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Research Priorities Synoptic View

I feel rather like a headmaster of a school who calls his pupils together at the end of term to tell them how well they have done, to warn them that there is a need for still greater efforts next time but to reassure them that the holiday has now come and the school rules can be relaxed and a certain amount of frivolity is permitted once again. Perhaps we have become too serious. Anyway if I use some of these next few minutes in a rather light-hearted and even fanciful way, I hope I will be forgiven and that you will all enter into the spirit of this end-of-term occasion.

For one thing, we have the ladies with us, and we owe it to them not to be serious or too professional in their company. We all know that the ladies get on and do something while the men just sit and talk; we therefore have some obligation to justify all our sitting and talking. I am reminded of the story of the lady who was asked by an admiring visitor the secret of her happy marriage. "Oh, it's quite simple" she said, "my husband and I share all the planning and decision-making equally between us; he does all the planning and I do all the decision-making".

We have had a vast number of words delivered during the past ten days and what I have tried to do is to dip my fishing net into this pool of words. Much material was so refined that it slipped right through my net, but I am reporting on those creatures which I have retained. My filter is no doubt somewhat different from yours and I am not going to give you a ready-made report to take home which your bosses will accept as a satisfactory account of how you have used your time.

I may not be able to mention by name all those from whom I have fished some of my ideas and I apologise if I do not give your full academic titles to those whom I shall mention.

Let me say, first of all, what is my own attitude to agricultural economics. I believe that when we strip away all the wrappings with which we like to encase this subject and get right to the core of it, we do not find a mathematical equation. We do not find a set of systems. We find at the centre a human family. This is my starting point and I recall what Schultz said on our first

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day: "It's what farm people do or what farm people will be able to do which holds the key to our story". I shall be saying a little more about econometric models but first I just want to say this. Econometric models, and indeed all the other models we use, must in the end be buildings in which men and women could feel at home and recognize their identity. They must not be too clinical, or so inhuman that people are thought of just as labour units. The more model builders polish the marble floors of their buildings, the more slippery and uninviting they become; and men and women may not want to make their habitation there.

Now I suppose I should ask, have we in this Conference been, to any extent, off course? Have we wandered at all from our proper function? I suggest you might refer to our Constitution, and find Article II (Objectives) which reads as follows: "To foster the application of the science of agricultural economics in the improvement of the economic and social conditions of rural people and their associated communities". That is the first point. I think we can all recognize the hand of Leonard Elmhirst in drafting that section. The Article on Objectives continues: "To advance knowledge of agricultural processes and the economic organisation of agriculture". That last phrase, by the way, is the title of one of Schultz's books. "And to facilitate communication and exchange of information among those concerned with rural welfare throughout the world". If we are not personally pursuing any of those aims I think we should ask, ought we to be here at all? Or do the objectives of the Association need changing, because after fifty years our world and our ways of looking at it have changed? In passing it is interesting to note that our French colleagues describe themselves not as agricultural economists but as rural economists. Perhaps this is an indication that they have remained closer to the original objectives of the Association. Even so, at the present state of Michel Petit's work on the rôle of models in the decision process I do not find it to be noticeably rural in character.

It has been suggested to me by some people to whom I have talked during the Conference, that our papers have been too general. Do we want, at a conference of this kind, general or specific papers? The contributed papers which we received yesterday did seem to me closer to research and to the scientific method than some of our other papers have been. I think, for example, of Kenneth Shapiro's paper on "Efficiency Differentials in Peasant Agriculture and their Implications for Development Policies". That paper re-examines a proposition previously formulated by another research worker, in this case none other than Professor Schultz, concerning the high efficiency of traditional agriculture, given the available inputs and technology. Shapiro's paper produces data purporting to show that the previously held proposition is not supported, and postulates that many farmers could operate much more efficiently than they do with the resources they now have. Finally, the paper suggests that further research is needed to determine *why* this is so. Now that kind of scientific criticism, debate, and reassessment, seems to me to be of the very essence of research and I feel sure that Karl Popper, the leading thinker in the philosophy of science who was quoted earlier in this Conference, would thoroughly approve of that kind of paper. He might be much

more dubious about the papers of a general stock-taking kind. Of course we cannot please everybody. If our Conference consisted mainly of the discussion of reports on highly specific and localised case-studies or small-scale surveys, a number of disappointed participants would say, "I found there was very little of relevance to my situation". That number would probably increase if we invited mainly local research papers. Each attempt to generalise or to make a comparative analysis enables more people to identify with the question under discussion, but at too high a level of generality the depth of such identification can become very superficial and even totally impersonal.

