

Development at the Grassroots: The Organizational Imperative

JOHN OSGOOD FIELD

Increasingly, development theorists and practitioners have come to recognize that successful long-term development depends on grassroots participation by those directly affected. The difficulties of fostering this sort of participation have forced many to reexamine their expectations for rapid change in developing countries. In the following case study of a province in southern India, Professor Field looks at a successful instance of development with special emphasis on the role of food aid in promoting local projects.

Introduction

Malnutrition is well understood to be a constraint on development in low income countries, and food aid is widely accepted as a means of alleviating malnutrition. However, the role of organization in these relationships remains ill-defined. Little attention has been paid to organization as a critical link between food aid and the attainment of nutrition goals; and organization, while often acknowledged in the abstract, is seldom seen as the process by which institutions convert goals into programs, and programs into results. My purpose in this article is to explore the importance of grassroots organization in producing grassroots change.

“The Organizational Imperative” in my title is taken from Samuel P. Huntington’s brilliant book *Political Order in Changing Societies*. Huntington’s principal concern was with the capacity of governments to govern, and for him the “organizational imperative” was particularly relevant to political parties. My concern here is with the capacity of governments and other implementing

Dr. Field is an Associate Professor in the Graduate Department of Nutrition and an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, Tufts University. This paper is based on an oral presentation at the “World Food Forum: Practical Points of View,” Hiram College, Hiram, Ohio, 31 March 1978.

agents to produce change on the periphery of low income societies. For me the "organizational imperative" is the key to grassroots development.

Quite apart from its theme, this article is really an account of the Kottar Social Service Society, an indigenous voluntary agency in Kanyakumari District at the southern tip of India. The Kottar Social Service Society (KSSS) is affiliated with the Catholic Church in the diocese of Kottar. It receives American PL 480, Title II, food aid from Catholic Relief Services and employs this aid, along with other resources, in a wide range of endeavors, each serving as a catalyst for change. Those of us professionally concerned with malnutrition need to be aware of case experience if our many models and theories are ever to confront recalcitrant reality. The Kottar case is a most interesting one, for as an illustration of both the "organizational imperative" and "development at the grassroots," it is a reminder of what often has to happen if meaningful change is to occur.

My text consists of reviewing the Kottar experience and drawing from this small, isolated "success story" some inferences concerning the immensity of the task confronting us when we think of food aid as a resource both for combating malnutrition and for promoting development where it is needed most, in the thousands — perhaps millions — of villages of the Third World.

The Challenge

Let me begin by recalling the brave words of Secretary of State Kissinger at the World Food Conference in Rome in November 1974:

The profound promise of our era is that for the first time we may have the technical capacity to free mankind from the scourge of hunger. Therefore . . . we . . . proclaim a bold objective — that within a decade no child will go to bed hungry, that no family will fear for its next day's bread, and that no human being's future and capacities will be stunted by malnutrition.

Unfortunately, five and a half years later, little if any substantive achievement in the reduction of hunger and malnutrition has occurred in non-communist countries of the world. Nor is it clear how the worthy goals proclaimed by Secretary Kissinger are to be pursued, let alone realized, in the years ahead. For all intents and purposes, we are still on square zero, while the problem is becoming worse.¹ If food aid is to be effectively used as part of the broader effort to confront malnutrition explicitly, directly, and developmentally, we need answers to at least three core questions.

1. This latter statement is based on IFPRI projections. See, *Food Needs of Developing Countries: Projections of Production and Consumption to 1990*, Research Report #3, International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C. (December 1977).

First, how can aid donors, governments, and other program implementers *reach* the malnourished poor with food assistance? This question highlights the often formidable spatial and psychological distance separating the people who plan food distribution programs from the people for whom these programs are intended, even when both are of the same country. The usual administrative, logistical, and cultural problems that arise in bridging center-periphery cleavages and in integrating the delivery system effectively with the society it is supposed to serve become all the more troublesome in nutrition transfers when it is realized that the primary "target groups" are, increasingly, very small children.² It is difficult to imagine a more dispersed, passive, and vulnerable part of society.

Second, once the malnourished poor have been identified and contacted on a fairly large scale, how can we have a measurable impact on their malnutrition? The answer to this question is by no means easy to assert, for basic protein-calorie malnutrition has a complex etiology that makes it highly resistant to remedial attention under anything less than the most focused, intensive, and sustained circumstances.³ While the international nutrition planning community is still attempting to learn what works, under what conditions, and why, the evidence to date is clear in one critical respect: single-shot inputs, such as supplementary foods, are typically not sufficient. Indeed, it may be only a slight exaggeration to say that most "nutrition interventions" in fact have very little effect on nutritional well-being. The reason is that there is a mismatch between the problem and the response to it. The former is large, diverse, subject to multiple determinants, and embedded in a syndrome of deprivation. The latter, all too often, is small-scale, mono-emphatic, isolated, and intermittent. Even at their best, most nutrition interventions are simply inadequate.⁴

The third core question is the most difficult: how to generate other kinds of change so that the malnutrition, if reduced, will not return to its former prevalence and severity after food aid is withdrawn. Here the focus shifts from narrow issues of outreach and the specific problems of malnourishment to the overall dissemination of development in a society. In promoting development, large-scale, capital-intensive modes of production featuring high rates of financial return are less impressive than small-scale, labor-intensive modes of production featuring high rates of social return. The one is often concentrated; the

2. Children aged 6-36 months are the most vulnerable to malnutrition, infection, and early mortality.
3. This burden of evidence from many nutrition interventions with which I am familiar, including the three-village study in Guatemala, the Narangwal project in India's Punjab, and extensive experience with mother-craft and nutritional rehabilitation centers in Haiti and elsewhere. Even in these special instances, the results are not always very encouraging.
4. This may be called the "null hypothesis" of nutrition planning. It is derived from the apparent fact that protein-calorie malnutrition is less affected by nutrition interventions than by more broad-gauged strategies of development.

other is more dispersed. What matters is not productivity alone, but productivity in relation to distribution: land ownership, access to credit, marketing arrangements, employment generation, educational opportunities, the availability of health care, and so on. The ultimate question is who benefits: the affluent or the poor, the few or the many, the urban center or the rural periphery. The operational question is how to produce multiple kinds of change, reinforcing change, among the poor in their own habitat, change which overcomes the inevitable opposition and obstacles that arise in such efforts, change which cuts away at the poverty syndrome, unleashes the productive potential of traditionally exploited sectors in society, and — most critically — is sustainable over time.

