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The Society's annual membership fee is \$30, which includes two issues of the *Journal* and issues of the *Vanguard*. Library subscription price for the *Journal* is \$35 annually.

Mail payment to: CDS Secretary-Treasurer, John D. Rohrer, Ohio State University, 2120 Fyffe Road, Columbus, OH 43210.

Single copies of back issues, Volumes 1-16 may be obtained for \$1.00 per issue (plus postage) by writing the Editor.

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## Journal of the COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY

Vol. 16, No. 2, 1985

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**EDITOR'S NOTE**

I would like to acknowledge the following reviewers who contributed a considerable amount of time and effort into producing this edition of the *Journal*. Reviewers represent a vital link in maintaining a quality *Journal*. The *Journal* could not be produced without their cooperation.

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# DATA GATHERING AND PROJECT DESIGN: A THIRD WORLD CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

By J. I. (Hans) Bakker

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**ABSTRACT**

There are many constraints to community development. In this paper some of the constraints to the design of a feasible integrated, rural community development project in an isolated third world setting are considered. Constraints to data gathering are considered in terms of reliability, validity, and multi-disciplinary team work. Constraints to the project design process are discussed with respect to attitudes of officials, the use of the report, and development. Three factors which community development specialists might want to pay particular attention to are: interpersonal relations, qualitative contextual factors and community goals. This case study will help to clarify some of the similarities and differences between Indonesia and other third world settings on the one hand and North America on the other. While social organization and welfare may be quite different in some respects, some of the constraints to data gathering and project design may be analogous to problems frequently encountered in community development efforts in the U.S. or Canada.

**INTRODUCTION**

The objective of this paper is to describe the process of information gathering in a third world developmental setting. There are many stages involved in community development efforts. The data gathering phase, however, has not been studied as much as other stages, particularly outside of North America. The case report material omit-

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ted here would be of interest to those who are specifically concerned with village-level development in Southeast Asia and in comparable parts of the world. Those who are not specifically interested in Indonesia may nevertheless be interested in this analysis as a "case study" of one aspect of the community development process.

The data are from the sociological part of a report written by four Canadian team members for the Canadian International Development Agency, C.I.D.A., the Canadian equivalent of U.S. A.I.D. The other Canadians on the team were experts in the fields of fisheries, agronomy and agricultural economics. The constraints to data gathering and development are presented because only by having a complete and detailed understanding of obstacles to data gathering is it possible to have a clear idea of specific development strategies and targets.

### Indonesia

Indonesia is a nation-state which comprises 13,677 islands, 3,500 of which are inhabited. The archipelago stretches 3,210 miles from East to West, with a land area of 1.9 million square kilometers. The Indonesian archipelago is the largest in the world and forms a highway between the Pacific and Indian Oceans as well as a bridge between Asia and Australia. Indonesia's population is the fifth largest in the world. (The population of Indonesia was approximately 151.6 million in 1983.) With more than 80 million people living on Java and other "inner islands," there is a great deal of interest in resettling some of the people to the less densely populated "outer islands."<sup>1</sup> Such projects are known in Indonesia as "transmigration" schemes.

The combination of lopsided population distribution and regional disparities in economic development has led successive governments of Indonesia to actively promote the idea of moving poor people from more densely settled "inner islands" to less densely settled "outer islands." Transmigration schemes, however, are not likely to be able to handle a large proportion of the increase in population in the inner islands. Moreover, socio-economic conditions in the outer islands are

<sup>1</sup> In his classical analysis of the process of "agricultural involution in Indonesia," Geertz (1971, pp. 12-37) discusses the differences between the inner islands and the outer islands in terms of two types of "ecosystems": slash and burn (*ladang*) versus wet rice paddy fields (*sawah*). The *sawah* flooded paddy fields of Java and Bali are a key factor in the system of "shared poverty" that Geertz discusses. There is no paddy cultivation in the communities studied, yet there is a system of "shared poverty" very similar to that found on Java.

not necessarily conducive to greatly increased "pioneer settlement" by Javanese and Balinese migrants. The people living in the outer islands are dependent on an ecological and socio-economic way of life that has evolved over many generations. It cannot always be easily adapted to a changing, growing population.<sup>2</sup> Hence, birth control and family planning are an important component in the government's overall development strategy.

