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15. LEAST DEVELOPED NATIONS

L. Berry and R. W. Kates

Measured against the basic needs of the world's population, the current economic order is insane. In the aggregate, all the basic needs are met; but in terms of distribution and consumption there coexist the obese and the hungry, the three-bathroom home and the open sewer, the unemployed graduate and the illiterate. A small symbol of that insanity was the hoped-for benefit accruing to countries designated "least developed."

At a seminar held in East Africa in 1969, exploring "appropriate" criteria for least development, participants were assured that, by all the criteria that could be devised, Tanzania would surely qualify. It is ironic, of course, that this was considered good news at the time, for it was hoped that by highlighting the special conditions that apparently exist in countries like Tanzania, a rationale would be provided for special aid and trade initiatives.

Events rapidly overtook the situation. Worldwide changes in the pricing of commodities, particularly oil, resulted in a very different national economic situation for a number of developing nations not included in the original least developed group. Concern over the problems of the least developed, exacerbated by the Sahelian drought, merged with problems of those countries most affected by the oil price increase and subsequent inflation.

As a result, there was a rapid, nonuniform increase in the number of countries eligible for special treatment. Despite this fact, the original group remains a core designation for a number of purposes. The focus on the least developed and most affected countries has, by some measures, been effective at least in the short run. Many donor nations give these countries priority in aid allocations and bestow a higher proportion of outright grants in their assistance to countries in these groups (see chap. 13).

Poorest People or Poorest Nations?

Whatever the criteria—least developed or most affected—the nation-state still serves as the basic unit of designation. However, an alternative focus on the poorest people, wherever they may be, has been legislated by the U.S. Congress and selected by the World Bank. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive. In our detailed analysis of the least developed, we explained the differences between the plight of poorest nations and poorest peoples. Our conclusions relate to nation-states and the peculiar inconsistencies that result when jurisdiction over portions of the earth's surface is divided among 160–200 units of enormously varying size.

The complicated process of forming nation-states has resulted in some strange contrasts: the huge states of Brazil, China, the United States, and the USSR; tiny nations such as the Maldives, Gambia, Benin, and Guyana. In comparing nation-states, one is comparing very different units. The smaller nations tend to have a greater uniformity of natural, cultural, and economic conditions; the larger nations usually combine these conditions in a greater variety. But most statistics and analyses are structured in such a manner that they emphasize the national unit and facilitate comparisons among nations. Indeed, regardless of their size, nations are the basic economic and decision-making unit in the modern world.

The debate over poorest nation versus poorest people is played out in this context and involves important issues. It is surely a *world* problem that poverty is so widespread. But when poverty is found in pockets within large and comparatively wealthy nations, it becomes primarily a *national* problem to refocus attention and redistribute wealth. The international community has important responsibilities toward the poorest people, but the problems of the world's poorest nations can only be addressed in the context of the international community.

Among the world's poorest and most affected nations, there is little surplus wealth to be redistributed, few centers of economic growth from which to initiate changes in the national well-being, scant resources to meet the hardships of drought, famine, and disaster. During favorable periods, extended assistance is useful to generate new growth; in times of need, aid has been a necessity to maintain health and life. The least developed and the most affected have necessarily become the concern of the world community.

The Causes of Least Development

It is easier to place nations on scales of development than to explain the causes of their predicament. Competing theories that attempt to "explain" the poverty of nations tend to emphasize one of three causes: the inherent characteristics of the nations involved; the processes of underdevelopment; or the artifacts of the scales of measurement employed. Thus, less-developed countries are precisely that because they are young, unfortunate, or inept; or because they have been underdeveloped in order to develop other countries; or because the choice of measurement scales do not favor their characteristics. A rich and disputatious literature advocates all these views. It is not the purpose of this chapter to review the latter, but to ask how well they explain the phenomenon of least development.