To raise questions like these is to underline the challenge confronting us as we seek to honor Secretary Kissinger's pledge. There are no simple answers in this business, no technical fixes or magic wands. There are, however, some ingredients of success which case experience offers to us as a guide. The Kottar program in southern India is one such case. It is particularly instructive because it illustrates what can be done to produce "development at the grassroots" on the strength of local organization.

Before discussing the specifics of Kottar, let me pose two questions for purposes of orientation. First, why does the Kottar program appear to be such a success?⁵ Second, how transferable is the Kottar approach? I shall attempt to answer the first of these two questions myself. The second question is more rhetorical, in that the answer — "not very transferable" — is implied throughout my presentation. If so, the Kottar experience, while possibly inspiring, should caution us as well, for the ingredients of success observable there are rare indeed.

The Kottar Social Service Society

The Kanyakumari District lies at the southern tip of India, where the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal join to form the Indian Ocean. Kanyakumari is a small district three-fifths the size of Rhode Island with a large population of 1.3 million people and a population density of 726 per kilometer.⁶ This is more than four times the average for India as a whole, and the actual density is even greater when one notes that approximately a quarter of the land area is mountainous and sparsely populated.⁷

5. A quick caveat: Whether, in fact, the Kottar program is as successful as it appears to be at first (and second) blush is something that only reasonably intense scrutiny can answer. Suffice it here to say that, operationally, Kottar is an extraordinary success, as the account below indicates. Impact is more difficult to measure, but to the naked eye it, too, has been impressive.

6. Kanyakumari measures 645 square miles, or 1,572 kilometers.

7. Even without this proviso, Kanyakumari is one of the most densely populated rural areas in the world.

In spite of this density, Kanyakumari District is genuinely rural. Society is village-based, there being only one major town. Several other features warrant brief mention. Though small, the district is ecologically diverse. Fishing villages dot the coast, inconspicuous save for their impressive churches. (The coast is virtually 100 percent Catholic.) The interior has three zones: a mountainous region reminiscent of the Adirondacks, though much more wild; a broad valley in the south distinguished by large tracts of rice paddy; and the "plateau," a rolling piedmont featuring terraced paddy, tapioca, plantains, and the ubiquitous palmyra tree. By all accounts, the land is beautiful, the climate agreeable, and the people handsome and friendly, if poor.

A few hard facts will round out this brief introduction. Even though land ownership is reasonably equitable, 55 percent of those possessing land own less than an acre, the epitome of "postage stamp cultivation."⁸ Many, of course, are landless, with "coolie workers," who make up somewhere between a third and a half of the rural population, comprising a floating pool of labor, much of which at any one time may or may not be employed. Incomes are low and skewed; 30 percent of the families in Kanyakumari District earn less than 100 rupees (under \$12) per month. Infant mortality, at 64 per 1,000 live births, is well below the Indian national average;⁹ but malnutrition afflicts roughly 80 percent of the children under five, with more than a fourth of all preschool children suffering second and third degree malnutrition.¹⁰ In sum, the statistical picture is one of chronic deprivation in which people hang on above the threshold of survival — but just barely.

8. Eighty-five percent of all the landowning households own less than 2 ½ acres, with 95 percent owning less than 5 acres. The average holding is a mere 1.6 acres, the lowest among all the districts of Tamil Nadu. Overall, 98 percent of the cultivating households hold 81 percent of the total cultivatable land. These figures are from the 1961 *District Census Handbook for Kanyakumari*.
9. Infant mortality in India as a whole has been estimated at 139 per 1,000 live births. Toddler mortality is also high.
10. These figures are approximations because data are lacking for the district as a whole. I am currently analyzing a random sample of more than 4,000 growth charts used in the Kottar program in order to see whether and under what conditions KESS is successfully impacting malnutrition. The following distribution for August 1977 is fairly typical (weight for age, Gomez classification, Harvard standards).

Normal:	3.5%
1st Degree:	57.0%
2nd Degree:	36.4%
3rd Degree:	3.0%
(N = 4,154)	

These figures probably overstate the problem. Kottar directs its maternal and child health project to the rural poor, among whose children malnutrition may be assumed to be most prevalent and serious. The Gomez classification, with its 90 percent cutoff between "normal" and "first degree," may also overstate the incidence of malnutrition. On the other hand, the average child in the Kottar sample was only 73-76 percent of the standard weight for their age between February 1974 and August 1977.

