Development Narratives, Or Making the Best of Blueprint Development

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Summary. — The scenarios and arguments that drive and sanction much of Third World rural development are often dismissed as myths, ideologies, conventional wisdoms or fads. Yet these development narratives persist through time and frequently in spite of evidence learned in the field. Instead of calling for more site-specific learning to overthrow narratives that seem to be blueprints for development interventions across countries, the wiser course is first to examine ways in which these narratives can be improved or superseded. Four case studies show how policy makers and practitioners can think more enterprisingly about development narratives specifically and blueprint development generally.

1. INTRODUCTION

No one has a good word for blueprint development. The notion that rural development can be stenciled whole-cloth from premade plans and blueprints has been taken to task by many well-known critics, e.g., Hyden (1983, p. 65), Moris (1981, pp. 19–22), Korten (1980, pp. 496–501), and Sandford (1983, pp. 258), to name but a few. Invariably, the remedy recommended is to abandon blueprint development in favor of a learning process approach, one that conceives development as trial and error, where projects are hypotheses and what is called “failure” is part of, or should be part of, a broader learning curve (e.g., Chambers, 1983, pp. 211–212). The comparative advantage of the learning process approach is taken to be its flexibility and adaptability, given that the “probability of planned actions going wrong is high in an environment characterized by instability and uncertainty,” as is the case for many regions of the developing world (Hyden, 1983, p. 157). Unfortunately, this last point undermines, rather than reinforces, the purported advantages of the learning process approach.

The reasons we do not learn more from past rural development efforts are precisely the same reasons we cannot plan better for future ones. If planning is difficult, so too must be learning, and the performance record of rural development points overwhelmingly in one direction: planning has left much to be desired (Caiden and Wildavsky, 1974; Johnston and Clark, 1982, Chapter 1; for an exception, see Cohen and Lewis, 1987). The preconditions for successful project and national planning — low environmental uncertainty, stability in goals and national objectives, institutional memory, and redundant resources — are precisely the same preconditions for “learning better from experience,” and it is these preconditions that are woefully lacking across wide parts of the developing world. It is the impression of learning less and less over time while being more and more vulnerable to error which characterizes some 30 years of sub-Saharan African livestock projects, for example. Those caught in its clutches find little consolation in being told that they should “embrace” error in order to learn better (e.g., Korten, 1980, p. 498).

The learning process approach, or some more potent remedy, could of course win the day. But what do we do, as development practitioners, if blueprint development is here to stay for the time being? How can we make the best of a bad situation? These are the questions addressed by this paper. Rather than focusing on how one might improve the learning process approach, attention is given below to ways practitioners can better utilize blueprint development.

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2. FOUR DEVELOPMENT NARRATIVES

First it must be understood that blueprint development persists for precisely the same reason said to warrant the learning process approach. Rural development is a genuinely uncertain activity, and one of the principal ways practitioners, bureaucrats and policy makers articulate and make sense of this uncertainty is to tell stories or scenarios that simplify the ambiguity. Indeed, the pressure to generate narratives about development is directly proportional to the ambiguity decision makers experience over the development process. The more uncertain things seem at the microlevel, the greater the tendency to see the scale of uncertainty at the macrolevel to be so enormous as to require broad explanatory narratives that can be operationalized into standard approaches with widespread application. The unresolved failure of project blueprints derived from development narratives thus often serves only to reinforce, not lessen, the perceived need for some sort of narrative that accounts for the resulting increase in uncertainty.

These considerations raise the question of whether rural development could be more productively improved by identifying ways to make better use of those narratives that give rise to the blueprints. To see how this might be done, four development narratives are examined below. The examples are from Africa, but could be from anywhere in the world. Each of these narratives has persisted in the face of strong empirical evidence against its storyline and it is this persistence which, the paper argues, can be more effectively exploited. Rather than continuing to focus on trying to undermine the narrative evidentially, our efforts should shift to creating and engaging counternarratives to the more objectionable narrative of modifying that narrative to make it less objectionable. In order to strengthen this argument, the four examples have been chosen precisely because they appear at first glance to demonstrate the worst in blueprint development and to cry out for rectification through a learning process approach. By arguing that blueprint development can be improved through better manipulating the narratives upon which it is based, the examples seek to underscore that practitioners will have to deal much more enterprisingly with a form of development that persists regardless and, at times, in spite of what is learned in the field.

A preliminary definition of "development narratives" stresses both their status as stories or arguments and their differences from other notions more familiar to the development practitioner, namely, ideology, myth and conventional wisdom. The narratives discussed below follow the common definition of "story." Each has a beginning, middle, and end (or premises and conclusions, when cast in the form of an argument) and revolves around a sequence of events or positions in which something happens or from which something follows. Typically less hortatory and normative than ideology, development narratives tell scenarios not so much about what should happen as about what will happen — according to their tellers — if the events or positions are carried out as described. Even when their truth-value is in question, these narratives are explicitly more programmatic than myths and have the objective of getting their hearers to believe or do something. In addition, the narratives, at least the four to which we now turn, are treated by many of their tellers and hearers as continuing to retain some general explanatory or descriptive power even after a number of the specific conventional wisdoms upon which they are based are understood to be subject to serious qualification. How these and other features of development narratives operate, and with what implications, will become clearer in the examples.