In addition to these major general theories of development, a special theory of least development involving random "leastness" asserts that, "after all, someone must be last." In the context of a theory of stages of economic growth (Rostow, 1960), the least developed would include those nations that, by some accident of history, culture, and location, got a late start. They would therefore be the random residuals at the very base of the economic ladder.

A study of the characteristics and location of the least developed suggests that there is more to be said on this matter. A map designating the least developed (see chap. 5, map 5.1) does not appear to show a random selection of poorer nations. On closer examination, most of the least developed appear to be in Africa; the majority are located in arid or semiarid environments; and many seem physically or economically isolated to an extraordinary degree. Study of the environmental, political, cultural, and geographic aspects of the least developed raises numerous questions about the group. Randomness, however, appears to be the least likely explanation for their existence.

Setting aside the theory of randomness as an adequate explanation for least development, none of the major theoretical orientations uniquely account for the phenomenon. Almost all the least developed are, in terms of location and economic linkages, peripheral to the world cores of power and wealth. Most have environments marked by shorter growing seasons resulting from aridity or cold, and by the absence of known mineral resources. Although many are young nations concentrated in Africa, a few number among the continent's oldest. Most rely on a few agricultural export crops. The least developed encompass a wide variety of political, economic, and cultural systems. They surely have characteristics that set them apart from rich nations, but these traits are shared by other poor nations.

Nor can the processes of underdevelopment have worked exclusively to their disadvantage. Mercantilism and capitalism in Europe, and later in North America, led to major reorientations of trading links. Places once central to the caravan trade subsequently found themselves at a great distance from even the regional links of the new centers of wealth. Independent nomadic peoples bore the brunt of conflict with colonial invaders. As a result of these and other activities, the growth of the least developed was halted during the colonial era. Underdevelopment surely occurred. More recently, a case can be made for the least developed suffering relative neglect, rather than exploitation, of colonial powers and world investors. The generally weak integration of many of these countries into the world system may have buffered them against the more rapacious processes of "global accumulation."

The conventional indicators of economic and social well-being are, by definition, biased against the least developed. Richness of extended family life, wealth of traditional culture, depth of religious feeling, and effective participation in village activity are all well-developed values among LDNs. They may inversely relate to GNP, literacy, or the manufacturing work force. LDNs appear to share some of these more favorable cultural characteristics.

The present writers prefer to adopt a cautious stance as to cause. Explanations of least development that rely on intrinsic characteristics come perilously close to "blaming the victim," a familiar justification for maintenance of the status quo. A similar situation exists for those explanations that "exalt the victim" by idealizing the social milieu of the folk society. Such explanations may serve to discourage criticism of local ineptitude or indigenous exploitation and thus prevent the development of self-reliance.

While it is preferable to eschew single-cause explanations of least development, the latter is not simply a random condition existing among the world's poor nations, nor is it a pragmatic but arbitrary classification. Some nations may soon lose their place among the least developed, possibly contingent on the vagaries of mineral exploitation. Others will be included in the formal classification for purposes of geographic representation (Latin America, Oceania) or excluded because of size (Bangladesh). But for most countries it would seem that peripheral location within regions and environmental marginality combine to exacerbate the inequalities of the current economic order.

Peripheral Regional Location

The least developed share with the less developed a location that is peripheral to the core of world wealth and power; moreover, many of the former share, within their own regions, a location peripheral to their wealthier and more powerful less-developed neighbors. Thus, in a regional setting the coastal areas of West Africa, especially Nigeria and the Ivory Coast, may be considered cores surrounded by the peripheral states in the Sahel.

West Africa. In precolonial times, the inland states of West Africa were the seat of great kingdoms founded on the principles of nomadic flexibility and power. The coast was a somewhat isolated region plagued by disease. The arid and semiarid areas were the heart of the major lines of communication and trade, the centers of knowledge and learning.