This is the setting in which the Kottar Social Service Society is at work. As noted above, the Society is affiliated with the local Catholic Church, an important connection because there are 90 parishes and 120 priests in Kanyakumari District providing a human and organizational infrastructure which permits the Society reasonably easy access to village communities. It also provides a basis for mobilizing people into the wide range of projects to be described. All this is possible, of course, because a fifth of the population in Kanyakumari is Catholic, an unusually high proportion in predominantly Hindu India.¹¹ The Society's work, however, is strictly nonsectarian. Most beneficiaries are Hindu; and if there is an overrepresentation of Christians in the Society's projects, that is because Christians generally — and Catholics specifically — are disproportionately poor.¹²

The Kottar program's most direct approach to the problem of malnutrition lies in the area of maternal and child health. In 1972, KSSS created what they now call their Community Health Development Project, a package of services consisting of take-home supplementary feeding (made possible by American food aid), health and nutrition education, and a rudimentary form of health care.¹³ If the package is conventional, its mode of delivery is not. Nor is the penetration of the countryside that the Community Health Development Project (CHDP) has achieved in the space of only a few years. The CHDP now covers more than 38,000 preschool children in 124 villages. This represents three-fourths of the eligible low-income rural families with children under five in Kanyakumari District.¹⁴ Each child is weighed once a month, with his weight recorded on a growth chart. Each mother receives fortnightly lessons in health and nutrition along with the supplementary food for her child, at which time the child is given a health check-up as well.¹⁵

This represents extraordinary outreach and a truly impressive degree of interaction between the delivery system and its beneficiaries. One rarely finds this amount of contact in maternal and child health (MCH) programs of this scale, a fact which makes the Kottar approach especially intriguing. For the services are provided in the villages themselves, not in distant centers to which people must

11. In all, 39 percent of Kanyakumari District's population is Christian, and half of the Christian community is Roman Catholic.

12. This reflects the historical fact that poorer people of humble ritual status have been the most inclined to convert.

13. The latter includes a quick examination; instructions; the giving of pills, ointments, and syrups as appropriate; several basic immunizations; and referral.

14. Eligibility is confined to families with an income of 150 rupees (\$17) or less per month.

15. The precise nature of the supplementary food varies, depending on what is in the pipeline. Wheat soy blend, corn soy meal, powdered milk, and peanut oil are commonly distributed in 1½-pound quantities (a value of 5-8 rupees per family per month).

come.¹⁶ Partly as a result, rates of popular participation in the CHDP average more than 90 percent overall, a striking figure.¹⁷

The operational lubricant enabling all this to happen is the successful recruitment and training of village girls to implement the CHDP on a day-in, day-out basis. These girls are typically well-educated, most having a secondary school learning certificate. In this respect, education is one of several features of Kanyakumari District facilitating the Society's efforts. Sixty-one percent of the women in the District are literate against only 30 percent in India as a whole. Indeed, 92 percent of all children in Kanyakumari attend school, and the typical child acquires at least the beginnings of a secondary education in the process. Human capital is, therefore, well developed; and the "foot soldiers" of Kottar's CHDP are unusually well qualified as a result. At the present time, more than 550 young women work in the project, offering the lessons, distributing supplementary food, weighing the children, keeping records, and attending to the health needs of member families both at clinic time and on home visits.¹⁸ Originally moving from village to village on a regular schedule, teams of girls are now permanently located in each village as part of "health cooperatives" set up within the CHDP.¹⁹

I might add that the health and nutrition education provided by the CHDP is unusually well done. The lessons are simple and practical. They are tailored to local conditions, beliefs and practices. Moreover, they are offered by local people speaking in the local idiom and using flip charts and other aids that are within the experience of the audience. Rapport is excellent. An impressive

16. The formal health system in Kanyakumari District is not lacking in facilities, there being nine primary health centers, 25 government hospitals, and 30 mission and private hospitals. Although often well equipped and staffed, these facilities are typically concentrated in the larger towns. They are too clinical, too expensive, and too far away to be really responsive to the principal health needs of the rural poor.
17. This figure represents the number of times each child is weighed as a percentage of the number of months that he is registered in the CHDP. Registration is done on a six-month cycle in January and July of each year.
18. The young women are divided into several roles for which different amounts of specialized training are provided. The great majority are simply "volunteers" working in the same village as they live in. Others are "health educators" (also called "animators"), "health workers," and "health guides" — the latter being the functional equivalent of registered nurses. Four volunteers, two health workers, a health educator, and a health guide typically work together. The day begins at 8 A.M. and ends at 5 P.M., with groups of mothers and children (20-25 mothers in each group) processed on an hourly basis.
19. In July 1978 all mobile teams were converted into stationary teams working in the health cooperatives. The change was intended to replace the somewhat intermittent attention provided by the mobile teams (based on visits to the village twice a month) with more sustained and comprehensive attention, permitting much greater interaction with the entire community. The cooperatives were also designed to cover all members of a participating family, as against being limited to mothers and children under five.

amount of discussion takes place among the mothers, suggesting widespread comprehension. What in other projects is all too often a sterile, irrelevant, and incomprehensible exercise here has real meaning. More to the point, the health and nutritional guidance provided by KSSS is a direct input to village-level decisionmaking, an observation to which I shall return shortly.²⁰

Much more might be said about this remarkable effort. For example, the CHDP is never imposed on a village unprepared for it. Rather, a new village must first request to be included in the project. Then it must permit some of its young women to become part of the delivery system, and the village must provide space for the clinics and shelter for the health workers assigned to it. Another requirement is that the nominal fees charged be faithfully paid.²¹ In fact, incredible as it may sound, the CHDP is entirely self-supporting in its recurrent costs.²²

There is little question that the distribution of food is a vital element in the CHDP's success. The food is a tangible transfer much valued by its recipients. Mothers pay their fees and attend lessons twice a month because they know that they are going to receive more than food for thought. One can only speculate about what the response to the CHDP would be without the food or how much the project would be able to accomplish in other respects. The food aid channeled to the Kottar Social Service Society by Catholic Relief Services is what really enables everything else to happen in the Community Health Development Project.

Be that as it may, were village-based MCH services the only contribution made by KSSS in Kanyakumari District, the observer's reaction might be confined to muted appreciation for a job well done along with misgivings as to whether any service delivery approach, however innovative and elegant, can really come to grips with the underlying problems of poverty, exploitation, and malnutrition that exist there. Therefore, let me broaden the portrait somewhat, so as to highlight some of the other things that KSSS is doing. It is clear that food aid plays as big a role in these other ventures as it does in the CHDP.

