NOTES ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND BLACKS

Flourney A. Coles, Jr.

There is an unfortunate tendency to confuse black Americans and black America when considering economic development. Although many black Americans have met most (if not all) of the criteria that generally define the progression from a less-developed to a more-developed state, black America most assuredly has not. Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* is generally credited with being a causal factor in the decision to wage a “war on poverty” by exposing and illuminating the plight of the subculture of an ethnically and racially heterogeneous group of this country’s minorities. Likewise, many black and non-black social scientists have documented the sad lot of the “other black America.” And, yet, there is a continuing — if not, in some quarter, deliberate and increasing — tendency to consider the economic successes of a minority of black Americans as evidence of the successful economic development of black America.

THE CONCEPT AND NATURE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic development is economic growth plus structural change. Patterns of structural change, in turn, are influenced by the economic structure, the size of the economy, its history, the political environment, social-cultural constraints, and other factors that shape development policies and strategies adopted in and by specific countries and communities.

Economic development is also concerned with — and, in fact, is dependent on — interrelationships between economic elements in society, interrelationships between economic and noneconomic elements in society, and the effective and efficient application of capital and technology to natural and human resources.

Economic development is essentially a long-term phenomenon, primarily because it involves structural changes that can only occur over a long
period of time. The long-term nature of economic development, notwithstanding, there are both short-term and long-term objectives inherent in the development process, in the sense that achievement of long-term objectives is dependent upon and is the culmination of achieving short-term objectives.

It is necessary to distinguish between "short-term" and "long-term." The demarcation between the two, as used herein, is roughly a generation. In establishing this line of demarcation, I am aware that, within the short run, there are shorter-term objectives (e.g., completion of an irrigation project for agricultural production) and longer-term objectives (e.g., an agricultural program to provide adequate nourishment for the population and to provide necessary inputs for primary-stage industrialization). Similarly, there are shorter-term and longer-term objectives with respect to the long run. With specific reference to the black community, I should like to delineate what I consider to be the more important short-term objectives of economic development.

Since the 1960s, the limited success of economic development programs and policies has dictated a shift away from mere economic growth to improving and expanding the quality of life in terms of providing people with basic needs. The lack of these basic needs characterizes the condition of absolute poverty that Robert McNamara, immediate past president of the World Bank, defined as "a condition of life so degraded by disease, illiteracy, malnutrition, and squalor as to deny its victims basic human necessities." Satisfying basic human needs — adequate food, shelter, education, and medical care — must be the first priority short-term objective of economic development. The rationale for granting priority to this objective is that the effort necessary for economic development will (can) not be forthcoming from a starving, illiterate, and sick population. As in the less-developed countries, black America also suffers from the lack of satisfaction of basic human needs.

A second short-term objective must be expanding the range of economic choices and the speed at which these choices can be implemented. Increased employment opportunities is one means of expanding the range of human choices, but it is only one. Other choices, which make the difference between merely subsisting and living, include choices between work and leisure; preoccupation with the future rather than the present; greater or lesser control of one’s environment; consuming more of this commodity than that commodity, more of this service than that service, or more services than commodities; and so forth. One has the freedom of these choices only if he or she is not required to devote all his or her attention and