and mortar” (1949, p.1). Individual indigenous leadership in the maintenance and direction of the peoples’ interests remained important. An article in the publication, *South Pacific* (1951), outlined three such *Rural Progress Societies* that demonstrated the pattern which community development took through agricultural improvements. These three projects were The Lower Gogol River and Amele Plateau Extension Project, Madang District, the Dagua-Wokinara Extension Project, Wewak-Sepik District and the Ramu-Warapu Extension Project. Both the Lower Gogol and Dagua-Wokinara projects suggested the importance of local leadership for economic development. Assistance was given by DASF in the establishment of mills for the processing of rice and in the diversification of crops, both for local consumption and cash and led to the buildings of a mill, storage and residences, all based on community and voluntary effort. Literary skills increased with the aid of the local Lutheran Mission, increasing educational standards especially in areas of clerical and bookkeeping skills. Villages became formalised and conventional in their layout. Detached kitchens and latrines became common and a clinic staffed by locally trained personnel was established. The Ramu project, it was noted,

did not have a central leadership figure as in the other two projects, however the communities, on their own initiative increased rice production and acquired a hulling machine and along with the Catholic Mission were able to disseminate agricultural information.

Rural Progress Societies also enabled a greater participation of women in cash crop development. This can be exemplified by the Ibulo Society which operated a rubber processing factory at Kubuna in the Central District in 1972. It was the first Society that involved women as tappers. This was seen as a new avenue for women to enter the cash economy in the Territory (Wright, 1971, p. 101).

In all three projects Agricultural Officers from DASF visited periodically to give advice, but it was found that there “had been no suggestion of, or desire for permanent assistance” (*South Pacific*, 1951, p. 125).

However, it is worth noting the contrary view that “if agriculture is to support the growth necessary in the local economy it is not sufficient to rely solely on the emergence and stimulus of local initiative” (Cleland, 1961, p. iv). *Rural Progress Societies* were formed by the initiative of DASF. These include the *Unggai Trading Society* in the Goroka Sub-District which was concerned with coffee. Due to the inaccessibility of the Unggai Census Division no private buyers would visit (Donaldson and Good, 1981, p. 153). Another Society formed by DASF initiative was the *Yagaria Progress Society* concerned with ensuring a sufficient production of peanuts for Nobby’s Nuts Ltd based in Perth (Donaldson and Good, 1981, p. 154). This list is by no means endless.

The *Didiman* found that the innovation of *Rural Progress Societies* became particularly valuable when it was incorporated with innovation in agriculture. This was acknowledged by Saville (1961, p. 53) who stated that

When a cash crop has been introduced, the Extension worker has the problem of disseminating information on its culture, harvesting, processing and marketing. Bearing in mind the educational level of the participants, an informal society is the only answer.

The *Rural Progress Societies* for the *Didimen* served;

- as contact points with a group of people;
- as situations where method and result demonstrations may be used; and
- as training grounds in managerial skills with the more formal aspects receiving attention (Saville, 1961, p.53)

Willis (1966) a *Didiman*, noted in the case of *Rural Progress Societies*, the effectiveness of introducing agricultural change through group contact rather than on an individual basis. At the same time he also acknowledges that staff and fund shortages which were prevalent in DASF, *Rural Progress Societies* aided in the dissemination of information, the demonstration of crop planting

(both cash crop and subsistence crops) and in assisting Indigenous people to be able to access other educational training schemes through group contacts.

Extension personnel were required “to study the inter-relationship of agricultural extension and an organisation and provide an appreciation of the effectiveness of the organisation in the sphere of economic development with regard to social and political aspects”. This was to be done as part of the personnel's' Agricultural in-service training and was to be completed within the first six months of field duty. Willis, (1962) initially in Bainyik, Sepik District, carried out in-service training with the *Supari Rural Progress Society* (which was registered on the 27/2/1958). In the same area there were three other *Rural Progress Societies* operating. These were the Tamuai, Mitpim and Yekens. Willis (1961,p.3) stated that economically, *Supari* not only gained monetary returns, but “there was a valuable amount of experience given by the *Supari Rural Progress Society* to the Indigene, in the form of appreciation of buying and selling, the uses of money, and the reason why products increase in value with handling and processing was demonstrated”. He also noted that it was important that “since the establishment of *Supari*, the people of that area have progressed to a more combined unit, striving in the direction of improving their old customs and adopting new ways which make for better living”.