Item: Portions of the coastal area in Kanyakumari have a serious soil erosion problem, the topsoil being dislodged and swept into the sea by the monsoon rains that come twice a year. The Society's response: the planting of Casurina pine and other plants that sink roots in order to hold the soil. The task is ab-

20. See the discussion of the "25 paise scheme" below.

21. CHDP services are not free. Prior to the setting up of health cooperatives, the registration fee each six months was one rupee. The monthly clinic fee for a mother and child came to 90 paise, and pregnant mothers paid an additional 50 paise per month. Polio vaccines were provided at cost. A family typically paid 13 rupees or so annually. Now with the health cooperatives, the annual charge is about 23 rupees (\$2.85) per family.

22. Not included as recurrent costs are the food aid received, vehicles purchased, and training programs offered. These are products of international assistance.

surdly simple. It merely requires two inputs: organization and labor. KSSS provides the organization, and American food pays for the labor. The unemployed and under-employed — the “coolie workers” to whom I referred earlier — are put to work, and they are paid in kind.

Item: Water is often a problem in Kanyakumari District. At times there is too much of it, and at other times there is too little. At most times for most people, the water available for drinking and cooking is impure, resulting in a variety of gastrointestinal disorders which are particularly severe among the very young. The Society’s response: dig tube wells for drinking and agricultural use, and terrace the land where possible in order to create water tanks permitting controlled release to the fields below; simple ideas that call for no more than village-level technology and require only organization and manpower to execute. KSSS provides the organization, which in this instance is a basis for securing bank loans for needed materials as well as for mobilizing the work force. American food aid not only gets food to people who need it; it compensates them for their labor.

Item: The monsoon rains occasionally wash out dirt roads, of which there are many in Kanyakumari District, and destroy small bridges over stream beds. The district government is principally responsible for such matters, but there are often delays harmful to the marginal producer. The Society’s response: work teams for the roads and construction of improved, cement bridges. There is nothing difficult about any of this. All it takes is organization and labor. KSSS provides the former; food aid pays for the latter.

Item: Kanyakumari District has an impressive network of irrigation channels that carry water from the mountainous interior to the productive lands of the southern valley and plateau region. Built originally by the British and then extended after independence, these channels — for political reasons — tend to favor the lands owned by the more prosperous and influential farmers, often by-passing the holdings of small landowners entirely, thereby leaving them materially unaffected and competitively at a disadvantage. The Society’s response: organize — with government approval — small landowners and landless laborers to build ancillary ditches off the main channels. Some of these ditches are huge in size and extend for several miles. More than 40 kilometers of such feeder channels have been dug under KSSS sponsorship to date, and one outcome is notably improved yields on small plots of land, made possible by a regular supply of water and by the incentive this provides for even the poorest farmers to adopt water-dependent high-yielding varieties of rice.²³ The

23. The Society’s annual report of 1976-1977 (p. 22) indicates that, by the end of 1976, 1,603 acres of land had been reclaimed by the KSSS Channel Irrigation Project, benefiting 9,701 farmers. Of these farmers, 61 percent were discovered to own less than a quarter of an acre, with another 25 percent owning between a quarter and a half an acre, with only 4 percent owning one acre or more.

main effort here was diplomatic, first to get the smaller farmers to give up portions of their land so that the new channel could be cut through, and then to agree to share the water with others further down the line. The Society has accomplished both, largely on the strength of helping farmers to organize themselves and to establish their own rules of conduct. This is one of the Society's most impressive achievements in the interior of the district.

Item: Fishing villages are among the poorest in Kanyakumari District. With rare exceptions, fishermen have only small catamarans — two or three logs strapped together — to take them out to the fishing grounds off the coast. Often these catamarans are not even owned by the fishermen, meaning that they must share their catch with the owner before dividing it further among themselves. (Three or four fishermen are needed to operate each catamaran.) The size of the catch itself is limited to what a catamaran can haul through the surf to shore. Moreover, the fishermen tend to leave and return at the same time, with the result that they compete with each other to sell their catch to the merchants (or their agents) awaiting them. It is a moment of acute vulnerability. The fishermen are physically tired from their labors, hungry, wet, and often cold. They sell at a disadvantage, driving the price down in the process. Most are heavily in debt to moneylenders — typically the merchants to whom they are selling — and this drives the price down still further as a portion of the catch is a form of loan repayment, with the moneylender setting the price.²⁴ The result is a *de facto* system of bondage. The need to sell is accentuated by a high rate of alcoholism among fishermen. Fishing villages are known for their violence — families, clans, and whole villages indulging in prolonged feuds with one another. Wife beating, child abuse, and other social pathologies are especially common along the coast.

Probably no other aspect of the Kottar Social Service Society's activities is more ambitious than the attempt to break the grip of poverty and powerlessness among the coastal fishermen. More than labor mobilization and environmental public works are involved; here Kottar is engaged in a campaign of inducing fundamental socio-economic change. The principal effort has been to organize *sangams*, or cooperatives, of younger fishermen. Now numbering more than a half dozen, these *sangams* serve several purposes. Through collective, coordinated marketing, they greatly enhance the negotiating position of the fishermen vis-à-vis the merchants.²⁵ Indeed, several *sangams* have developed alternative selling arrangements, totally by-passing the middlemen

24. To quote from the Society's annual report (p. 30), "The auctioneer, who is very often a moneylender and also a small fish merchant, raises his voice to give the impression of a fair bargain with the silent fishermen, who kings of the sea, are everybody's toy on land. Wealthy merchants and hefty people dominate the scene at the shore."