With the European penetration inland from the coast, which led to the establishment of seaports, trading routes, and the growth of the slave trade, the entire region underwent a radical change. Later, colonial development, which was centered on the ports and the boundary road and rail network linking them, confirmed this pattern of economic supremacy. As a result, Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Ghana are among the more prosperous developing countries, while Mali, Chad, Niger, and Benin are among the poorest of the least developed.

East Africa. In East Africa, a more complex historical and physical setting

serves as a backdrop to a different set of relationships. For a variety of colonial historical, geographic, and climatic reasons, Kenya became the early focus of white settlers' farming and business activities and investments. Although this interest developed gradually, the post-World War I accession of Tanzania to British control emphasized the role of Mombassa and Nairobi. The pattern of communications and trade was focused more clearly on Kenya. Despite the efforts to concentrate East African community activities at Arusha, in northern Tanzania, and the various agreements to "allocate" industrial investment among the three East African states, Kenya has continued to be the center of modern industrial, agricultural and tourist activity. Political factors may have aggravated present dichotomies, but the total effect has been to produce very different patterns of development within each of the three countries. Per capita income is higher in Kenya than in Tanzania or Uganda (though income distribution is more equitable in Tanzania).

More significant, it appears from a variety of indicators that core growth in one country has accompanied a slower growth and trade-dependent situation in others. Tanzania has independent outlets and a political will that may enable it to overcome the ties of long-established patterns of growth, but this is proving to be a long and difficult task.

In a second-tier arrangement in eastern Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda collectively comprise growth areas in relation to the very poor and crowded states of Rwanda and Burundi. Formerly linked on the west through the Belgian colonial network, these two isolated countries have struggled to establish eastern links; they now rely on these routes for imports and exports. The great distances, high cost, and uncertain nature of the links have greatly handicapped these resource-poor countries in their attempt to develop economically.

Ethiopia and Somalia do not seem to fit the regional-peripheral model quite so neatly. Ethiopia is one of the larger (in terms of population) LDCs. It may be that a combination of strong historical factors (including a strong feudal system and later colonial subjugation), internal communication difficulties, health and disease problems, and relative isolation has prevented this country from following a path of stronger economic growth and internal integration. Somalia, a once isolated desert country, has now assumed some strategic importance, but it does not seem to have been greatly influenced by its relations with local (regional) neighbors. It is ironic that these two exceptions to the model came perilously close to open warfare.

Southern Africa. The three least developed states of southern Africa clearly illustrate the regional marginalization process. Lesotho and Swaziland, the two smaller states (i.e., inland area), became residual to the territory of the Republic of South Africa. Marginal hilly lands of relatively low agricultural value, they have become densely populated, independent territories dependent on South Africa for trade and income from migrant labor. Botswana is much larger in land area but equally small in population (650,000). It has also developed a strong dependence on South Africa for trade and income. Opportunities for growth are more hopeful in at least two of the states, namely, Botswana and Swaziland, since the discovery of mineral resources may serve as the economic catalyst to create a new pattern of future development. However, existing communications and trade ties with South Africa may be tightened as a result of new investments for mining development and thereby exacerbate the dependence of these states.

Himalayan Mountain States. The Himalayan countries present some striking analogies with the Sahel. Like the latter, they lack outlets to the sea, are isolated from the world trading network by physical barriers, and have larger, more prosperous neighbors. India, though a poor country, has much greater aggregate resources; Russia and China, to the north, present a similar contrast. The Himalayan states have remained relatively isolated until recently; even now they have tenuous links with the world economic system. Two states were incorporated into their powerful neighbor, leaving Nepal, Bhutan, and Afganistan, areas possessing comparatively rich cultural heritages yet isolated by harsh physical surroundings. Their links with the rest of the world have mainly depended on their larger neighbors; this state of affairs may continue in the future.

Environmental Marginality

Many developing countries, and a number of developed nations, may be characterized as having harsh environments, but the least developed display three distinctive patterns. For most, physical isolation is a common characteristic. In sixteen countries, arid or semiarid environments, with little internal diversity, add to the effect of isolation. For a number of others, the high relief of mountains or dissected plateaus are distinctive features. For a few, a humid, tropical environment in a small national area, high population density, and/or an insular or mountainous location combine to provide yet a third group of marginal environments.

