

Commission on Nomadic Peoples

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ARE NOMADS CAPABLE OF DEVELOPMENT DECISIONS?

by Philip Carl Salzman

Just how capable are nomads of making development decisions or of participating in the making of such decisions? Addressing this question requires investigation of at least two critical elements, and the extent of the conjunction or disjunction of these two elements. The first element is the nature of decision making within the particular nomadic society as it currently exists. The second element is the conception and framing of "development" in the socio-political setting under consideration. With the nature of local decision making known and the conception of development specified, the extent of conjunction or disjunction between the two can be examined. The initial position taken here is that the greater the conjunction between existing forms of decision making and the kinds of decisions required for development as defined in the socio-political context, the more nomads may be seen as capable of making development decisions. Similarly, the greater the disjunction between local decision making and decisions for development as defined, the less capable nomads are of actively engaging in decision making for development.

The phrase "development decisions" applies to long term objectives and middle range goals, and the strategies and tactics to advance these objectives and goals. Now it is critical whether development as defined in the socio-political context under consideration emphasizes primarily the interests of local people as they themselves define them or whether, in contrast, the interests of some larger political unit, or local interests as defined by representatives of the larger political unit, are emphasized. If the purposes of development are framed in such a way that the interests of local people are in practice secondary to those of the state or region, and the development of local peoples is a means of achieving this externally defined objective, then local decision making, which can be assumed to be tied to local interests as defined locally, is largely irrelevant and would likely be obstructionist in practice. In contrast, if the locally defined interests of populations are primary in development objectives, then processes of local decision making are likely to be more relevant, and, as will be argued, to a significant degree efficacious.

There are good reasons to recommend development plans emphasizing interests as defined by local peoples. First, the local population is more likely to support than oppose development plans and projects if local interests are seen to be advanced. Second, because local interests are tied to extant processes of work and production, such locally focussed initiatives draw upon extant knowledge and skills of the people upon whom success of the development rests and thus build upon valuable human resources.

Similarly, there are good reasons for local people to be involved in decisions at all levels of planning and implementation. First, as is well known, people are more favorably disposed toward decisions in which they have played some part. Second, although outsiders are often loath to admit it, it is the local people who have the greatest expertise about local processes of labor and production. Local people have profound and subtle knowledge of local resources, techniques, and productive organization. Thus locally formulated projects and plans will be more efficacious because more appropriate to local conditions and substantively more congenial to the actors who must put them into effect.

If, then, there are benefits in basing development upon local interests and in drawing local populations into development decision making, the question remains whether such peoples are in practice capable of engaging effectively and judiciously in such a process of decision making. It is on this point that extant processes of decision making among local peoples are relevant, for commonalities or similarities in type or substance between ongoing local decision making and the projected development decisions to be made would indicate a capability among local people for making development decisions based upon established frameworks and practical experience.

With this question in mind, a brief ethnographic account is presented of decision making in regard to economic matters among the Yarahmadzai Baluch of Iran. These nomadic tent dwellers have a multi-resource economy involving a variety of productive activities, primarily with a subsistence orientation but including some market engagement. Their tribal organization generates strong local groupings with considerable autonomy, with individual households also having great flexibility in their commitments.

Most decision making about economic matters takes place in two arenas: (1) the household, which controls and allocates the labor of its members and certain major kinds of productive resources, especially livestock, date palms, and cultivated fields, and (2) the herding camp, which as both local community and collective herding unit, controls migration and location of the community and management of the herd of small stock constituted by the household herds of member households.

The household head is the primary manager of household resources, guiding the productive activities in each sector and the relationships between the sectors. The development of the household herd, involving investment in additional animals, fodder, or medical treatment, shaping of the age and sex structure through culling, and arranging for adequate herding and supervision, is a major responsibility, as is the care and expansion of the household date grove. The planting of crops in a dry cultivation regime, or involvement in irrigation cultivation, is another important sector, as are wage labour, petty trade, and smuggling. In each sector, the household head must consider the resources, including labor and material, available for allocation, must consider both short term objectives, such as maintaining a certain level of ongoing income, and long term goals, such as building his herd or gaining rights to irrigation water, must consider the conditions which obtain, such as in the labor market, or in regard to government surveillance of the borders, must assess the alternatives as to relative risk, and finally must commit his resources. As this is an ongoing process, the household head will consider the results of his decisions and the gains and losses which followed and try to adjust his calculations in the light of the additional information gained.