25. Apparently, not only *sangam* members have benefited. Other fishermen are also enjoying a higher return.

of their own villages. The *sangams* are also pledged to save a portion of their proceeds, to distribute the rest equitably among the membership, and even to buy less fortunate members out of debt. The fierce individualism and clan-nishness of fishermen families are being countered by this drive to organize. Exploitative arrangements are being eroded by deliberate "consciousness raising," instilled discipline, and collective effort. The *sangams* are even trying to counter the tendencies to drink and rowdiness. Surprisingly, they give every sign of succeeding in each respect.²⁶

Two other projects are part of the Society's response to the plight of the fishing villages. The first is an extension of the *sangam* idea, and the second is another example of social manipulation. Thanks to the *sangams*, KSSS has started introducing mechanized fiberglass boats. These are made locally by *sangam* members themselves, financed by bank loans guaranteed by both KSSS and the *sangam* in question. Food aid is again a mode of payment for the labor involved. Several boats — small, but decidedly better than a mini-fleet of catamarans — are in operation, and more are on their way. As a result, catches are greater and more diverse, and earnings are up significantly.²⁷

Second, because of the ongoing need to repair nets or secure new ones, the Society has organized net-making centers in thirteen coastal villages. The labor is provided by over a thousand young girls aged nine to fourteen or so, who are compensated in part by food aid and in part by the proceeds from repairing and selling their nets. The girls are doing nothing that they would not be doing at home. Now, however, they are earning money — unheard of traditionally. They are also making better nets, bank loans having enabled KSSS to purchase higher-grade cotton and nylon than is normally available to a coastal family.

It should be evident from this somewhat extended discussion of the fishing villages that the critical role played by KSSS in mobilizing the populace, obtaining credit, and innovating rests primarily on its own organizational presence and effectiveness, with food aid serving as an enabling resource. Before developing these themes further, let me mention two additional KSSS projects in order to complete the picture.

Item: The little inland village of Thirumalai is inhabited entirely by potters, Hindu families of very low caste whose sole occupation is making the clay pots that are used for cooking, washing, and storage in village homes. The

26. There has been opposition, needless to say, and even some violence. On one occasion, a group of coastal merchants visited the Bishop of Kottar and threatened to withhold financial contributions to the Church if the *sangams* were not disbanded. The Bishop turned them down.
27. The catamaran is effectively confined to a ten-mile band of the sea off the coast. This has resulted in over-fishing close to shore and under-fishing further out. With their greater range, the mechanized boats make ecological as well as financial sense. Thanks to a substantially increased catch of shrimp and lobster, *sangams* with boats are now selling directly — and lucratively — to exporting firms whose agents come down in huge ice trucks from Cochin in Kerala.

Thirumalai potters are not only isolated; like the coastal fishermen — and for similar reasons — they are thoroughly exploited as well. They all make and sell pots, competing against each other in the process. Invariably in debt, they must cart their wares out to the main road, where at the appointed hour they sell to the merchants. They have no bargaining power; and, of course, pots broken on the half-mile trek from the village fetch no price whatever. The Society's response: organize a potters' cooperative; secure bank loans to build new collective sheds and a covered kiln by the main road; and develop alternative marketing outlets. After a slow start, but with patient cultivation of the suspicious, conservative, and family-oriented potters, KSSS's plans have come to fruition. Half of Thirumalai is now in the cooperative; the new facilities have been built; more and better pots are being made; and a higher price is being realized through collective bargaining and the new outlets.²⁸ KSSS has also succeeded in persuading members of the cooperative to compensate women for their labor, as revolutionary a concept in Thirumalai as it was on the coast.²⁹ The ingredients: organization to create organization and food aid to pay for the labor involved in construction.³⁰

Final item: Aside from other problems, coastal villages lead a precarious life by virtue of their location. It is not uncommon for portions of a village to be swept away by the sea, the southern tip of India being a storm-wracked area where three major currents meet. The Society's response: resettlement schemes often entailing the creation of entirely new villages on higher ground. These villages, incidentally, not only feature better houses; they are a basis for introducing hygienic sanitary facilities, which are generally lacking in established communities. To anyone familiar with rural India, these resettlement villages are impressive, if simple. They are built by the people themselves with the support of bank loans and food-for-work. Once again, it takes organization to orchestrate undertakings like these.³¹

It should be clear that the food aid distributed by KSSS is not just a handout. On the contrary, it is a vital instrument for change. Nor is the food aid a disincentive to production. If anything, it is quite the reverse when employed

28. The Thirumalai potters had previously sold mostly to merchants from Nagercoil, the district headquarters five miles away. Now much of their business comes from Kerala.

29. Pot making in Thirumalai entails a division of labor based on sex. Males mold the pots, and females beat them closed at the bottom. Traditionally, females worked as appendages to their husbands or fathers. Now, as a KSSS requirement, they are compensated independently for their work by the cooperative. The village men, initially opposed to this arrangement, have reconciled themselves to it.

30. The Society also received a grant of Rs. 50,000 from Canada to help build the cooperative's compound, the total cost of which amounted to Rs. 125,000.

31. More recently, KSSS has initiated resettlement schemes in the interior of Kanyakumari District. One such scheme is near Thirumalai, the potters' village, where fifty houses have been built, each with latrine facilities. Resident families pay a monthly mortgage of Rs. 20 on top of an initial Rs. 10 installation fee for electricity.

in food-for-work schemes such as channel irrigation. When allocated to the children of poor families, it is not a mere sop but acts as an incentive to improve conditions. The Kottar program regards food aid as a resource enabling it to undertake various forms of socio-economic and environmental engineering.

In my opinion, the Kottar experience illustrates a beneficial use of food aid. The food is targeted to nutritionally "vulnerable" groups (preschool children along with pregnant and lactating women) in rural families lacking the means to purchase adequate food in the marketplace. It is also linked to community organization and mobilization behind an impressive range of self-help efforts. People are genuinely better off as a result.