(a) The "tragedy of the commons"

The most obvious feature of the "tragedy of the commons" is oddly the least commented on, namely, its status as narrative. Its most famous expositor, Garrett Hardin, goes out of his way to tell the tragedy of the commons as a story having all the classic properties of a beginning, middle, and end. "The tragedy of the commons develops in this way. Picture a pasture open to all . . . ." begins Hardin in what surely is the most quoted passage in all of the common property literature. We soon are in the middle of things — "the rational herdsman concludes that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal to his herd. And another . . . But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons" — and the end comes rapidly and palpably into sight: "Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons" (Hardin, 1977, p. 20).

Reality story, however, congrue imperfectly. Why the tragedy of the commons argument is probed empirically — for example, just what is the evidence that desertification is caused by overgrazing? — the data turn out to be much more ambiguous or outright contradictory (Sandford, 1983, Chapter 1). Even where people agree
with Hardin that range degradation is taking place and that many commons today are open access free-for-alls, they often part company with him over causes. For these critics, long-term climatological changes along with growing and competing land uses have led to degradation more than the existence of the commons — a commons which, the critics hasten to add contra Hardin, was often managed in a restricted access, not open access, fashion until these exogenous pressures undermined local management efforts (see Panel on Common Property Resource Management, 1986; McCay and Acheson, 1987).

Hardin merits a much closer reading than some of his critics have given him. “It must not be supposed that all commons are bad in all situations,” Hardin tells us, “... when there were only a few million people in the world, it was all right to run the hunting grounds as a commons, though even then an area was no doubt often managed as tribal property” (Hardin, 1977, pp. 47–48). Hardin does not say that the commons cannot be managed. The “commons, if it is justifiable at all, is justifiable only under conditions of low-population density” (1977, p. 28). His pivotal point is that herders find it to their individual advantage not to cooperate in limiting herd numbers or ensuring range quality even when each and every herder recognizes that the overall stocking rate on the commons exceeds its carrying capacity, and that range deterioration and liveweight loss are on the rise (Hardin, 1977, p. 72). In such a situation, corrective measures are largely outside the initiative of the individual herder. Either the commons has to be legislated as private property or other coercive devices, such as taxes and user regulations, have to be instituted from the outside (Hardin, 1977, p. 22).

In short, if we subscribe to Hardin’s argument, we should expect to find at least two states of affairs pertaining when a rangeland tragedy of the commons is said to exist. First, even when herders agree that the range is in poor or already heavily-stocked condition, they act in a noncooperative, competitive fashion. They evince few if any collective practices for managing that commons, which in turn encourages its further overutilization. Second, a tragedy of the commons supposes that a privatized rangeland will be better managed (e.g., have a better range condition), than if it were a commons, other things being equal.

The best test to date of Hardin’s comprehensive version of the tragedy of the commons can be found in a series of publications based on data collected during the 1979–80 Botswana Water Points Survey. These data allow us to address the applicability of each element of Hardin’s argument to rural eastern Botswana, an area of the country that has repeatedly been described by both those inside and outside the Botswana government as in the throes of a rangeland tragedy of the commons. First, do rural Batswana themselves perceive overgrazing to be taking place? The evidence here is mixed. While the range condition was found to be already at low levels in much of the eastern communal areas when assessed by standard range ecology measures, a number of survey households indicated that variation in rainfall rather than livestock numbers was taken to be the major explanation of overstocking and overgrazing (Fortmann and Roe, 1981; Bailey, 1982). Yet there is sufficient grounds — in the form of low cattle carcass weights and other interview findings — to suppose that a significant proportion of Botswana, albeit not a majority, did in fact believe that increasing numbers of livestock were leading to overutilization of the range in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Moreover, Botswana must be one of the few countries in sub-Saharan Africa that has enshrined the tragedy of the commons argument into its national rangeland policy (see in particular, Republic of Botswana, 1975, p. 1).

On the assumption that overgrazing is taking place, do rural Batswana cooperate in the management of their communal resources and have management practices to do so? An in-depth survey by Fortmann of communal dams constructed in eastern Botswana during 1974–80 found that this was indeed the case (Fortmann and Roe, 1981). Of the 24 dams surveyed, 21 had some sort of collective management, be it in the form of maintenance, regulation, or revenue collection. In particular, all 21 dam groups had users who jointly regulated the use of these dams. Restrictions on numbers of users, types of use, the manner of use, and the time of use were found in force.