### Sub-districts and Growth with Equity

In addition to transmigration and population control, economic growth has been a major component in Indonesia's national planning. A key theme involves the equitable distribution of the benefits of economic growth. In addition, the government has placed rural development at the "sub-district" level high on its list of priorities.<sup>3</sup>

Of the five administrative levels in Indonesia's governmental structure—national, provincial, district, sub-district and village-cluster—the sub-district level has been the least well integrated into national development efforts. The reasons for this are complex. The lack of adequate attention to the sub-district level is partially due to the different role played by the sub-district in the outer islands than in the inner islands. In the outer islands village-clusters often do not represent true communities in terms of linguistic, cultural or socio-economic structure in the way they do on the "inner islands." Reasons for this are grounded in the colonial heritage. The colonial government tended to emphasize the inner islands for a variety of reasons

<sup>2</sup> An estimated 42 percent of the population is under the age of sixteen. Indonesia as a whole has a high infant mortality rate, approximately 100 deaths before age one, out of every 1,000 recorded live births. Approximately one third of Indonesia's children suffer from malnutrition (Grant, 1984, pp. 13, 40). One major factor is lack of equitable distribution of money income. The income distribution is highly skewed between urban and rural areas (Zuidberg, 1968). Overall, the per capita income is approximately US (currency equivalent) \$530 per year, with a GNP of US \$66.8 billion (1982), mostly derived from oil and natural gas profits.

<sup>3</sup> The Suharto-led government came to power in 1965 as a result of a complex series of political events analyzed by Crouch (1978). The army's important role in political life was justified ultimately by the government's promise of economic development and distribution of the benefits of development to a broader cross-section of the population. The government's economic policy was established with an eye to the reaction of the International Monetary Fund. In 1967, the United States, Japan, and other industrialized states formed the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI) to coordinate aid policies and in following years aid inflows increased vastly. The IMF and the IGGI play a key role in influencing Indonesian development policies and five-year plans, according to Crouch (1978, p. 320).

(Bakker, 1978; Geertz, 1971). Thus, along with the general neglect of the outer islands during colonial times there was also a neglect of community structures characteristic of the sub-district in the outer islands. The national government has attempted to correct this imbalance since 1979. It is now recognized that community development efforts in the outer islands must be focused on the sub-district level. Sub-districts can also be important in the inner islands, but in the outer islands—where population density is relatively low—village-clusters are too small to provide the necessary initiative and basic administrative and management expertise for effective community development. Moreover, district officials are often not as fully aware of local conditions as sub-district officials. In the outer islands of Indonesia today the community is often best represented at the sub-district level; the sub-district is the community.<sup>4</sup>

### The Case Study Area

The study team, in cooperation with Indonesian counterparts and from officials at the provincial and district levels of government, studied two sub-districts. The relatively isolated sub-districts lie a 1½-hour ferry ride across a narrow strait from a regional economic center for the coastal region.

The two sub-districts studied by the team were chosen on the basis of their classification in a national study conducted by the Ministry of Public Works as among those sub-districts which are the poorest and most in need of development assistance. They are officially called "critical communities" and represent 20 percent of the 3,329 sub-districts in Indonesia. Furthermore, they were also selected by an earlier Canadian study team that made an extensive examination of their development potential. That study (University of British Columbia, 1979) had included the case study sub-districts in its list of areas which required more intensive research and which would benefit from Canadian development assistance.

<sup>4</sup> In this analysis the concept of community is linked to the sub-district (*kecamatan*) rather than the lower, village-cluster level (*desa*) or the administratively higher district level (*kabupaten*). Most of the peasants identify with their hamlet or village; however, it is unlikely that development efforts will reach villages except through the sub-district head's efforts. Most planning decisions basically are made by the national government, but decentralization is a stated goal. The key to decentralization is seen as the sub-district because sub-district officials are close enough to the grass roots to be reliably informed and yet distant enough to be, on average, reasonably well educated and well informed.

### Constraints in the Data Gathering Process

There are many constraints in the data gathering process in a third world setting, especially when one works as a member of an interdisciplinary team. Let us consider constraints to obtaining adequate information and then examine constraints to working in a team.

*Constraints to gathering unbiased data.* In many community settings in developing nations it is difficult to obtain unbiased information (Dixon, 1980). Interviewer effect plays a part in determining response. Local people saw us as representatives of a foreign donor which might be willing to give them money. Therefore, they had every reason to promote their own communities' standards of living by encouraging more assistance funds. At times local conditions may have been made out to be more limited than they really were. It was not always clear that this biasing factor was operative because it may well have been cancelled out by the equal but opposite effect of the bias created by the desire of local officials to look good in the eyes of their superiors from the district and provincial levels of administration.