A final piece of information about the Kottar Social Service Society: all of these projects — the CHDP and those involving soil erosion, tube wells and water tanks, road and bridge repair, irrigation channels, fishing *sangams*, mechanized boats, net-making, the pottery-makers' cooperative, resettlement schemes, and more — are administered out of two offices. One office is located on the coast at Muttom and the other in the interior near Thirumalai village. While hundreds, at times thousands, of people are active in these projects, the managerial cadre which is responsible for them numbers less than 20 persons. The clerical staff is also very small.³²

What makes it possible for so few to do so much and to do it so well? Why is the Kottar program so successful at popular mobilization, service delivery, environmental improvement, and social reform when the landscape, in India and elsewhere, is cluttered with similar ventures which never seem to get off the ground and work as intended?

There are, to be sure, some simple answers. Among them is the prominence of three Europeans, a Catholic nun and two priests. Sister Gedelieve Vande Walle developed and manages the far-flung CHDP. Father Pierre Gillet is in charge of the mechanized boats project. Father James Tombeur is the executive director of KSSS. All three are Belgian. A development theorist might attribute Kottar's success to these "outside change agents." This would be partially correct, for much that has happened is their doing. Father James, in particular, is a remarkable person: an ascetic who is also a brilliant organizer, a devout Catholic who thinks of himself as a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, a modest, totally unpretentious man whose quiet words carry unusual force. He is among the few about whom it may be said that simplicity and service are the source of a genuine charisma. The executive director is the inspiration and backbone of all that the Kottar Social Service Society has accomplished.³³

32. The Society consists of 30 members overall and has a seven-man Board of Directors. There are 12 community development organizers, half of whom are working in the *sangam* movement and half in agriculture and community health.

3. I am reminded of the Millikan-Hapgood study, *No Easy Harvest*, which sought to account for differential success in agricultural development projects. All the things a technical expert

Behind the leading personalities, of course, are features of the Catholic Church. One feature is the extraordinary motivation that characterizes people working in KSSS projects: the dedication, spirit of service, and self-denial. The accepted life style is purposefully simple, even spartan. One's rewards are not material or political; rather, they are religious, philosophical, and communal.

Another feature of the Catholic Church that contributes to success is its impressive infrastructure in Kanyakumari District. Churches are everywhere, as are parish priests; and the latter are highly respected members of the communities where they live and work, even among non-Catholics and non-Christians. Some are active in KSSS projects; others lend their support. In sum, the Church provides access, facilitates mobilization, and lends legitimacy. It is also a source of revenue.

Finally, there are attributes of Kanyakumari District itself which are clearly helpful to the realization of KSSS goals. The small size and dense population of the district make it possible to reach people in need with little difficulty, thereby answering the first core question raised earlier in this article, the question of access.³⁴ The high levels of education in the district, particularly among women, permit relatively easy recruitment of qualified people into projects such as the CHDP; and they may also be a factor in promoting greater popular responsiveness to KSSS initiatives.³⁵ The absence of large landowners in Kanyakumari and of a pattern of patron-client relationships based on a landed plutocracy makes many things possible that would be fiercely (and effectively) resisted in a state like Bihar.³⁶

All these features of the Society, the Church, and Kanyakumari District contribute to the positive circumstances in which KSSS projects are launched and from which they derive strength. All are idiosyncratic, although clearly not unique. They represent a series of first-cut explanations for the success that KSSS has enjoyed to date. What I would like to do now is to go behind the

might emphasize — soil, water, seeds, fertilizer, pesticides — proved to be less telling than the leadership qualities of the people involved. So it is in Kottar.

34. How dissimilar this is to the situation confronted by Project Poshak in Madhya Pradesh! See Tara Gopaldas et al., *Project Poshak* (New Delhi: Care India, 1975). See also David F. Pyle, "The Problems of Transition: From Pilot Project to Operational Program: The Case of Project Poshak," in *Political Aspects of World Food Problems*, Monograph 1, Agricultural Experiment Station, Kansas State University (July 1978), pp. 128-56.
35. In this respect, as in others, Kottar's CHDP is at a great advantage in comparison with Dr. P. M. Shah's equally ambitious Kasa Project in Thane District, Maharashtra, and with the Government of India's experimental Integrated Child Development Services Scheme, both of which also rely on village women as the link between system and society.
36. Located astride north India's Gangetic plain, Bihar is socially traditional and, despite immense promise, agriculturally backward. For an interesting analysis of rural dynamics focusing on frustrated land reforms, see F. Tomasson Jannuzi, *Agrarian Crisis in India: The Case of Bihar* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974).

specifics and attempt to identify, in more general terms, some ingredients of success suggested by the Kottar experience.

Ingredients of Success

Exposure to the Kottar Social Service Society and its several projects, large and small, induced me to write, three years ago, an analysis entitled "Ingredients of Success, or Why Voluntary Agencies Succeed and Governments Fail."³⁷ The title aside, the ingredients referred to may be of interest because they are derived principally from the Kottar experience.

One ingredient of paramount importance is *proximity*, the fact that the most important people in KSSS, those who run the program, are located in the area being served, not far away in a government office. Moreover, their presence is continuous. They are well-known in the communities where they work, and this is as true of the three Europeans as it is of the Indian supervisors, organizers, trainers, and marketing specialists. All three Europeans speak fluent Tamil, the local language, and have worked in southern India for up to 40 years. The "outside change agents" are, in truth, outsiders and insiders at the same time, enjoying the best of both attributes. The Kottar program has greatly benefited as a result. The result is that center and periphery, typically so far apart in developing areas, are collapsed in the Kottar case. The center is both in and part of the periphery. Distance — spatial, logistical, cultural, psychological — is not a problem.

The significance of proximity is threefold:

- (1) Kottar personnel are able to cultivate an intimacy with the people they serve which is possible only through sustained contact.
- (2) A two-way flow of communication is opened up which, at the very least, reduces the risk of insensitive imposition of programs on people unprepared for them and which also permits an unusual degree of responsiveness to felt needs. The CHDP is a good illustration of this two-way flow.
- (3) Respect for the people one seeks to help is encouraged by project leaders, and this is reciprocated by feelings of trust on the part of the people. Respect and trust are common features of Kottar projects.