Next I want to turn to Glenn Johnson's outline of the triple rôle of agricultural economists. After that I want to underline some points from which I think we could derive satisfaction, then some points giving cause for concern, then a word about models and policy-makers and finally a programme for action.

Now the first part of the triple rôle of agricultural economists, says Glenn Johnson, is to participate in decision-making, the eventual object being to help to prescribe a solution. An inter-action is needed between the decision-makers and agricultural economists. The agricultural economists will be looked to particularly for maximising decisions or indications, and Johnson reminded us that great philosophic flexibility, as he called it, is required on the part of agricultural economists in that context. Capstick suggested that maybe we should switch some more of our resources in agricultural economics into this first category of Glenn Johnson's. On the other hand Ohkawa clearly prefers that we confine attention mainly to the second and third and not get too involved in direct participation.

The second category was to carry out subject-matter research, putting together information of a specific subject where the immediate objective is not to prescribe policy but to prepare the components of models. Here I would recall Uma Lele's request for more accurate data on such matters as yields, acreages, prices and market behaviour; and Tracy's suggestion that we should do more outlook-projection work before the next crisis appears, rather than analysing it after it has happened.

The third category was to carry out disciplinary research, where we attempt to improve theories and quantitative techniques. As Glenn Johnson said, often the practical problems encountered by agricultural economists in their first rôle go unsolved because the necessary disciplinary research has not been done. Here Johnson underlined that we need better techniques for working with non-monetary values and Richter also said, when he was talking about world models, that these must take account of some factors not easily quantified – socio-economic parameters, as he called them – which belong more to political economy.

Now I will move on to points from which I think perhaps we can derive some satisfaction. I think we could congratulate ourselves on our intellectual stamina and alertness throughout these long days; I wonder though if it has always been so. I can recall some earlier conferences at which I believe that a participant could sometimes have got away – perhaps at four o'clock in the afternoon at the fifth plenary session – with some most outrageous

statements. They would solemnly have got into the record and no one would have taken any notice. I think we are much more alert today.

One of our colleagues said to me in the corridor, "I feel very happy here, because we have experience a *planetary dimension*". I know what he feels and I share his view. I think discussion here has been more systematic, more relevant, less episodic, than at previous conferences. Too often in the past we have had to listen to members who have used valuable discussion time to read long prepared statements which took no account of the course of the debate and seemed to be introduced at random points. There has been less of that this time and I am very happy about it. Perhaps our preoccupation with the development of rigorous conceptual systems has had that effect.

Now if I may turn, Mr. President, to points raised in this Conference which should give us some cause for concern. The first one I want to mention is — are we, perhaps, not doing enough empirical research? Are we losing our appetite for, or even our belief in, research? So many of our papers consist of commentaries upon current trends in the economy and in society — for example the trend towards decentralisation mentioned by Yudelman — or express a concern with the analysis of concepts and systems without any specific content. I wondered sometimes whether we had done more at this Conference than to design and assemble a set of empty boxes. Is it the case that our large institutions such as the World Bank, are still learning more by trial and error than by systematic research? These are questions I am asking. I remember one comment made by Mr. Martens at one of the discussion sessions, pointing out that we should not suppose that the content of our Conference papers, or of our journal articles, reflects fairly the bulk of empirical work which is going on but which is not widely reported. I think that is a very good point. But perhaps it is a point which editors of journals should note, not to over-weight the methodological side of the subject and not to restrict themselves to philosophical articles as though there was nothing of interest to report in actual research outcomes.

I wonder whether the apparent lack of research content in some of our papers is due to the age composition of those attending our conference. Have we got too many administrators amongst us who have little time for research and indeed are not expected to do research? Anyway I think I am going to suggest to my new Executive Committee that a certain number of papers, and a certain proportion of discussion time, should be allocated to members under 35 years of age, and only if such young contributors are not forthcoming would their share of the time be surrendered to the elder statesmen. Does the world, perhaps, pay more attention and pay more money to those who advise (often on the basis of knowledge much of which was gained a quarter of a century ago) than to those who are engaged in the process of discovery? Where are we to look today for the fresh springs of vigorous intellectual activity on our subject which are replenishing our discipline and its body of tenable propositions?