A more pronounced biasing factor involved the relationships between Canadian team members—considered as a group—and their Indonesian counterparts. It is clear that the interactions which took place did not always promote the collection of relevant, useful information (Chambers, 1983, p. 22). That is due in part to lack of a common language, both in terms of the split between *Bahasa Indonesia* and English and in terms of differences in professional and personal orientations. While language may not have been the key factor, all team members shared some development jargon in common, although it was often expressed in a strange mix of Indonesian and English words. (At times the team resorted to Dutch words like *medebewind*, an antiquated term used in colonial times to mean something like "governing together.") The key factor, however, may not have been verbal communication but the silent language of prestige and status differences.

Prestige differences between Canadians and Indonesians hindered the smooth running of the research.<sup>5</sup> In addition, there were cultural differences which furthered the status differentials. For example, in

<sup>5</sup> For example, Canadian team members were often housed in more expensive quarters than Indonesian counterparts, due to the vastly different incomes and per diems received. Even though the Indonesian counterparts were well paid, by their own standards, they were quite well aware of the wealth enjoyed by the Canadians. It was difficult to develop and maintain friendships when Indonesian counterparts were physically separated from those they were assigned to help.

Indonesia it is customary to visit someone in his home, even without an invitation, if you are working together. The head of the Indonesian counterpart team kept waiting for the head of the Canadian team to make a formal visit while the Canadian team leader kept waiting for an invitation. It was only after several weeks that the etiquette problem was solved by one of the younger Indonesian counterparts inviting the Canadian team over to his house for dinner. This seemingly trivial incident was extremely important. At dinner the Canadian team leader spoke with the Indonesian team leader informally for the first time. This served to improve working relations immensely.

The research report, however, was viewed by the Indonesians as a Canadian effort and not as a joint effort, even though the Canadians could not have done the work without the help and guidance of the Indonesian counterparts. The Indonesian team members, however, contributed greatly to the information we were able to gather, but they were reluctant to speak out. At district-level meetings, for example, they preferred to be silent. Because responsibility for the final report was not placed in the hands of the Indonesian team they may not have been as concerned with the final product as they otherwise might have been. On the other hand, the Canadian team's assumption of responsibility made it possible for them to be less concerned with criticisms they might receive from superiors and report things which might otherwise not have been reported, like problems with receiving adequate medical supplies for newly built first aid stations. Heavily influenced by the prestige differentials of a patron-client system and an efficient military, local officials were reluctant to make any pressing claims and tended not to report problems that could not be solved through intervention of higher levels of government anyway.

Thus far the discussion has shown the constraints to gathering unbiased, reliable information. If another foreign team were to go to the study area it is likely they would reach somewhat different conclusions regarding specific facts.

However, even if data are completely reliable, it does not necessarily mean they are valid. While the team was able to escape many sources of bias, we were still not always sure that the information obtained would be the most useful information for planning purposes. In the dual role as researcher and planner, team members soon saw that much of the base-line data collected was still not very helpful for actually designing and costing a reliable community development program. For example, while the study clearly was not a matter of viewing reality from the comfort of an urban office, the team was not able to spend enough time in all of the villages which were directly involved in the project. It was clearly impossible to drive through all

of the villages, let alone spend one or two days participating in a series of community, town-hall types of meetings. To illustrate this further, females rarely participated in hamlet or village-level meetings. Yet, women carry out much of the simple horticultural activities, especially in fishing villages where the men are busy repairing boats and nets, when they are not out catching the fish that will constitute the family's cash income. The under-representation of women at public meetings may have detracted from the validity of some of the findings concerning community goals and aspirations. It is quite likely that men wanted different things (e.g., mosques, fishing boats, motors, fish auction facilities) than the women wanted.

Most of what was investigated directly related to the overall project, or so we believed. Without a direct knowledge of the local dialects, the team had to rely on translators who were sometimes viewed by local people with suspicion because they were from different villages.

Another problem involved the use of questionnaires. Survey data obtained by a questionnaire format was impossible because most of the people could not even read or write their own language, let alone the national language. Hence, a convenience sample chosen more or less by happenstance had to be developed and the opinions obtained through a limited number of local interviews ( $N = 67$ ) probably did not adequately represent the opinions of a cross-section of the population. By comparing information from interviews with information obtained at meetings and from government officials we can be fairly sure that we have generally valid data. But, it would be difficult to determine the validity of specific conclusions.