Did communal management have a positive effect on the surrounding range condition and if so, how did it compare to privatized resource management? An analysis of grazing conditions around a sample of 46 water points found that those water points owned or managed by government or groups had better dry season range conditions than privately-owned water points (Roe, 1984). No one-to-one correlation was found between private ownership, private management, and the actual restriction of livestock watering access. Indeed, the finding that private rights and better range condition do not go hand-in-hand has been confirmed on a number of occasions in Botswana. Only three years after the first leasehold fenced ranches were occupied.
under the World Bank's First Livestock Development Project, two-thirds of them were already overstocked (Odell and Odell, 1986, p. 7). Conditions did not improve under the Bank's Second Livestock Development Project. Bekure and Dyson-Hudson (1982) found that range management and condition on these leasehold ranches was often no better than in the communal areas. In a related fashion, roughly 15 years of government grazing trials undertaken periodically from the 1950s through the 1970s could show no significant difference in range conditions between those found under various fenced rotational systems and that observed under a continuous "single paddock" grazing regime approximating the communal system (see Roe and Fortmann, 1981, p. 71; Animal Research Production Unit, 1980, pp. 85-86). Communal management of the dams studied in the Water Points Survey was found not only to be ecologically efficient relative to the next best private alternative, but cost figures indicated that this management was economically efficient as well (Fortmann and Roe, 1986). In short, the evidence is far from conclusive that privatization of the Botswana commons increases the likelihood of improving range conditions there.

These and other negative findings across the world have been around for some time and it is increasingly tempting to dismiss the tragedy of the commons as some kind of old-fashioned fable. But to do so would be misguided and would miss the point altogether. As a development narrative, the tragedy of the commons continues to have staying power in large part because these negative findings and critiques in no way dispel the chief virtue of the narrative: it has helped to stabilize and underwrite the assumptions needed for decision making. Policy makers resort to the tragedy of the commons model in order to understand what is going on and what must be done of more elaborate and demanding analysis? particularly when such analysis leads only to doubts and uncertainties about just what the story is behind rural resource utilization. Critiques of the tragedy of the commons are doubly troublesome for the decision maker, since they can generate rather than reduce uncertainty. They both undermine the assumptions of decision making and leave that decision maker without the means to make the transition from the discredited narrative to whatever is to replace it. In fact, the more the tragedy of the commons is criticized and found substantively wanting, the more uncertain policy makers can become — why indeed did Batswana manage their water points collectively? — and the more pressure they feel to hold onto the simple heuristics they have, no matter how worn around the edges they now appear. In short, a critique, like that based on the Botswana data, never tells its own story — its point-by-point rebuttal does not have its own beginning, middle, and end — and often serves only to raise doubts that the critique itself cannot answer.

What displaces a development narrative are not just the negative findings that seem to refute it. Displacement also requires an equally straightforward narrative that tells a better story. The appeal of the tragedy of the commons to livestock rangeland project designers has been its blueprinted design implications for privatizing the commons and legislating stock controls. If project designers are to reject the blueprint, they must have another story whose design implications are equally as obvious to them. The operating assumption here is that if decision makers are to move beyond the prevailing model of an entirely unmanaged and open-access commons, they will do so not merely by being told that reality is more complex than has been thought, but also by having a counternarrative which can predict when common property management will take place or not and what are the implications of either event.

Moreover, the counternarrative will have to be as parsimonious as the tragedy of the commons argument, but comprehensive enough to explain not only when management of the commons occurs, but when the tragedy takes place instead. Indeed, the ideal counternarrative for the project designer and policy maker would be like the tragedy of the commons in having to rely on nothing more sophisticated than introductory microeconomics (for an example of one such model, see Roe, 1987a). While such a conclusion will offend many social scientists, its dismissal is surely premature, as we all wait for a counter-narrative — any counternarrative — to the tragedy of the commons that is more substantial than the critiques offered up so far.

(b) Land registration and increased agricultural productivity

For at least the past 35 years, one of the most potent development narratives in Kenya has been that land registration leads to increased agricultural productivity. Once land is adjudicated, consolidated and registered, so this argument goes, the landowner will be in a position to use the title deed as collateral for securing credit with which to invest in improving and intensifying agricultural production on the land concerned. Dating from (if not before) the blueprint laid out in the government's 1954 Swynnerton
Plan (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, 1954, pp. 8-9), the argument remains extremely popular among Kenyan politicians, senior civil servants and social scientists (e.g. Haji, 1989, p. 20 and Mutiso, 1988, p. 48).

Empirical studies have repeatedly failed to find a positive causal link connecting the government's land registration program to expanded credit opportunities and thereby to increased agricultural productivity. Over the years, the effects of land registration in one district (Embu) have been studied in detail by different researchers, while others have undertaken point-in-time research on the same topic — much of it in the form of household surveys at the farm level — for localities in at least 13 other districts (Meru, Nyeri, Kiambu, Kwale, Kisi, Murang'a, Taita-Taveta, Kismu, South Nyanza, Nakuru, Kericho, Machakos, and Kakamega) covering much of the country's most agriculturally productive cropland. All the studies have failed to confirm or have raised serious doubts about the scenario linking land registration to agricultural production (Sorrenson, 1967; Barber, 1970; Bernard, 1972; Gray, 1972; Wilson, 1971; Coldham, 1979; Hunt, 1984; Njeru, 1978; Brokensha and Njeru, 1977; Haugerud, 1981, 1983, and 1989; Shipton, 1985; Odingo, 1985; Green, 1985; Fleuret, 1988; see also Wangari, forthcoming; and Olouch-Kosura, forthcoming). This general finding is made all the more significant by the equally demonstrated interregional ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the country's rural households.