While particular environmental features are by no means unique to LDNs, in only a few cases are the environmental constraints to agriculture and communication alleviated by the presence of actively developed mineral resources or other significant economic growth points. Where these are present in significant quantities, as in Botswana, exploitation is still in an early phase.

Strategies for Coping with Least Development

There is no easy or quick solution to the problems of the least developed. The development of new resources and changes in development strategy or political relationships may modify the economic status of a few LDNs. The

discovery of oil reserves has, for example, dramatically changed the economic and political position of Libya in the last twenty years. Mineral development in Botswana may be the stimulus for rapid change. But in all probability the present group of LDNs will be recognizable, using current limited criteria, in twenty or thirty years' time.

Being "least" in a world of "most" places a special burden on those who formulate development strategies. In the second and third sections of this work we discuss three suggested sets of strategies: (1) those that are designed to promote an economic catch-up, focusing on economic growth at higher rates; (2) those that encourage regional integration by linking richer regions and states with one or more LDCs to enhance the possibility of steady economic growth; and (3) those that attempt to isolate LDCs from the full impact of the world economy and thereby preserve the essence of the local cultural and economic systems. Discussion of these strategies has proliferated in recent literature (O'Keefe and Wisner, 1977; Seidman, 1974b). A review of the attitudes and concepts put forward by the various contributors to the book provides a somewhat different set of viewpoints. In general, our coauthors both deny the possibility of catch-up in the prevailing economic order and eschew the centrality of economic growth implicit in such a strategy. They replace this with a call for both a new economic order and an emphasis on noneconomic forms of development. But they also draw on aspects of the prevailing strategies: seeking harmonious linkages rather than catch-up with richer nations; emphasizing self-reliance but not autocracy; and searching for nonexploitative regional linkages.

New Economic Order. New sets of relationships between "first" and "third" worlds are implicit in almost all the preceding chapters: they are presented in sharp contrast in Szentes' plea for a totally new economic structure (chap. 3) and in Goulet's cry for a new ethic to guide future world relationships (chap. 14). Both contributors address the whole of the developing world and suggest that for the least developed the issues are even more serious. Helleiner perceptively (albeit cynically) suggests, in a personal communication, that it is possible to institute new economic relationships with LDNs while doing little to change the global picture. The shift in world resources would be relatively modest and could ease the consciences of the rich.

Emphasis on Noneconomic Forms of Development. A major theme in many of the foregoing chapters is the emphasis on development sectors that are generally considered as resulting in rapid economic growth yet also address other aspects of national and personal well-being. In their discussion of health care and nutrition (chap. 7) Haraldson and Sukkar emphasize the importance of programs that impact directly on rural populations and the poorer sectors of the population. These authors point out that the traditional Western approach involving curative medicine does not work for most of the least developed and consequently necessitates that utilization of a widespread preventative approach in health care. Their views on nutrition suggest a similar approach. Mujwahuzi (chap. 10), Kates (chap. 9), and many other contributors emphasize the social infrastructure as a means of alleviating the slow progress toward economic growth that characterizes the least developed.

Harmonious Linkages. There are advantages in harmoniously linking Western knowledge and attitudes with the internal understanding of local conditions in developing countries. Is there a way in which less-dominating intellectual relationships can evolve? This is a central theme of Johnson and Vogel-Roboff (chap. 6), who attempt to define ways in which the modernization of pastoral nomadism can take place without a destruction of this important and productive way of life. They are relatively optimistic that this can occur. Berry and Renwick (chap. 11) approach the information problem directly and make a case for the integration of three sets of knowledge: international scientific information; technical, holistic understanding of the conditions and problems of particular areas; and indigenous wisdom about local resources and their proper use. They show that the relative, sometimes total, neglect of all but the scientific source of knowledge is an important reason why development programs do not attain their projected goals. Ways are suggested in which different types of integration of knowledge might lead to new styles of development.