Schultz noticed an increasing opposition to economics and the abasement of economics by governments. If economists have gone wrong, I wonder where they have gone wrong? I think the Conference has shown, Mr. President,

that we may have gone wrong in three main ways. First, we overlook social and political factors in our own sector. We still think we can identify purely economic problems when really they are socio-political-economic problems. This point was stressed, Mr. President, in your own address at the opening of our Conference, and it was also very effectively expressed in Mbithi's paper. I was not able to be present at the session when he delivered that paper, but it seemed to me to be a very challenging paper about decision-making in the farmhouse household. The farmer's social decision-making environment is prescribed by his culture of which he is a product and its complex values, cognitions, beliefs, and experiences are important components of his decision-making frame of reference. Technical and economic factors in *some* decisions are not really critical. Mbithi went on to list some of the false assumptions made by professional extension workers. First false assumption: that the rural farm can be assumed to be a responsive, expectant production firm which can be organised. Second false assumption: that the farm is operating in a knowledge vacuum and that historical, social and environmental factors, as well as the personality of the farmer, can be ignored. Third false assumption: that the change agent or extension worker is himself operating with all the necessary information. Fourth false assumption: that the farmer understands and appreciates the technical nature of the expert prescription and has the resources to implement it. Mbithi utterly rejects the "trickle-down-effect" theory which he says leads to rigid barriers in access to national farm resources and perpetuates unacceptable income disparities. I was very impressed by that line of argument and I think we all have to review our analysis of economic problems against the background of those criticisms.

The second possible failure of agricultural economists is that we do not sufficiently integrate our studies in the agricultural sector with events in the rest of the economy. This was underlined by Ohkawa in his paper. Vos also emphasised that there is a clear and strong feed-back between the rates of growth in the two sectors of the economy, and that this is of vital significance when it comes to the choice of the strategy for the economic development of the country. Tracy pointed out in connection with this matter of relating our own sector with other sectors, that in the same way we should integrate our studies of regional agricultural policy with the world situation more than we have done; and I did notice that when Tracy was giving his paper about European agriculture it so happened that there were no Asians or Africans present. I know that there were other regional group discussions going on at the same time, but it does illustrate the tendency for our regional studies to become isolated from each other.

The third factor which I think has emerged as important in the criticism of our attitude is that we do not take enough account of the changing exogenous factors which can so often upset the agricultural picture. We seem to be sometimes unwilling to accept that the world is dynamic. Nussbaumer underlined this. The pace of change is probably accelerating. We cannot stop the system so as to take a long hard look at it; we have got to adapt our studies to the changing system. Van den Noort said that we have to accept that the decision-making process is affected by the fact that the conditions, the economic

machinery, the objectives, even the general welfare function are not constants but are changing over time. All this leads to the point, I think, that we need more multi-disciplinary studies. There has been insufficient awareness of the findings of our colleagues in other social sciences and so our models lack realism. Giving another angle on this, Paarlberg underlined that we must concern ourselves with the question "who makes the decisions, what is decided and what is the outcome of the decision?". I find a reflection of this same pointing to involvement with decision-makers when Scheper pointed out, when he was talking about model building, that our real problem is to find operational procedures. That is the main problem, not to analyse situations but to find operational procedures, and I think this is what Paarlberg was getting at. Again, Folkesson said in another session, "If we are interested in agricultural policy we should spend more time on the analysis of the policy formulation process itself". Bublout drew our attention to the operations of pressure groups, bodies, social classes, and we cannot ignore that these are real factors in the decision-making process, Ohkawa said that preferences of political parties are decisive and preferences of administration cannot be ignored. Tracy recommends us to ask, when we are making our analysis, where does power lie? Similar points were made by Anthonio and Sebestyen. Another comment here is that we are telling ourselves that we have not been sufficiently dis-aggregated in our approach. We need to aim programmes at specific groups of needy people, not just ensure that the global supply keeps pace with population increase.