In contrast to the narrative, the cumulative picture left by the research suggests that once landowners are registered, many do not bother to obtain their title deeds (they would never risk losing them on anything as uncertain as loan defaults); of those landowners who do obtain titles, not all of them do so to obtain credit (they may have to sell their land or parts of it to meet school fees and other household expenses); of those who want to use their titles to obtain loans, not all actually receive credit (farmers may not know where to go for credit or meet other requirements of the lending institution, which in turn might not have the funds to lend); of those landowners who actually succeed in using their titles for securing credit, a number of them use the loans for nonagricultural investments (e.g., their off-farm businesses); once the registered landowner dies or sells off parcels, the new landowner frequently does not reregister; and those who do not reregister or who could not legally register in the first place — mostly women — are ineligible for title-secured loans.

Nor has the problem only been one of a low conditional probability that, once registered, credit will be obtained and agriculture intensified. In some cases, land registration and increasing agricultural production may actually be negatively related. When registered, some landowners feel (i) they can leave the land idle without fear of someone else claiming it because no one was planting there; (ii) they have the "freedom" to sell land without real consent from those dependent on it and whose labor makes it as productive as it is; and (iii) they can enter land transactions for speculation purposes only. As a result of these and other factors, several authorities have concluded that Kenya's land registration program has increased insecurity, rather than the security, of tenure in many parts of the country. Yet, the recurrent finding that registration does not increase production via the credit mechanism has not changed one iota the belief of many respected Kenyans that registration has a positive and widespread effect on agriculture. What then is the policy maker to do if he or she feels compelled to pursue the topic of land registration's supposedly positive effect on agricultural productivity? One could, of course, continue to analyze the subject of agricultural credit on the assumption that land registration would intensify agriculture if only credit is made more timely, convenient, and adequate to more smallholders. Pushing credit, however, has continually proven to afford about as much leverage in Kenya's agricultural sector as pushing string does elsewhere (e.g., World Bank, 1985). Another option would be to explore the other links between registration and agriculture that appear to have potential in offering up a counter-narrative relevant for policy and program development. Land registration, for example, seems to have affected shifts in crop mixes, land concentration and fragmentation, and the utilization of both nonfarm income and credit for nonagricultural purposes. Nevertheless, if past research is any indication, this approach will yield mixed signals for the policy maker. Land concentration has boosted agricultural productivity in the view of one study, while another finds otherwise; fragmentation is an ecologically valid, risk-averse response of farmers to some researchers, while others focus on what they see as increasingly subeconomic holdings (e.g., see Shipton, 1985; Haugerud, 1983). The policy maker who chooses this option, as noted earlier, will have to balance the findings of increasing complexity at the microlevel with the widening scale of Kenya's land problems that seem to demand standard approaches to their management and amelioration.
A very different option suggests itself, however, if the operating assumption is that both the popular narrative linking registration to production and its blueprint, the government’s land registration program, will persist for the foreseeable future in the absence of any viable alternative and regardless of empirical findings that erode their credibility. Assuming this is so, the question then becomes one of focusing the policy maker’s attention on those few topics where land registration offers some promise of actually expanding agricultural production.

One prospect stands out in its priority and scale — estimating the extent to which the implementation of a progressive land tax in Kenya could intensify agricultural production by discouraging land speculation, absentee management, uneconomic fragmentation, and nonproductively large holdings. The records of the land registration program as to who is registered or holds title deed will greatly facilitate the operation of such a tax, if and when it is introduced. Moreover, it is difficult to conceive of a more efficient way to up-date these records for the unregistered subdivisions mentioned earlier, i.e., the levy could serve as the necessary incentive for the reregistration of land currently registered in the names of other owners, since the tax would presumably be assessed on those whose names show up in the records. Even though land taxation is controversial in Kenya (albeit the government is proposing to introduce a tax on agricultural production), a focus on the promising positive links between registration and agriculture has the considerable merit of being consistent with the development narrative that has hitherto resisted all manner of assaults on it. Indeed, the narrative’s blueprint becomes one way of altering rather than displacing the narrative itself. The existence of a huge and growing ministry, staff and budget — all committed to ensuring that land registration is the blueprint across the country — will inevitably increase pressure to justify their purported programmatic effect on intensifying agriculture, even if the specific mechanism for linking registration and production is no longer principally that of title-secured credit.¹⁰

Pastoral production is normally and correctly part of wider production systems; changes in any element have ramifications in all others (Galaty and Aronson, 1981, p. 21).

Livestock production is a very complex system which has many interrelated components such as climate, soil, plants and obviously animals operating with a high degree of interaction within a certain economic and social environment (Sidahmed and Koong, 1984, p. 61).

The fact that pastoralism needs to be seen in a regional perspective rather than an isolated production system for an understanding of the changes in living conditions of pastoralists has been pointed out (Hjort, 1981, p. 135).