37. This piece is a section of a larger paper entitled "The Soft Underbelly of Applied Knowledge: Conceptual and Operational Problems in Nutrition Planning," which I presented at the Conference on Political Aspects of World Food Problems, Kansas State University, 4-5 March 1977. It may be found, as originally written, in the proceedings of that conference, although it had to be dropped when the rest of "The Soft Underbelly" was published in *Food Policy*, 2 (August 1977). What follows is a substantial adaptation from the original.

Sustained presence, intimacy, communication, and trust feed on one another. KSSS enjoys a privileged position among the people of Kanyakumari District that one finds only rarely at the grassroots level in poor countries. The significance of this is reflected in the following four reasons for Kottar's effectiveness.

A second ingredient of success is *capacity*. Kottar has an impressive capacity to recruit and train local people for participation in its projects. This generates confidence: Kottar advice is considered authoritative, its material contributions (food, tools, know-how) are catalytic, and its organizational abilities are respected. The element of risk associated with change is reduced, psychologically at least, while the willingness of the people involved to undertake new activities and to try new ways of doing things is very high. The fishing *sangams* and potters' cooperative are cases in point. Governments seldom inspire such confidence and innovation.

Related to capacity is *authority*. Kottar is in a particularly favorable position to make demands on the communities where it has programs contemplated or under way. Some demands are modest: for example, charging fees in the CHDP, requiring compulsory savings by the *sangams*, and insisting upon satisfactory attendance and work performance in the public works projects. Other demands are more sensitive, entailing significant changes in social and economic relationships. Kottar is able to insist on a measure of economic independence for young girls making fishing nets, and on payment to Thirumalai women making pots. The Society has also been able to develop alternative lines of credit and marketing for fishermen and pottery makers, thereby by-passing the local moneylenders and dominant commercial interests. None of this would be possible without a widely shared sense of Kottar's legitimacy.

A fourth ingredient of success which is a hallmark of the Kottar approach is *flexibility*. Kottar projects are characterized by considerable spontaneity in their origins and by remarkable flexibility in their development. In most instances projects emerge in response to needs expressed by the people being served. They are not conceived far away and then rigidly or ritualistically imposed. There is, therefore, no need to "sell" them to unwilling beneficiaries. Moreover, one repeatedly finds an uncanny adaptability in KSSS ventures, a capacity to expand, contract, modify, and make new departures, all in response to experience.

An impressive illustration of this may be found in the CHDP. After two years of working in the villages and coming into direct contact with the repeated bouts of diarrhea and parasitic infestation plaguing small children there, KSSS decided upon a way of breaking the cycle of infection and contagion. If the villages agreed — and almost all did — every member family in the CHDP would be charged an extra 25 paise (3¢) per clinic visit throughout

the district and the proceeds, Rs. 18,000 per month, would then be distributed to six villages on the basis of a "lucky dip" (raffle) each month.³⁸ A winning village could do with its windfall whatever it thought best (with the mothers in the CHDP alone deciding), although KSSS has gently urged construction of pit latrines, provided thousands of cement slabs for this purpose at cost, and compensated some of the labor involved with food aid. The "25 paise scheme" became an instant success, and significant change in the villages of Kanyakumari is the result.³⁹

At the risk of digression, an important lesson is contained in an anecdote like this. Development theorists and programmers, in nutrition and health as in other fields of endeavor, are easily over-impressed by the need for central planning. As a nutrition planner myself, I certainly would not deny the merit of planning models, systematic data gathering, cost-effectiveness calculations, and other tools of the trade. Nevertheless, it is clear that one of the reasons why the Kottar program is so effective is that it does none of these fancy things. KSSS epitomizes Charles Lindblom's "science of muddling through," which is really the art of guiding incremental change.⁴⁰ KSSS also honors, in practice, Albert Hirschman's "principle of the hiding hand," which argues that planning is less critical to success than are the series of creative adaptations in implementation that are necessary when projects are confronted by unexpected opportunities and constraints.⁴¹ Kottar's effectiveness is very much an outgrowth of its flexible approach and adaptability. The latest transformation in the CHDP — creation of health cooperatives featuring a permanent health team for each village — is itself an outgrowth of the "25 paise scheme."

A fifth ingredient of success, inseparable from the previous four, is *popular support*. Anyone concerned with the vicissitudes of system-society interaction in social programs cannot fail to be impressed with the high degree of responsiveness to KSSS-sponsored projects by the targeted population in Kanyakumari District. The extraordinary level of participation in the CHDP is one manifestation of this responsiveness. The spread of the *sangams* is another, and the irrigation channels are a third. The people affected by these projects are in-

38. An Oxfam (England) contribution to this venture has enabled each village to obtain Rs. 1,000 in addition to the Rs. 3,000 allocated by the lucky dip.

39. To be specific, 5,200 slabs for private latrines, 3 common latrines, 98 community hall and clinic facilities, 8 drinking water wells, and 2 drainage systems by the end of 1976, all to the tune of Rs. 525,000 in locally raised funds. Less visible is the fact that these undertakings required a degree of local decisionmaking, by village women no less, that is quite rare in development projects. The lessons in health and nutrition offered by the CHDP helped the desired community consensus to crystallize, an instrumental role of information dissemination and attitude change that is also quite rare.

40. Charles E. Lindblom, "The Science of Muddling Through," *Public Administration Review*, 1959, pp. 79-88.

41. Albert O. Hirschman, *Development Projects Observed* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1967), notably Chapter 1.

volved in them throughout, from the identification of need to the actual implementation of a chosen course of action. As a result, motivation among the beneficiaries is quite high. People acquire a dignity and sense of accomplishment from the self-help implied. They are not acted upon; rather, they themselves are the actors. Kottar projects generate substantial local interest, receptivity, and involvement — a far cry from the apathy and resistance, if not outright sabotage, that so often greet undertakings of the same kind elsewhere.

