Thomas Jefferson, the two-year-old web page can be reached at http://loc.thomas.gov. Available to on-line users are House and Senate floor activities, both summaries and full texts of bills, recent public laws, the Congressional Record and committee reports. The Library also maintains the National Digital Library at http://www.loc.gov. Through the NDL one can access prints, maps, photographs, audio recordings and films. This extensive collection from the Library’s holdings is expected to exceed 5,000 items by the year 2000.

The REAL WORLD

By Robert Winthrop

For anthropology to become effective in a policy context, we must offer data, analysis, and recommendations that are sound, coherent, and relevant to the issues at hand. Our ideas should offer a basis for—or at least contribute to—action, rather than merely reflection. Finally, to gain a place at the policy table there must be an anthropological “value added,” a distinctive contribution that our colleagues in such fields as economics, law, agronomy, or public health cannot make.

Unfortunately this formula is too simple. The potentially radical character of anthropological analysis means that our way of framing a problem can be quite alien to those whose decisions we would influence. Alternatively, if our work as applied anthropologists conforms too readily to the assumptions and requirements of dominant institutions, it may be because we have allowed ourselves to drift too far from the foundations of our discipline. In short, how can we achieve effectiveness without succumbing to expediency?

This dilemma was highlighted for me last January at a conference at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, on the subject “Creativity and Innovation at Grassroots for Sustainable Natural Resource Management.” The conference was sponsored by SRISTI (Society for Research and Initiatives for Sustainable Technologies and Institutions), an Indian ngo dedicated to preserving and communicating local knowledge, both traditional and innovative, relevant to problems of agriculture, animal husbandry, and other aspects of rural development.

The conference gathering was extremely diverse, drawing participants from 40 countries. While most individuals came from government agencies, ngo’s and universities, a number of farmers and artisans also made presentations. The greatest proportion of those attending were associated with programs in agronomy, forestry, animal husbandry, or another applied field of the biosciences. A much smaller number were trained in one of the social sciences—economics, law, political science, sociology, anthropology—or in one of the hybrid “development” disciplines. Some participants came from business, management, and banking (discussing, for example, venture capital funds to encourage agricultural innovations). The conference drew representatives from a number of organizations that have had major roles in guiding Third World development efforts, for example, the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization, or the USAID-funded Biodiversity Conservation Network.

In short, this was a good forum in which to communicate an anthropological perspective on the challenges of “development”—for example, the challenge of linking scientific and local knowledge, or crafting programs that can be sustained through “grassroots” social organization. To the extent that issues such as these are generalizable and shape the success or failure of programs, they fall—or at least should fall—within the domain of policy.

How did the anthropologists in Ahmedabad meet this challenge? The flavor of our experience was suggested by a chart prepared by one rapporteur in summarizing the final day’s discussion regarding recommendations for future action. There were, he reported, two distinct sets of recommendations, because the group in question found itself deadlocked over what would constitute appropriate follow-up action. These contrasting approaches, laid out in blue ink on an overhead transparency for the final plenary session of the conference, were neatly labeled pragmatic and anthropological. As one anthropologist colleague working for a government-funded ngo said to me: “I hope my boss doesn’t see this.”

What led to this divergence of perspectives? Equally, what lessons are to be learned from this interesting but abortive experience in communicating an anthropological viewpoint, in a context that could contribute to informing and perhaps even reshaping development policy?

Policy serves to define both ends and means: asking not only “what are our goals?” but equally “how do we get there?” In the case of “development,” not only the means but the ends themselves have been very much in contention over the past several decades. As Arun Agrawal has written, “An enormous restlessness and dissatisfaction with the lack of success (in development programs) can be seen in the rapidity with which various shibboleths have yielded to new ones—from economic growth, to growth with equity, to minimum needs, to appropriate technology, to human capital, to participatory development, to sustainable development, and most recently, to indigenous knowledge.” (“Poststructuralist Approaches to Development: Some Critical Reflections,” Peace and Change 21(4): 464-77, 1996).
By its nature “development” is a relational concept, implicitly comparing what a less self-conscious age termed the “underdeveloped world” with those industrialized societies which served to define (at least to their own satisfaction) the goals of social and economic change. Thus the conference’s focus on innovation and indigenous knowledge reflected the latest stop on a long itinerary, marking not only the changing goals of development policy, but in a broader sense also the shifting self-understandings of western societies.