But why stop at “region”? The “system” entails, after a point, supraregional levels in a long chain of behavioral links which starts with land managers and their direct relations with the land (. . . stocking densities . . . and so on). Then on the next link concerns their relations with each other, other land users, and groups in the wider society who affect them in any way, which in turn determines land management. The state and the world economy constitute the last links in the chain (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987, p. 27).

Once something has evolved into such a long-linked “system,” description frequently becomes prescription. “A local systems approach holds the best hope of success in development for pastoralists,” recommend two social scientists (Galaty and Aronson, 1981, p. 20). “The Panel recommends a systems approach to all phases of project planning and execution,” advises a US Agency for International Development taskforce on rangeland/livestock projects (USAID, 1985, p. 7). For Sidahmed and Koong the moral of their systems approach is clear, i.e., “any attempts towards [livestock] development should be preceded by the construction of a mathematical model which should contain all the essential elements of the current production system” (1984, p. 74).

As this last statement should indicate, making a systems critique can be easier than living with its implications. The development syllogism in the critique seems inescapable: integrated systems, integrated intervention. As many readers already know, a number of integrated rural development programs (particularly in the agricultural sector) have been “disintegrating agricultural development” (Leonard, 1984). Ministerial portfolios, based often on apparent sectoral divisions in the political economy, seem as a rule not to accommodate the need for intersectoral coordination and integration. Moreover, once one accepts the validity of a narrative that posits

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a long chain of putative causality between the international economy and the local herder, the probability of finding something wrong along the way increases exponentially. Critics continually find projects that are local successes, but system failures, in a world where localized interventions, such as projects, provide little leverage in correcting what are perceived to be systemic dysfunctions. Nothing seems to work right because the conditional probability of doing so approaches the vanishing point. Development syllogism has thus become development tautology.

Yet the practitioner who objects to the systems approach to rural development runs the risk of always having to recant the objection. Those who do not believe that cause gives way to effect which gives way to cause, etc., threaten to end up like the recanting Bishop Cranmer at the stake, saying, as he stretched his writing hand into the rising flames, "This hand hath offended" and it shall be the first to burn. After all, what rural development practitioner is foolish enough to operate as if cause and effect had been suspended?

One of the more recent and salutary developments in the systems approach has been to introduce the distinction between tightly and loosely coupled systems. Many early integrated rural development projects were clearly designed as tightly coupled systems, i.e., everything had to occur in a sequence of steps, there was only one way to achieve to desired objective, little or no slack existed in the project, and any delays or missteps could paralyze activities throughout the rest of the project cycle. What has not been sufficiently observed, however, is the loosely coupled nature of many rural development systems that set the context in which project cycles have to operate, i.e., environments in which delays have to be accommodated, the order of sequences often change, and where slack seems particularly evident.13 For example, Moris and Thom argue that irrigation scheme managers in many parts of Africa must contend with what is best characterized as a loosely coupled system where a myriad of agencies, levels of authority, and formal as well as informal networks of communication are relevant to the manager's activities, but not coordinated for the purposes of facilitating his or her management (1987, pp. 430-431).

In fact, many rural development processes are best understood as a mix of tightly coupled and loosely coupled systems. A livestock rangeland example will again help illustrate how this is so.12 Research in Botswana found three tightly coupled levels of water use and management governing any given rural water point: the site immediately surrounding the water point, the locality in which the water point is found, and the compound locality in which the water point is located (that is, the set of different localities over which the users of that water point typically reside and work during the year).

When rural Batswana are physically at the water point site, they often are keenly aware of the physical condition of adjacent land as well as the type of water source in question (e.g., boreholes, because they are mechanized, are operated differently than open wells). At the locality level, how a water point is managed and used is in turn affected by, among other things, the availability of labor for fetching water, which varies by locality (some household members move to the cropping fields for planting, while others, such as children who would otherwise fetch water, remain in village schools); by the locality's topography and hydrogeology; and by the locality's prevailing land uses (e.g., in Botswana, villages and grazing areas are typically dominated by borehole development, while mixed cropping and grazing areas frequently have a greater variety of sources). Equally important, the operation of a specific water point has to be seen within the context of the availability and accessibility of alternative water points in the locality.

Because members of rural households in Botswana have frequently shifted their household compounds over the course of the year — in the cropping season, they have gone to the "lands" where their field homes are and, after harvest, they have returned to their village homes for the rest of the year — one finds that the demand and supply of water has shifted as well over the course of the year across the localities concerned. It is at the compound locality level that the specific water point in question frequently has to be seen as one of a sequence of water points over time and space. Households fall back from many, often surface, water sources in the wet season on their lands to fewer groundwater sources in the home village during the dry season.

These three levels are tightly coupled when compared to those larger regional, national, and international domains pertinent to rural water use and management. The specific water point is at a site, in a locality, and within a compound locality at the same moment. Indeed, the three levels are able to be identified precisely because they share the same unit of analysis at the same time. This is not true for the other levels. No one can doubt national considerations affect rural water use, e.g., Botswana relies on boreholes much more heavily than, say, does Kenya in
many of its arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs). Similarly, international considerations clearly affect water use conditions in a given county.