The team attempted to be diplomatic and polite, even to the point of timidity. We did not want to knowingly insult the local people. It was difficult, therefore, to cross-examine an informant on a sticky point. For example, a village official who would go to extraordinary lengths to obtain old records concerning land tenure, even though everyone had previously denied that those records still existed, could not then be pressed to give further details. Situations occur where it is impolite, or even rude, to keep insisting on certain kinds of information. The researcher in the field in a third world country—particularly on a short-term assignment—must draw conclusions which she or he would not be as willing to draw if the research was being done in Kansas or Saskatchewan. Research findings in third world countries may also be influenced by barriers which constrain true dialogue between the participants because of different cultural backgrounds, expectations and professional training.

There are many more constraints to reliability and validity in a short-term consultancy project, many of which are faced by com-

munity development specialists in North America as well. Perhaps the biggest single factor concerns constraints in multi-disciplinary team work.

*Constraints in team work.* The reliability and validity of the data gathered may have been influenced by the multi-disciplinary nature of the research. The Canadian team was composed of a fisheries expert, an agronomist with training in agricultural economics, and an agricultural economist. In addition, the author, a sociologist with training in community development, Indonesian language, culture and history rounded out the team. Constraints to team work are often not reported because it is sometimes assumed that criticism of the shortcomings of the team members tends to impugn one's colleagues (Chambers, 1983, p. 55). Apart from personal differences unrelated to professional training, other constraints to team work occur due to professional "blindness" that divide experts.

The other Canadian team members were not community development specialists. Their professional identity did not involve training in the sociological factors to which community development experts are attuned. This was quickly discovered by their attitudes toward the myriad of cultural differences which surrounded them. One of the first things one learns in sociology is that different cultures can vary considerably in expectations concerning time, personal space, exchange of gifts, perceptions of nepotism, legitimate expressions of conflict, ways of expressing friendship, attitudes about sexuality, plus a host of other factors. When a social science researcher investigates a community with a sub-culture all its own many kinds of cultural variables are taken into account. Community development specialists are trained to look at interaction and exchange relations in such a way as to be sensitive to qualitative factors (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979) as well as quantitative variables. In this study there was a considerable difference in concerns. For example, there was a professional (and perhaps also generational) difference in attitudes concerning time schedules and setting up of appointments. One of the older members stressed a level of punctuality at meetings that went beyond mere promptness. That may have hampered field work in a culture where punctuality is not a common virtue. (In Indonesia it is not at all unusual for someone to come to an appointment one hour late and not feel late at all.) In addition, older team members were also less willing to remain in the field for extended periods of time and had different attitudes toward use of leisure time than younger members.

One of the keys to the team's success was the ability of individual team members to speak the national language. Two of the team members, however, did not even learn basic expressions. They also

tended to regard Indonesian counterparts simply in terms of instrumental relations and not as individuals. Cultural differences also tended to anger team members who were not particularly interested in the communities. The intensity of the work schedule tended to magnify very minor differences in attitudes, promoting arguments and bad feelings. It did not help to be separated from families and friends at home, with the only communication possible being by telegraph. (There was no regular mail service.) At times a spiral of disharmonious relations developed among team members because there was no opportunity to relax by oneself.

Some of the constraints on team work could have been removed if there had been a clearer sense of a common goal. Team members were briefed on their roles with emphasis on separate responsibilities. The importance of the cooperative research was not emphasized. At briefings a good deal of time was spent on the logistics of trips to and from the field site. The ways and means team members should cooperate was left to each of the individual experts.

It was also made clear in subtle ways that the final report was merely a step in a procedure. A document attested to as the product of research by "experts" was clearly needed because an outside authority dictated the need for such a report, but at times it seemed that it was more of a ritual activity than a substantive one. A sense of common purpose was sometimes lacking because the common goal was frequently perceived as a bureaucratic ritual.

### **The Community Development Design Process**

A major project goal was to produce a development model and "project design" that would be acceptable to members of the community and to officials within the Canadian International Development Agency, or another foreign donor agency. (Although C.I.D.A. was funding the research, there was no guarantee that the Canadian government would pick up the actual implementation of the project.) Thus, the project involved not only producing base-line data, but also included developing an integrated, rural community development project which could be undertaken by the Government of Indonesia with support from a foreign donor agency (e.g., U.S. A.I.D., World Bank, etc.). The team was entrusted with the responsibility of writing a comprehensive, five-year development plan for two sub-districts that would not only benefit all sectors within the communities but would also convince bureaucrats of its feasibility and likelihood of acceptance by local officials.

The problem of writing a project design was compounded by the