For many at the Ahmedabad conference—insofar as one could judge—the ends of development policy were uncontroversial, while the means required refinement. From this perspective the steps called for at the conference were a logical and appropriate extension of the current policy emphasis on indigenous knowledge as the key to effective rural development. These goals included increasing financial incentives for rural “innovators” to develop new techniques in agriculture and other domains; providing mechanisms for sharing traditional knowledge and innovations with other rural communities, on a worldwide basis; creating protections for local knowledge by establishing an intellectual property rights regime applicable to rural communities; and encouraging institutional innovations such as joint forest management programs through which local communities could secure greater access to—while gaining greater incentives to conserve—natural resources. In contrast, for many of us (by no means only the anthropologists), these strategies were intriguing, but the assumptions on which they were based—notably the concepts of innovation, local knowledge, and “the grassroots”—were problematic.

Many of our colleagues in agronomy and other of the applied biosciences appeared to assume a positivist version of cultural knowledge, limited to that which can be explicitly verbalized or demonstrated, and thus capable of being recorded and communicated in written form. This is exemplified by SRISTI’s quarterly journal Honey Bee, currently published in eight editions, in English and seven South Asian languages. The journal provides a record of local knowledge, primarily from the agricultural sector, on the assumption that sharing such knowledge will contribute to sustainable rural development. Thus, from the fall 1996 issue:

- Preventing Pest Attack in Banana: Application of 150g of a solution prepared from powdered and boiled shells, sea pearls, etc. in the pits dug for planting banana plants is used to kill root infecting organisms.
- Treating Animals that Refuse to Feed: Root of milagaranai kodki (Stephania japonica), three cloves of garlic and 10 pepper seeds are to be ground and diluted in hot water and fed once to the animal. (Honey Bee 7(4): 11, 12, 1996).

Honey Bee actually represents an extremely interesting experiment in sharing local knowledge. But the knowledge it contains, is almost by definition, decontextualized. Whether or not that is appropriate depends on the purpose intended.

In contrast, I argued at the conference that cultural knowledge could be likened to an iceberg, in which only a small proportion of the whole was visible or explicit, and the rest invisible, belonging to the domain of tacit or contextual understandings, symbolic associations, and the like. One corollary is that traditional knowledge necessarily exists through a community of understanding, rather than as the mental capital of particular individuals. A second is that creativity and innovation should be understood not as isolated cultural acts, but in relation to an underlying tradition from which they derive. This view of cultural knowledge is presumably an anthropological commonplace today, perhaps most recently associated with Pierre Bourdieu’s practice theory, but it has been articulated by a long line of culture theorists, among them Milton Singer, Clifford Geertz, and Edward Sapir (and before them the philosopher Charles Peirce). These issues—which most of us associate with the debates of our graduate school seminars—in fact have direct, practical implications for the design of programs intended to preserve cultural knowledge and encourage “sustainable” environmental practices.

At the risk of overly simplifying the debate within the Ahmedabad conference, one could say that from the “pragmatic” perspective the global market system should be taken as a given; local agrarian knowledge should be widely disseminated and its commercial development by entrepreneurs encouraged; and some system of compensation for the intellectual property rights of the individual innovator should be developed. The alternative viewpoint—for better or worse labeled the “anthropological” perspective—was admittedly not this coherent. Yet as presented in conference discussions, elements of such an alternative perspective included the following: communities rather than individuals should be the focus of grassroots development efforts; an overly narrow understanding of cultural knowledge risked promoting a commodification and exploitation of local knowledge; greater emphasis should be given to the protection of traditions, which are the source of cultural creativity; and the economic and organizational diversity of Third World communities (e.g., institutions of social reciprocity, common property regimes) should be seen as a valuable repository of cultural alternatives, against which the appropriateness of market institutions as the fundamental goal of development can be weighed.

In retrospect, I don’t believe that there was a “right” or “wrong” side to this discussion, nor were the two sides as distinguishable as this account suggests. Nonetheless, anthropologists have a distinctive and valuable voice to contribute to policy debates such as these, but we need to become more skilled at articulating it, and reinforcing our message through reference to a coherent body of anthropological theory and persuasive examples of ethnographic research.

I invite colleagues to contact me with comments, suggestions, and ideas for guest columns. Contributed columns may discuss particular policy issues, or advocate strategies to increase our involvement in public policy. I can be reached by email at rhwinth@mind.net; by phone at 541-482-8004; by fax at 541-552-0825; and by mail at Cultural Solutions, P.O. Box 401, Ashland, OR 97520, U.S.A.