2 The Politics of Changing Development Objectives

Some characteristics of the debate

The advocacy of changing development objectives has been accompanied, not only by the advocacy of different development strategies, but also by a decline in the quality of discussion on development issues. To a large extent this is because measurable parameters have been substituted by unmeasurable and unmeasured parameters.

Unmeasurable parameters The problem of defining unemployment, for example, has been clearly inhibited because of the difficulty of measurement. Tortuous attempts have been made to quantify it in agriculture, usually in terms of crop ‘labour requirements’ and family labour supply, but none of them can claim operational value.¹ For this reason, it is much more difficult to encourage LDC governments to adopt policies of employment creation, particularly in agriculture. Of no less significance, however is the fact that these problems of definition and measurement have allowed critics, like Weeks, to reject employment creation as a worthwhile development objective while, at the same time, admitting that unemployment is widespread.

Unmeasured parameters Relatively few valid studies have been undertaken of income distribution within agriculture. Farm economic surveys provide the best data for farm and farm household income distribution analysis, but only if they are based on fairly large samples - to keep sampling errors...
acceptably low. But these surveys are very costly for data collection and processing. A large team of field enumerators has to be kept in the field for a farming year, undertaking at least monthly farm visits. There is no other way of obtaining reasonably accurate farm household income data for distribution analysis. Even then it relates to only a single year which may provide 'untypical' results. For these reasons, few large-sample farm economic surveys have been undertaken and not all of these have been used for distribution analysis. It is no exaggeration to say, therefore, that very little valid information exists relating to the distribution of agricultural incomes in LDCs.

Claims for wide and increasing disparity of farm incomes are, therefore, based either on hunch (no data), small statistically unrepresentative samples, (selected mainly for farm management purposes), or data from agricultural censuses and national sample expenditure surveys. Those who are aware of the purposes and the execution of agricultural censuses will know that they are unusable for income distribution analysis. Their prime purpose is to measure the physical rather than the economic attributes of an agricultural sector; and data acquisition is based either on a lengthy form completed by the farmer or on a single farm visit. National expenditure surveys are equally unsuitable for distribution analyses. Expenditure is not a sound proxy for income when family food is mainly home-grown and it disregards saving and dissaving.

The point about widening disparities of agricultural incomes is also worth underlining. A statement like this needs to be based on time series data (not just two points in time, say a decade apart), using near identical and/or random samples. But annually recurring farm economic surveys in LDCs are a rarity. Griffin claims to provide evidence of increasing disparity of agricultural incomes relating to 70 per cent of LDC rural peoples. These data are based on agricultural censuses (the details of which cannot be checked - nor can the calculations!), none of which are annually recurring and several of which are separated by a decade. It is professionally improper to use these data for a single observation of income distribution, let alone changes over time. Claims of wide and