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Future Helmand Valley Involvement

Perhaps the "Levintow-Shankland Proposal" for the Helmand Valley has biased our thinking. The track we are on, assuming that the Ministry of Agriculture gets around to discussing what they see as their priorities and want to compare them with what we might do, is basically away from capital development (large construction projects) and into a relatively comprehensive program of farmer-intensive activity (extension - cash crops - processing - marketing). The idea of the project is so comprehensive that apparently Washington felt it necessary for a high-level negotiator (Dalton) to come out for detailed discussions with the GOA on their priorities as they relate to this comprehensive program. This was to be followed, hopefully, by a study group that would justify or reject such a program. The program as envisioned would include a major training component or training institute which would focus on the various administrative and technical problems. Part of this development would also be dependent upon the GOA being willing to increase its budget to support such an activity. While this review is over-brief and perhaps not completely accurate, I think it includes most of the essential points.

The total package of actions necessary to come up with a new Valley project has

been hamstrung by government inaction. An official statement of priorities has not been forthcoming from the Ministry of Agriculture nor have any substantive discussions been possible that could lead into the proposed Dalton-type of exchange. If we consider the budget problems apparently being faced by the GOA at the present time, it would be unrealistic to expect them to increase the HAVA budget in the near future. If nothing else does, this last point suggests that we begin to think in slightly different terms. I am not suggesting a simple holding operation, which at first glance it might appear, but a limited and effective operation that could be expanded or reduced, depending on HAVA interest and support. The total planning and evaluation system established to monitor the activities should be clearly focused equally on both possibilities (expansion or reduction).

We should consider a limited number of technician-trainers with the skills to focus on the main problems defined for the Valley:

1. Land Development and Water Management. This would be someone like Tyson who has not only been getting demonstration plots leveled and planted (like his predecessor) but has had the activity develop into at least one field-day with numbers of farmers, extension people and local government administrators attending.
2. Operations and Maintenance. This could be someone like Candil who is not only highly skilled but knows the area and its problems. The delay of at least a year for a new project to develop is going to have the effect, unfortunately, of losing individuals like Candil who has a great fund of knowledge of the details of

the problems to be faced. It will be some years before another individual can reach his level of understanding.

3. Horticulture. We should expect that the successes Dr. Pilsbury is having with a number of innovative farmers will gradually expand. As Dr. Pilsbury often points out, if they (the farmers) had begun to develop more orchards and vineyards when he first began his work in the Valley about five years ago, now that wheat prices have fallen (which should have been predictable) they would already be in the cash crop of fruit. Because of the emphasis on wheat production at the time, there was little official interest in his activity.

4. Plant Protection. This is a very important area for development especially as crops like fruit, perhaps vegetables, cotton are becoming common. Again, an individual like J. Rann with his Valley experience will be difficult to replace.

5. Extension. This activity, its improvement, expansion and innovativeness, is basic to tie the other elements into a program that can get to the farmers.

Without the development of an expanded market system as it relates to almost all crops except cotton (which already has a total system for processing and marketing developed) activity in the Valley to get farmers to be innovative would be pointless. As with wheat, we introduced an innovation in a traditional crop which was rapidly picked up, only to have the farmers produce themselves out of a good market price.

The point is that the problems of market development should be pursued at the national level in Kabul in conjunction with activities like PACCA rather than at the Valley end.

Method of Involvement: With my bias, I see one of the major barriers to rapid development in the future as being the farmer-government relationship. The training element in the involvement should not be institutionalized, even those aspects that relate to extension agent training. There is a tendency for institutionalized training activities to become inflexible and slightly remote from the realities of the situation being trained for. From what little I can gather (nothing very specific) this has been one of the problems with extension agent training in the PACCA project. In any case, it is a difficult proposition to train for a relationship of change between farmer and extension worker. Perhaps it has more to do with demonstration and attempting to change the expectations associated with the relationship.

The approach I am suggesting is one where each of the technicians would have a counterpart, not like the present counterpart relationship where the technician and the counterpart have two separate offices on different floors in different sections of the building. Present counterparts have a variety of other NAYA activities which reduce the amount of time actually spent in what we define as his major assignment. The counterpart assignment should be such that the offices are together; that the technicians should be included in the same sets of meetings the Afghan counterpart is subjected to, that the administrative distance between technician and counterpart be eliminated. This might include the often clear distinction between NAYA

and HAVR (The Afghan vs. the U.S. organization).

We are in the Helmand as advisors but given the administrative arrangements we are frequently in the dark about what HAVA is doing or plans to do. This is particularly true as it relates to former government relations. On the Afghan side (as I have outlined in a paper on the Socio-political context within which we have to work in the Helmand) we can suspect that this arrangement has been acceptable in the past. I suggest it has been one of our major problems of operation in the Helmand, although somewhat difficult to articulate and perhaps even more difficult to get at. In our future discussions of future involvement, we should stress the importance of this point and insist that if we are to be advisors, we must be kept informed of all current factors, not just the positive ones. As with the Shamsian, we tend to get informed of problems after they have reached a situation of impasse.

Back on the point, the focus of the activity would be in the context of an astute, effective counterpart arrangement, which is a training activity. This activity would be expected to function primarily in the field, not in the offices, and would include a broader range of training activities for area extension agents who at present have little knowledge to forward to farmers. Like Tyson's present activity, this training would be in the form of demonstration and field days where farmers as well as civil servants would be directly involved. The demonstration activity would be done on farmers' land primarily, and very little on government farms. These activities

should search for ways to involve small farmers in the demonstrations, even if it means some small subsidy the first time around.

The point here is that with this combination of groups involved in demonstration activity, hopefully, the technician would be training the total group into a new set of expectations. The farmers would not only be learning technical details but, hopefully, would be developing a new set of expectations and relationships with the government services. Perhaps, too, the civil servant would be nudged into developing a new view of his role, as a true service activity rather than one founded on traditional superiority and distance.

Other details of how this closer liaison of U.S.-Afghan activity might be accomplished would include everyone having the same working hours and working days, compulsory language training for technicians, and a reduction in forces as it becomes apparent that HAVA is not supporting an activity they had previously agreed upon. Except for short-term training topics trips to other regional countries, participant training should be held to a minimum. The focus of training should be local and in the field. There is already a relatively large number of foreign trained Afghans in the country and in the Helmand. The major problems faced in the Helmand were faced, defined but not solved by an even larger number of U.S.-trained Afghan technicians over the past 10 - 15 years. Perhaps our focus on training should now be shifted lower, to the working level - with the farmers and those working directly with the farmers - rather than the administrative.

In summary, this is a once-over-lightly presentation. Other ideas presented could be used and expanded as a basis of new considerations and further discussions. It could eliminate the need for high-level Washington teams to come out as a prerequisite to start something. It seems somewhat unrealistic at the present time for the GCA to respond to the idea of any large-scale involvement. I suspect that if detailed discussions do occur, the GCA might move for something large, at least as far as our input is concerned. I further suggest that we focus on something small, mainly technicians in a training-change role with the elimination of the patterns of the past in the HAVA-HAVR relationship. The very concept of the two organizations, as far as field activity is concerned, should be eliminated. Perhaps the support aspects would have to be maintained. The counterpart and advisers roles need changing to an integrated relationship. Without these elements of change, I see our involvement in the Valley, to a great extent, continuing to be "more of the same."