European Economic Community (EEC) price subsidies on beef exports — which Botswana has taken advantage of, but which Kenya has not because of its relatively weaker veterinary control efforts — helped make livestock investment in Botswana a much more profitable enterprise than it has been in the comparable ASALs of Kenya. Yet, when moving to these higher levels, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep the specific water point as the unit of analysis fixed in view by the three more local levels. Just how water use and management, but in a loosely other levels are, in short, connected to rural beneficiary of international price subsidies affects one of the thousands of open wells in eastern Botswana is doubtless not clear to the average user, let alone to the outside observer. These other levels are, in short, connected to rural water use and management, but in a loosely coupled fashion when compared to the tightly coupled processes governing the operation of any specific water point.

What such discriminations allow one to do is to adhere to the narrative of rural development as a long-linked system stretching from the local to the international, but to recognize that some systems are so loosely coupled that practitioners can treat them as if they were not systems at all. From the standpoint of any single herder (like that of any specific water point), the health sector probably is not “integrated” with the agricultural sector which in turn is not integrated with the wage sector . . . no matter what the government planners say or believe or feel should be the case. Indeed, much of the failure of tightly coupled integrated rural development projects becomes perfectly intelligible the moment we assume that for the typical project beneficiary “sectors” are not integrated at all, or at least not at the local level(s) relevant to the person concerned. Ironically, this is precisely the reason “multisectoral” programs are still needed in parts of the developing world, not because project activities are tightly coupled and functionally integrated at the sectoral level, but because multisectoral projects are often in practice loosely coupled and are better able to adapt to the “unintegrated” nature of development. They have had more flexibility at the local level in undertaking different projects over different geographical areas and better chances at exploiting new project opportunities as they arise — both major advantages in an environment typically characterized by the uncertainty of multiple actors, objectives, and criteria for evaluating program performance (Roe, 1985; see also Cohen, 1987, Chapter 7).

(d) Repetitive budgeting by national governments

Disarray in budgeting by governments at the national level is patently evident. Neither the developing world nor the developed countries can cope budgetarily. “How we Americans used to deride the ‘banana republics’ of the world for their ‘repetitive budgeting’ under which the budget was reallocated many times during the year, until it became hardly recognizable, truly a thing of shreds and patches. . . . Yet resolutions that continue last year’s funding for agencies, for want of ability to agree on this year’s, are becoming a way of life in the United States,” as one long-time commentator on budgeting put it (Wildavsky, 1984, p. 252; see Schick, 1988 for the OECD countries).

It is in the developing world, however, where repetitive budgeting has received the greatest attention. Under this kind of budgeting, according to Caiden and Wildavsky’s Planning and Budgeting in Poor Countries, the government budget is not made once and for all when estimates are submitted and approved; rather, as the process of budgeting is repeated, it is made and remade over the course of the year . . . The entire budget is treated as if each item were supplemental, subject to renegotiation at the last minute . . . Repetitive budgeting . . . is found in most poor countries. Its most extreme manifestation is as cash flow budgeting where changes may be made from day to day or even from one hour to the next (1974, pp. 71–72).

In practice, the presence of repetitive budgeting is best measured by the gaps that can perforate the national budgetary process. For example, there have in the past been substantial differences between what is printed in the government of Kenya’s five-year national development plan and what the government eventually budgets in its three-year forward budget, between that printed forward budget and what has been budgeted annually in the published estimates, between what the ministries formally requested to have budgeted in the annual estimates and what ended up being allocated to them by way of official Treasury warrants, and between that allocation and what audit reports subsequently showed was actually spent (Roe, 1986; for similar gaps in the US federal budgetary process, see Caiden, 1984). Accordingly, a very large gap can exist between what was originally planned and what is eventually implemented, and it is this gap which motivates many of more critical accounts on the failure of large-scale government programs in both the developing and developed worlds.

The facts, however, do not always accord with
this universalized narrative linking repetitive budgeting at the national level to poor project implementation at the local level. It simply is not the case, for example, that sub-Saharan governments all budget or implement alike, notwithstanding blanket terms like “the crisis in Africa.” From what accounts we have, it appears the government of Botswana has budgeted differently than, say, Kenya, whose repetitive budgeting in turn has not been as severe or disabling as it has been in Nigeria (Roe, 1988d; Omolehinwa and Roe, 1989). Similarly, as difficult as budgeting has been in Kenya or Nigeria, they have at least been able to produce yearly budgets in contrast to some more politically troubled governments (e.g., Angola; see Lamb, 1984, p. 175). Such discriminations should be terribly important for those who believe that rural development depends in some significant sense on government budgets.

More empirical work on these intercountry differences is needed and would certainly go some way in undermining the grim narrative’s depiction of African national budgeting. In the absence of these case studies, are there other ways to weaken the narrative? Several options have been suggested in the previous sections. In theory, one could try to create a counternarrative; use the blueprints generated by the narrative to alter it; or fill in the “details” of the narrative in order to make it less misleading. There are probably many cases, however, where the practitioner has little leeway to be creative. The best he or she may be able to do is to engage another already existing narrative, which, once engaged, conflicts with the more objectionable one.