Now after discussing decision-making for ten days, I suppose it could be said, have we made any decisions? I do not think it would be a fair question, because the decision-makers we are talking about are not agricultural economists, they are mostly politicians or farmers. We are seeking to help them, but not to become the decision-makers ourselves. It is, however, perhaps worth asking, did we come here to talk to each other or to the world outside? In the speech by Vice President Arap Moi he clearly challenged us to speak to the world outside, to give prescriptions, especially for his own country. I still think that it is perhaps not fair to suggest that we came here for that purpose. I think we have come here mainly for a kind of professional stock-taking, to remind ourselves or to inform ourselves of what different people are doing in our subject, to discuss what is the current conventional wisdom, to discuss what has been discarded since we last met or over recent years and to discuss what is emerging. All this will not necessarily have immediate relevance to actual problems in particular countries; we are mostly further back down the line than that.

Now I want to move on to a few words about models and policy-making. I start with Dr. Dadd's comment that policy-makers will not take our models on trust; they have got to be validated. We have to show that if the models had been used in the past they would have come up with reasonably good indications of what has actually happened. Dr. Kim said that we have got to sell these models step by step to those to whom we think they will be useful; not oversell them, or they will just be rejected, but sell them step by step, get people used to the idea that they are an instrument for policy-making, though

only one instrument. Nielsen said in one of the discussion groups that models should be developed in response to a problem which someone has asked us to solve, not for their own sake. And Paarlberg said if we want to advance in relevance we may have to do this at some expense of rigour. I thought that summed it up rather well. Petit was honest enough to admit some of the limitations of model-building, when he said towards the end of his paper that the usefulness of models obviously depends upon the quality of the new knowledge which they help to produce. The social relevance of this new knowledge must ultimately be judged from the point of view of the decision-making processes to which it contributes. In other words it is a pragmatic approach in the end, not just theoretical. Petit said that we must not overlook that in society conflicts are normal and recognised as such. We have to recognise that the adaptive behaviour model does not tell us how conflicts are solved. This is another point at which we need to touch people in neighbouring disciplines; adaptive behaviour models do not even tell us which conflicts are important and as such they fall short of being a global theory of social change. I think that could be a vital weakness, if all the problems today are socio-politico-economic and not just economic.

For these and other reasons, Mr. President, I have my own personal doubts about taking the model-building approach too far. I believe that decision-making will always be an art, at least as much as a science. Can we by analysis reveal the real essence of decision-making? Can we make optimum decision-making reproducible and available to all? I doubt it. I think there is an element of intuition and an element of improvisation in decision-making which will always elude us, but I am willing to accept that model-building is not a retreat from reality but the construction of a spring-board from which we can approach reality more effectively. But whatever attitude members may take on this question I would say, do not forget to read the forthcoming issue of the *European Review of Agricultural Economics* in which Petit, Renborg, Glenn Johnson and others will have a series of papers all about the validity of the adaptive behaviour model approach. Meanwhile some agricultural economists may prefer always to work with informal models to which they are accustomed; and Ohkawa pointed out that too sophisticated methods may not help much as tools for reasonable decision-making, a proposition with which Dr. Kim agreed.

Now I will turn to our programme for action. The very first point I would like to mention under this heading is that we need to give more attention to the clarity of our presentation. Mr. Arap Moi rubbed this in quite strongly. He challenged us to translate our professional sophistication into clear, precise and communicable language, to give a clear analysis of alternatives and the consequences of each alternative of action. I think we can do more along these lines and Capstick suggested that it is up to us economists to project our ideas to the policy-makers. If we wait until we are asked for our views we may wait a very long time, he said. I wonder whether our papers both here and in our journals are not sometimes written in much too impersonal a style. Why do we never use the first person singular in our papers? I will always welcome some papers of the kind in which someone will come to us and say

"I have made an investigation of the following kind and I have produced the following results. I will explain why I think these results may have some significance for conditions wider than those for which they were observed, and I invite your comments on my methods and my results". Why do we always say, for instance, "A sample survey of farm businesses was undertaken using interviewing techniques", when we mean "I went and talked to quite a lot of farmers"? Papers from the socialist countries, if I may say so, are particularly characterised by a highly impersonal and generalised style. I look forward to the day when a research worker from the Soviet Union will come to our conference and tell us what he and his immediate colleagues are doing, rather than making general statements about organisations and methods as they apply throughout the Union. But that is only one example; I am not suggesting that it is only the socialist countries which use the impersonal style. We seem to think it is more professional to use the impersonal style.