Behind these five ingredients is a sixth having to do with *management*. KSSS provides stable, continuous leadership at the local level, and it is at this level that planning and program development occur. Moreover, the Kottar leadership is small and thoroughly unbureaucratic. It is able to exercise sound economic control over its projects because of its effective presence in the community. It is, therefore, able to avoid the pitfalls of over-commitment and of spreading resources too thin, both problems endemic to public sector ventures. Corruption, that curse of officialdom, is conspicuous by its absence.

Finally, let me mention a seventh ingredient of success, *radicalism*. The Kottar approach is unabashedly radical, however saintly. The strategy pursued is not unlike the united-front-from-below strategy employed by militant Communist movements, although Kottar is both tough and gentle at the same time.⁴² On the one hand, KSSS engages in deliberate consciousness-raising among the poor; it seeks to mobilize, organize, and instill confidence in them; and it is not afraid of forcing an issue in the face of resistance by moneylenders, merchants, middlemen, and others. To quote from the Society's Annual Report of 1973-1974: "The first step towards development . . . will be to awaken men to liberate themselves from the oppressive structures in society. They will have to be conscientized to shape their own future in an organized and free community."⁴³ On the other hand, if the language is militant, the approach is non-coercive, non-confrontational, and non-sectarian. KSSS proceeds only on the basis of widespread deliberation and emerging consensus. It is anything but conspiratorial. It makes every effort to avoid fomenting social conflict; it rejects violence; and it embraces all who are willing to undertake constructive change. Saintly radicalism indeed, and a fascinating test of both approach and impact.⁴⁴

42. What KSSS has been doing in Kanyakumari District under Catholic sponsorship is not dissimilar in nature to what has been going on over a longer period of time in neighboring Kerala state under communist auspices. Several of Kottar's community organizers are, in fact, communist in their political sympathies and see no contradiction whatever between their religious and political beliefs.

43. Kottar Social Service Society, *Annual Report: 1973-1974*, p. 2. The Society's orientation is similar to that advocated by Brazilian educator Paolo Freire.

44. Several analysts at Tufts and the Community Systems Foundation in Ann Arbor, Michigan, are currently assessing Kottar's impact on malnutrition with the computerized data to which earlier reference has been made. It is my hope that we shall soon be able to analyze Kottar's operational characteristics, or the process by which change is occurring, in greater depth.

Proximity, capacity, authority, flexibility, popular support, management, and radicalism: These seven ingredients of success observable in the Kottar program suggest an eighth ingredient which underlies them all. *Effective local organization*, I submit, is a critical element in producing grassroots change through interventions (and in making food aid an instrument of development at that level). It is effective local organization that converts plans into projects, people into a work force, money into credit, and food into an instrument of community mobilization and self-help. Effective local organization is what permits food aid to play a catalytic role, enabling many other things to happen. The dilemma facing us is that food aid as a weapon against malnutrition and as a resource for grassroots development is only as strong as the organization that uses it where it counts most, on the periphery of low income countries.

Conclusion

The Kottar program in Kanyakumari District is beguiling. It has outreach; it is making a major push against the malnutrition-morbidity-mortality syndrome; and it is involved in all sorts of other attempts to produce meaningful change. With quiet determination, KSSS is proceeding on multiple fronts to answer needs and improve the lot of the poor; and its efforts, by and large, appear to have achieved remarkable success to date. Especially appealing are the Kottar approach to change, the way in which system and society interact, even blend, and the fact that so few can inspire so many to do so much. The overall impression is of an organization effectively, if not scientifically, helping a poor people to get the most out of what little they have. It all seems to be working, and the visitor is invited to seek the recipe.

Alas, if the "ingredients of success" are easy to identify, they are very difficult to replicate. Simply to list them is to reveal how rare they are individually, much less all together. With the possible exception of radicalism, all are essentially products (and virtues) of a decentralized approach to problem-solving. Government bureaucracies in most low income countries possess few of these qualities, and it is not at all clear that what works under Kottar's auspices in Kanyakumari District can work under civil service auspices covering much larger areas elsewhere. Herein lies a possible source of profound sadness.

In recent years, development theory has taken a marked swing in the direction of meeting basic human needs. "Equity-oriented rural development," "the sustained reduction of deprivation," "the physical quality of life," "the end of 'trickle down' " — these and terms like them are heard with ever-increasing frequency and enthusiasm. As perhaps the most serious deprivation

of all, malnutrition now enjoys the status of a developmental *cause célèbre*. Hence Secretary Kissinger's pledge at Rome to do something about it.

Happily, now more than ever before the international community does seem prepared to move against malnutrition and related problems of marginal livelihood in low income countries. Even so, and notwithstanding the many assets at our collective command — food, money, technical expertise, along with an arsenal of people and organizations anxious to lend a hand — the task is not going to be easy. The Kottar Social Service Society and what it represents are more the exception than the rule. If Kottar impresses us, we may have to accept the fact that, as a model for emulation, it is not transferable. The overall effect of considering the Kottar experience is sobering rather than exhilarating. Nor are other models especially promising, at least in the short run. Few governments have really demonstrated the necessary combination of commitment and capability to achieve the same ends, even by other means. In short, we have our work cut out for us.

One thing, I believe, is clear. Little of lasting value is likely to happen if the governments of poor countries are unable to develop an effective presence in the countryside and then to confront — and surmount — the structural constraints that leave a majority of people poor, dependent, and powerless. It is a tall order. Food aid and other transfers, if programmed appropriately, can help in this immense undertaking, but we would be most unwise to expect very much very quickly.