A US example illustrates how this has been done. The California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) has had a reputation for very long lines and very slow service. This narrative of a government department paralyzed by red tape and inaction was and still is to some extent very popular in the press and the public’s mind. Senior DMV managers have responded by engaging two other pre-existing narratives that are also accepted in the United States and elsewhere, namely, the widespread scenarios about how “computerization improves bureaucratic efficiency” and how “personalized service is what really makes bureaucracies effective.” In this case, the managers had DMV field operations computerized and initiated a program whereby service by appointment could be provided to those who formerly had to wait in line. The issue here is not whether these other narratives proved accurate—in this example computerization and service by appointment did lead to some improvement—but that their storylines ran against the dominant narrative of a government bureaucracy mired in its own indifference to the needs of the people it is meant to serve. One may be tempted to think of the actions of these senior managers as “public relations,” but to do so would deny the highly circumscribed nature of the public arena in which they had to make decisions. That the managers maneuvered at all is a credit to them.15

One can see parallel developments in government budgeting overseas. Computerization of the government of Kenya’s budget was introduced when budgetary and financial management there were widely considered to be at a low point. Pinckney, Cohen and Leonard recount how the introduction of microcomputers into the Ministries of Agriculture and Livestock Development improved the efficiency and effectiveness of scarce, skilled managers in their budgetary process (1983, pp. 151 and 167). They go on to add that “the presence of the microcomputer visibly changed the technology of financial decision-making . . . [It] legitimized a rôle in financial decision-making for those who could use it, therefore making it easier for new, reform-minded individuals to participate actively” (Pinckney, Cohen and Leonard, 1983, p. 166). Further legitimation came from the World Bank in the form of one of its elect “box” case studies for the 1988 World Development Report: “Overall the Ministry of Agriculture developed better management tools and information systems, aided by the introduction of microcomputers. The overall quality of agricultural programs improved markedly during this period” (World Bank, 1988, p. 129). This technology subsequently became an important part of the Treasury’s budget preparation exercise and the government estimates for 1985–86 were the first to be produced by microcomputer (Peterson, 1988). Once again, the impression, certainly among members of the donor community, has been that this extension in the use of microcomputers has also increased the budgetary and financial management capacity of Treasury officials and advisors (see Wescott, 1986). While the government of Kenya’s budgeting is still acknowledged to have problems, reforms such as the introduction of microcomputers have certainly helped alter its image of a repetitive budgetary process that cannot be improved.

3. CONCLUSION

At this point it should be clear that blueprint planning and a learning process need not be mutually exclusive, at least to the extent the
latter operates within the context of the former. Counternarratives to the tragedy of the commons, for example, can and have been based on what has been learned in the field about common property resource management (Roe, 1987a). Similarly, no one is arguing that since budget computerization seems to have worked in Kenya, it should be copied in Bolivia in the absence of learning to what extent, if at all, “computerization improves budgeting” is even a development narrative there. The argument here has not been that blueprint development that suits one country should suit them all, but rather a more modest claim. Blueprint development can be made more suitable to the needs of a given country by first learning how to better manipulate the development narratives that support these blueprints. Such a conclusion, however, should not be taken to mean that development narratives are to be evaluated solely on the grounds of how well learning introduces a measure of realism into them. In the four cases discussed above, it is not a question of which narratives are more accurate or have greater verisimilitude.\(^1\)

It may be best to conceive of many development narratives as functionally equivalent to the early animated cartoon convention that animals have four instead of five fingers. The convention tells us at once that these cartoon figures are supposed to be more “like” us than not — after all they have fingers — without, however, being us just because they otherwise behave as we do. So too for development narratives: they tell us at once that things happen “like” the way they are described — after all narratives relate things causally — without, however, reflecting the fact that things happen in rural development so uncertainly. Narratives may be caricatures of reality, but there is no pretense otherwise for many of them. Believing a narrative and acting upon it is just like watching a story unfold on the screen and being moved by it in the same manner as one is moved by real events. Indeed, when one story more than any other becomes the way we best articulate our “real” feelings or make sense of the uncertainties and ambiguities around and in us, then the force of the narrative in question becomes compelling. Obviously, the day rural development becomes less uncertain and riddled with disagreement is the day we can begin to dispense with some of the development narratives that populate our profession. Until then, rural development practitioners must think more positively than has sometimes been the case about how to make the best of what we already have, meager and troubling as it often is.