I think we have also got to be ready to meet ignorance of economics in high places with patience and with restraint. My experience is that not only do the plants and animals not read what we have written, as Schultz reminded us, but nine out of ten administrators are entirely unconvinced that any agricultural economists are worth reading or are readable anyway! Econometric models are regarded as too esoteric to be understandable and too artificial or historical to be relevant. They are seen in relation to the issues of the day rather as crossword puzzles might be seen in relation to the main news pages of the newspaper. Administrators want their economics encapsulated in immediately digestible tablets. They do not ask the questions which economists are accustomed to answering. They ask, for example, "Which is the best size of farm?" rather than asking "what is the relationship between size and the other economic characteristics of farming?" We have to be ready for that kind of attitude.

What will be the most important research needs for the future? The first I would mention, I think, is the general subject of how can we identify and ensure a better distribution of the national agricultural product? That is, we should study more closely the economic aspects of social justice for rural people. How should the benefits of growth be distributed? How much should success be rewarded? We have got to consider here what Ohkawa calls the trade-off between growth and equity. Bhattacharjee spoke of a dearth of analysis of policy options in this area. Nazarenko pointed out that we cannot use *only* marginal equilibrium theory in relation to the agricultural sector, because this sector is socially so important and so different. Do we not agree? Hence the USSR is doing a great deal to improve the rural infrastructure and so on. Can we sustain success in rural development without increasing inequality? We have also to fill some of the elementary gaps in technical knowledge indicated, for example, by Petit, when he said that some production models had to be abandoned because of lack of the necessary biological data about such things as the relationship between rainfall and the growth of grass. Again this is an indication of multi-disciplinary study being needed. Bhattacharjee asked the question: "Given a labour-intensive strategy of growth in many countries, which crop and livestock mixes should be included

and at what stages of the evolution of production should different crop and livestock mixes be encouraged?" This is an area for research, I feel sure. In general the recognition of people's multiple goals, not just their economic goals, means that we need more of the trade-off type of analysis. Yudelman drew our attention to urgent research areas through which to investigate the reasons for differences in the rate of take-up of new technology. These need to be better understood, including the elements of risk associated with new technology in different situations. This brings in agronomy and sociology as well as economics. He also pointed the finger to welfare measurement: we need to find practicable methods to measure what happens to rural welfare when we alter the relative weights of the components of development projects. We need to know more about the principles and patterns of behaviour of small-scale producers, and we need to monitor development projects much more effectively so as to help us to design new systems. This, Yudelman said, was a challenge to the academic community at large. So there is plenty to be done in all those areas.

How hopeful can we be about completion? I liked Campbell's quotation from Samuel Johnson: "where there is no hope there can be no endeavour". It reminded me of a remark I heard Leonard Bernstein, the musician, make when he was giving a televised lecture about a symphony and about music teaching generally. He said "all teaching is an expression of faith in the future"; and I think we might say in answer to those who question the validity of our research efforts, that all our research is an expression of faith that in due time we may bring order out of chaos. I believe that there will be enough time, and that we should not be too impatient about the apparent lack of progress. I have calculated that if each one of us could add only one small but significant increment to knowledge in a professional lifetime of forty years, then we could look forward collectively to receiving one such contribution every month.

I come now to the end of my talk, Mr. President. As I settle down into my seat in the aeroplane on the way back to London I think perhaps I shall remember some words of Shakespeare which he put into the mouth of Prospero in "The Tempest". (Please, dear interpreter, do not try to translate Shakespeare; I cannot ask you to do that.)

Our revels now are ended. These are actors,
(As I foretold you) were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air . . .
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind: we are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

But then, Mr. President, as I twist and turn in my seat and dawn comes up over the Mediterranean, I shall remember with pleasure one thing that

Shakespeare could not know, namely that we have the 16th Volume of Proceedings to look forward to, edited by Theodore Dams and Kenneth Hunt. So long as they promise not to publish this speech, I salute them. And, my friends, I salute you all.†

† For the welfare of readers we did not promise!. Edit.