In 1966, Willis, in relation to earlier comments on rural organisations stated, “It is worth mentioning here that one should be careful before contemplating the formation of such a group [*Rural Progress Society*] for if its purpose is not to promote farming your efforts could be wasted as far as DASF are concerned”. This suggests the imposing of agricultural change on Indigenous was not community driven, but economically driven by the Australian Administration to impose a dominant Western capitalistic hegemony, designed as economic progress hidden under the guise of the United Nations “trusteeship” doctrine.

By 1962, refresher courses for Agricultural Extension Officers were being conducted at the Co-Operative Education Centre in Port Moresby. The curriculum related to how the Administration could give assistance to *Rural Progress Societies*. Major subjects studied included the marketing of agricultural produce and bookkeeping methods (Charles, 1962).

Appraisals of Rural Progress Societies

Rural Progress Societies, from innovation and conception in the Mekeo region, played an important role in DASF and Administration policy for economic development and agrarian reform. From their conception as an experiment in social and economic development *Rural Progress Societies* began to proliferate through the Territory and many were registered under the *Native Economic Ordinance*, later to be replaced by *Co-Operative Societies Ordinance 1965*, which gives an indication of the success rate of this simple form of rural organisation ability. An examination of *DASF Annual Reports* show that from 1953 to 1969 *Rural Progress Societies* increased in numbers from 16 to 44. This is not to say that all were successful. For example, in 1959

a decrease in membership caused the liquidation of the *Banimo Rural Progress Society* operating in the Yangoru area of the Sepik District. This Society had over 4,000 members but was unable to show a profit as its operating costs were too high. This suggests that maybe the large size of the Society had a direct link to its capabilities to operate effectively. However, the *Finschhafen Marketing and Development Society* in the Morobe District, which started operations in 1959 had well over 5,000 members and became one of the most successful and continued to consolidate its activities in the produce and marketing fields (*DASF Annual Report, 1964-65, p.131*).

Another perceived problem with the formation of these Societies was that they may have promoted over-reliance on single crops (Andrews, 1956, 27). However, again *DASF Reports* acknowledge the diversity of produce grown and produced by different Societies. This can be exemplified by the *Finschhafen Marketing and Development Society* which relied on coffee, copra and shell sales. Societies formed in Bougainville; in particular the *Siwai Rural Progress Society* relied on peanuts, basket ware and stock meal. As acknowledged by Spate (1953), "DASF did not ignore the dangers of monoculture".

Andrews (1956, p. 27) noted that rural agricultural organisations were not necessarily capable of easy expansion in other areas, although Spate (1953) acknowledged the rapid chain reaction from the Mekeo to other parts of the Territory. *DASF Annual Reports* suggest that not all areas or Districts in the Territory were able to sustain a *Society* and many did not come to this realisation until the mid -1970. The DASF operated in nine Districts of the fourteen Districts of the Territory.

The general aim of each *Rural Progress Society* was to improve village life and the health and general well-being of the community and in line the Administration's overall agrarian policy to promote economic development. If Cooperatives were politically based as suggested by Fingleton, then *Rural Progress Societies* were significant socially and economically (Spate, 1953, p. 166).

The *DASF Extension and Procedure Manual* declared that, "It was the task of the Agricultural Extension worker to form *Rural Progressive Societies* in areas where this form of organisation would be of value to the farming community" (Agricultural Extension Circular No.1 of 1959: Extension Policy). However, *The Manual of Procedures* (DASF, 1967) also highlighted the need to "organise" Indigenous farmers to create organisations to which they would belong and develop a sense of formal order in what was seen as unorganized, derelict, primitive agriculture. It allowed in many cases the opportunity of individuals and families to enter a cash economy. This suggests agrarian reform for the purpose of economic progress was not essentially for the people but for the Australian Administration which would allow Australia to appear to have discharged their colonial responsibilities of "rural betterment" for the "material well-being" of the people. As with Cooperative Societies, *Rural Progress Societies* purpose was to encourage rapid change in a traditional subsistence society and in the process imposed a Western

capitalistic ideology and with it, all of its implications of entrepreneurial individualism and in the process breaking down traditional communities, beliefs and customs.

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