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Technical assistance  
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Technical Assistance  
program

Underdeveloped areas

The RF and the Technical Assistance Program of the U.N.

As noted in my reports from the fifth General Conference of Unesco, the question of how the experience of the RF could be utilized in the Technical Assistance program of the U.N. and its specialized agencies was informally raised by Malcolm Adiseshiah, who is at present in charge of such work for Unesco. This and other discussions I heard on plans for technical assistance seem to me to pose a larger question, namely, whether or not the operation of this program may not offer rather special opportunities for the Foundation.

As I understand it, if work in technical assistance goes well during the eighteen months now provided for by contributions from the U.S. and forty-eight other countries, work of this kind is expected to continue over some years - possibly as long as ten years. Concretely, it will involve assistance of three kinds: first, bringing personnel for training from countries in need of economic development; second, sending expert advisers to those countries; third, in some instances the establishment and operation of training facilities for them in the participating donor countries. A cardinal principle of the U.N. operation is that assistance in any form is rendered only on the initiative of the recipient country.

While this last provision is politically necessary as a protection for the sovereignty of recipient member states, it is recognized to represent one of the weakest points in the plan now proposed. Those administering the plan on behalf of U.N. believe that they retain a certain leverage in their theoretical power to decline to act on the proposal of a recipient state. But how real this power will prove to be in practice remains to be seen.

Of course very considerable amounts of money are available for expenditure: Unesco's share (fourteen per cent of the total) will alone amount to about 2.4 millions. In the end, then, the effectiveness of fairly large expenditures will in considerable measure depend on the wisdom of what the member states propose.

All this points to what might prove to be a special opportunity for RF initiative. I can perhaps best illustrate the nature of that opportunity by taking as an example one undeveloped country which I saw on this recent trip, Iraq.

Iraq has been an independent state only since 1932. Its independent intellectual, scientific, and educational development is in what might well be thought of as in its first generation. Considerable numbers of Iraqi have had training abroad, principally in Great Britain and, more recently, increasingly in the United States. But Iraq as yet has done little to identify or define its salient national problems.



This is largely due to the fact that research on national problems is largely non-existent. The country is only just now taking steps which will eventually lead to the establishment of a university, and its scientific and intellectual personnel is largely preoccupied with teaching.

Originally it was proposed that higher education in Iraq should develop out of research: concretely, the proposal was to establish a series of research institutes in which personnel trained abroad would carry on research which would serve precisely to identify, define, and elaborate the problems the country faces in such fields as public health, agriculture, the social sciences, and even the humanities.

Certainly Iraq is a U.N. member state which will ask for, and which deserves, technical assistance. But in this absence of any adequate research on the country's problems, how will its requests be framed? Presumably by consensus on the basis of the best available evidence, which must admittedly be deficient. Possibly, and this is all too easy to imagine, on the basis of personal ambitions and private interests which though undoubtedly well concealed, may point to personal and private gain.

In this situation the RF, if it were interested to make its "know-how" available, conceivably might take the initiative with the Iraqi government to offer help in the establishment of a national research institute covering the five major fields of RF operation. Concretely, the RF might propose, under the terms of a proper contract, to send to Iraq a five-man team representing public health, the natural sciences, -- particularly agriculture --, medical sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities, and to provide this team with a sufficient budget for carrying on rudimentary research on the country's problems in these five fields. It might well be agreed that the institute or its members would go no further than merely to publish its findings, i.e., would not make recommendations nor give advice except as formally requested by the competent Iraqi authorities. Its research would in effect be limited to a description of the country's situation in these various aspects of its national life. For this reason the institute would necessarily have independence and autonomy comparable to that of the Mexican Agricultural Commission. Presumably as its findings identified, defined, and elaborated national problems they could be dealt with in some measure through the continuing operation of technical assistance. In short, in this way Iraq as a sovereign state would have valuable guidance in formulating requests for the U.N. program.

But a move of this kind would have other consequences which might in the long run prove even more important.

In the first place, the work of this institute would establish a much needed tradition of research into which increasingly foreign-trained Iraqi personnel could be drawn.



In the second place, from the point of view of the RF itself it would provide a profitable experience in "joint operations" in a relatively favorable setting: there would be no serious language problem since virtually every educated Iraqi speaks English well; it would take place in a country relatively well situated financially (particularly from oil royalties) and in principle at least able to finance developmental projects; further development in Iraq is clearly possible since it is a country which at one time or another has supported at least six times its present population; it is a country in many respects typical of the entire Near Eastern region - predominantly Arab with important non-Moslem communities including various Christian minorities and tribal groups religiously divided between the two principal sects of Islam; the political situation, while far from being ideal, is relatively stable though administration is typically cumbersome and governments tend to change rather too frequently. In short, Iraq is a country far enough advanced to be a hopeful theatre of operation at the same time that it is just beginning to face up to its real problems.

As will have appeared, even a short visit in a country like Iraq tends to make one appreciate the potential importance of the U.N. program in technical assistance. For countries like Iraq it seems to promise assistance at just the level where assistance is sorely needed. Undoubtedly the RF in its long history has operated at this level, particularly in the field of public health, but probably less in the areas of the world into which the U.N. will now be moving than in areas no longer so markedly backward.

If the RF should wish to operate in these other areas, notably the Near East and Southeast Asia, it might be well, as I have suggested here, rather advantageously, to go in with the U.N. operation in a situation in which such relatively small sums as the RF could conceivably make available would have consequences quite out of proportion to their size.

John Marshall