Lastly, Mujwahuzi (chap. 10) shows that in the improvement of rural water supply, there is a need to incorporate local decision making in the overall process and to integrate "internal" and "external" know-how in a participatory manner. These and other chapters suggest that when the developed interact with the least developed, differences in conditions are so great that care must be taken to integrate concepts from both systems in order to create effective programs.

Self-Reliance. Conversely, several chapters imply that a partial removal from the international market scene would be advisable for the least developed insofar as every attempt should be made to be as self-sufficient as possible. Helleiner (chap. 2) espouses this view as part of his general approach to the international trading problems of the least developed. For some countries, such as Tanzania, this degree of self-sufficiency is already a major component of national policy. Helleiner sees little hope of economic catch-up in the short run and advocates the adoption of defensive strategies.

Kates (chap. 9), in his analysis of the impact of natural disasters on LDCs, advocates self-reliance as an important component of prevention and recovery measures. He points out the built-in nature of any adjustment mechanisms. However, the strategies he suggests for coping with major natural hazards involve a large measure of international assistance and involvement. None of the contributors have advocated a Burmese-style withdrawal strategy (chap. 4), nor do they encourage any attempt to seek total autocracy.

Regional linkage and integration. Only one chapter deals explicitly with combinations to increase the scale of market and resources and to take advantage of complementarity. Seidman (chap. 12) proposes strategies that will lead to regional integration. In the case of mineral development, it is clear that regional integration among nations—linking countries with similar resources and potential for industrial growth can pay handsome dividends in the near future.

Linking LDNs is a problematic venture. A major difficulty with combination proposals is the inequality that seems to develop regionally. Thus, the East African community found it impossible to provide equity to Tanzania and Uganda vis-à-vis Kenya. All new proposals for "stratification" in Sahelian livestock management (e.g., reproduction in the Sahel, intensive feeding in the Sudanic zone, marketing on the Coast) only seem to enhance the peripheral and dependent role of the Sahelian nations.

Five years ago, when the present writers first identified the environmental marginality of LDNs, the latter were described as "least known" nations. They are still least known (except, of course, to their own inhabitants), for knowledge, like all investments, is related to rates of return. But enough is known from this and other studies to draw some central conclusions.

Nation-states, regionally peripheral in marginal environments, constitute a special case of development need. Irrespective of who will devise an ordering of socioeconomic well-being in the world community, these states will predominate in the lowest fifth of nations.

Given the fact that the least developed constitute a special case with special patterns, a development strategy addressed to their needs cannot simply reflect a modification of conventional policies, be it the conventions of industrialized capitalism or industrial socialism. To do so will surely not help; it might even hurt, thereby increasing regional dependency and subservience and threatening the life-support systems of the population in question.

The alternative approaches suggested in the preceding chapters are directions to be taken, not blueprints to be followed. Within the individual countries concerned, they call for redefinitions of what constitutes growth and progress, and for increased self-reliance. Between North and South they demand a new mini-economic order in terms of flows of commodities and donor relations. And among nations within the same regions they require greater solidarity and mutual support.

This constitutes a tall order, perhaps too much for a strife-torn world where the attention given to any single set of problems seems so limited. Five years ago we wrote: "Soon, hopefully, the rains will come again in the Sahel, and the herds and herders will turn northward. A government or two might have fallen, but the pressures of wealth—inflation pressure, resource scarcity, corruption in public life—will eclipse the news from far-off, distant places." In 1971 the flow of resources to all developing nations from the rich was less than one-half cent for every dollar earned, but the flow to the least developed was somewhat greater (five-sixths of one cent). The least developed represent neither powerful allies nor resources and markets. They do serve as a measure of the distributive justice of the world order. The latter has fared rather poorly despite the radiant visions of global village or spaceship earth. That measure of justice still remains to be fulfilled.

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