The above remarks have been devoted to a class of development narratives that have, by and large, remained narratives only. What deserves much more attention is why and how a few of these narratives cease to be just that and become plausible assertions. Plausible assertions are those development narratives that can be justified as applicable to a site on the basis of long experience and observation. They are more than the latest imported development fad, but much less than an empirical generalization, let alone a testable hypothesis. Perhaps the best known plausible assertion in the rural development literature, and one that started out as a development narrative, is the scenario revolving around how road construction in an area can greatly facilitate the surrounding economic growth. The assertion clearly cannot be generalized to all developing countries or to all regions in some countries. Nor is it a hypothesis that can always be tested, since the scenario is very frequently cast in the past tense, i.e., had transportation infrastructure been constructed then, it would have led to more development later. Nor is the assertion really based on learning in the sense of trial and error. It is plausible solely because very different people would nonetheless be able to interrogate and defend the scenario on the basis of their detailed involvement, knowledge and familiarity with the area in question, notwithstanding the absence there of any major road construction program in the past. Case studies on the tangled and highly selective process whereby one of many development narratives is transformed into a plausible assertion are a matter of priority, if not urgency.\(^1\)

NOTES

1. Yet the pressures for long-term planning remain strong, at least in Africa, though for a different mix of reasons that pertained when Caiden and Wildavsky wrote their classic dissection of the planning mystique in Planning and Budgeting in Poor Countries. Today, the persistence of structural adjustment and budget ceilings are reinforcing factors. The response of African governments to the series of IMF/World Bank structural adjustment programs has been to call for longer-term planning horizons to counter what they see as the invariably short-term and short-sighted corrections suffered under SAPs (see, for example, the recent United Nations Economic Commission on Africa, 1989, p. 33). Moreover, the increased use of ceilings on ministry budgets as a form of year-to-year expenditure control (for an example, see Roe, 1986) has fitted in quite neatly with those who argue that a intermediate-to-long-term macroeconomic framework is needed in part to establish just what these yearly ceilings should be (e.g., see Ramakrishnan, 1989, pp. 2, 26–27).

2. For a discussion of this phenomenon as it is found in irrigation projects, see Roe (1988a).
3. Those who may doubt the vitality of blueprint development need only consider one of many instances of its continuing appeal. A recent United Nations' book, for example, regrets that the Lagos Plan of Action “does not provide a blueprint of the actual policies that are required for its implementation at the country level” (Kawamura, 1989, p. 270). Another UN publication of the same year however refers to the Plan of Action as “Africa's premier blueprint for development” (United Nations, 1989).

4. This definition of narrative and story is a standard one (e.g., see the respective entries in Prince, 1987).

5. How the truth of a narrative does not necessarily derive from or depend upon the truth of its constituent parts is discussed in Roth (1989), pp. 45ff.

6. The Survey was funded by the Government of Botswana’s Ministry of Agriculture and USAID through the Center for International Studies, Cornell University.

7. The asymmetrical relationship between public narratives and their critiques is explored in Roe (1989). The analysis of public policy narratives in the United States is further explored in case studies on the controversies over irrigation-related toxicity and salinity in the San Joaquin Valley, animal rights, nuclear reactors not being built according to design, and the Cuban missile crisis in Huukinnen, Roe and Rochlin (forthcoming) and Roe (forthcoming, a, forthcoming, b).

8. See Green (1985) for a more detailed review and bibliography of the literature on Kenya’s land registration program.


10. That the ministry responsible for Kenya’s land registration program is under increased pressure to better justify its expenditures is evidenced by a recent memo from the ministry's permanent secretary to his staff: “During the past six months or so, His Excellency the President has on a number of occasions impressed upon this Ministry the need to expand and intensify our work in land surveying, land adjudication and land administration so that the desired goals in land tenure, and the attendant social and economic benefits, can be realized throughout the Republic in the shortest time possible. . . . A review of the performance of this Ministry over the last few years indicates clearly that our performance and output have been below expectation and that drastic changes are needed in our operational strategies, priorities and personal attitudes if we are to meet the mammoth responsibilities entrusted to us by the Government. . . . While it is acknowledged that external factors such as scarcity of funds, personnel and equipment may retard the implementation of the [ministry's work] programme in certain cases, it must also be recognised that the Government does not have a limitless source of funds and, therefore, it is incumbent upon us all to optimise the utilization of the scarce resources at our disposal” (Ministry of Lands and Settlement, 1988).

11. The sociologist, Charles Perrow, provides an excellent description of these general properties of tightly and loosely coupled systems (Perrow, 1984, pp. 93–96).

12. More details on this illustration can be found in Roe and Fortmann (1982, Chapter VI).

13. The following two paragraphs rely heavily on Roe (1988c).


15. For a discussion of the difficult and different contexts in which government officials administer and manage in the developed and developing worlds, see Roe (1988b).

16. This is not to argue against criticizing development narratives for their lack of realism. For examples of conventional wisdoms, puzzles, myths and folktales in rural development that deserve much greater scrutiny, see Roe (1987b, 1988e, 1989b, and 1989c).

17. An important element of this process would seem to be what makes for "good advisors" to a government. For a typology and discussion of such advisors, see Roe (1988f). A specific discussion on how some “strategic notions” in agricultural development (a term having affinities to that of development narratives) have become more compelling over time can be found in the draft manuscript of Bruce F. Johnston, Peter Kilby and Thomas P. Tomich, tentatively titled “The Political Economy of Agricultural Development and Structural Transformation.”

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