This process of decision making is not restricted to the sectors taken separately, but equally applies to the mix of sectors in which the household is engaged. Which sector should get the investment, which expanded, which contracted, which phased out, are critical questions demanding continual attention and which have a determining even if not firmly irreversible effect on the trajectory of the household economy and eventually upon the shape of cooperative arrangements with other households. Here the household head decides to what extent the household economy will be based upon pastoralism, or upon cultivation, or upon the sale of labor, or upon entrepreneurial activity, and what overall mix of these will be attempted, and how much risk will be taken. Related decisions involve an increase or decrease of nomadic migration, shifts of association with communities, and modifications of authority relationships among

members of the household.

The Yarahmadzal household head is thus engaged in an ongoing process of assessing economic, political and social conditions, weighing alternative courses of action and their projected consequences, and making commitments of household resources. And at any point in time, the lessons of past decisions are brought to bear upon current considerations.

The herding camp is a contractual association of household heads in their capacity as livestock owners. The contract is an agreement to form a collective herd for the purposes of pasturing, and generates a residential community (based upon the rule that each camp can have one and only one herd of small stock) and migratory unit. The wasildar, or stock owners, jointly hire a shepherd, establish and oversee herding policy, arrange to fill in labor when required, and determine migration policy and patterns of the camp. In regard to all of these matters, but especially with regard to migration because of the particularity of every instance, there is an ongoing consultation among the household heads of the camp. Here again there is continual collection and collation of information and deliberation and debate about alternative courses and their likely consequences, and finally decision resulting usually in collective action but occasionally in fission of the community. This process of ongoing consultation and decision making, involving matters most basic to economic production and to social life, is--even though not formal and ritualized--explicit, systematic, and public.

Groupings other than the herding camps are generated by the tribal system, and are both conceptually and practically non-residential and dispersed. Each tribesman is a member of a series of lineages ranging from his immediate family to the larger minimal lineage and up through tribal sections and the tribe itself. Lineages at all levels are political action groups, operating contingently according to circumstance, with primary responsibilities for security and defense. Decision making takes place in councils, with elders and household heads having the predominant voice. Here too are found processes of deliberation, debate and decision similar to those of the herding camp. Even at the tribal level, the picture is the same, with the Sardar, or chief, acting as animateur, impresario, and, once decisions are made, representative of the tribe to external agents and agencies. The chief's powers and resources are very limited, and he has little leeway to act without the consent and support of the tribesmen. The actions of tribal and sub-tribal units have traditionally been restricted to political matters, but in recent times issues of a primarily economic nature have come under consideration, as shall be seen below.

Now it is hardly news to anthropologists that local peoples have conceptions of their interests, that they have continually to consider alternative courses of action, and that they welcome opportunities to advance their interests given a favorable balance of benefits and risks. What the case of the Yarahmadzai nomads shows--and there is good reason to think that these points are widely applicable to nomadic peoples--is that (1) household involvement in a variety of economic sectors requires ongoing decision making of a considered, critical, and reflexive type, and that the consequence is often an evolutionary development of a household economy based upon a series of decisions and commitments, and that (2) there is a well established procedure of collective decision making based upon extensive consultation incorporating collection and collation of information, and full deliberation and debate about alternatives.

With these points in mind, we may return to the question of whether nomadic

peoples are in practice capable of engaging effectively and judiciously in development decision making. The answer for the Yarahmadzai nomads is that their indigenous practice, in regard to both substance and process, at both individual and group levels, could be considered in its own right development decision making. This view, if correct, suggests that any development planning in conception based upon local interests, knowledge and skills, could in practice be based largely upon local decision making and draw fully from local participation in formulating development goals, strategies, and tactics.

To what extent were these abilities and capacities of the local population actively at work in decisions made by Government agencies during the period of observation (1968-76)? As would almost inevitably be the case, the answer is--variably. In the realm of politics, planning and allocation of resources were strictly controlled by central government agencies. The establishment and maintenance of order, manifested in the military, police and judiciary, was controlled by the central organs of the state and imposed upon the local population, albeit with some pragmatic consideration of prevailing local conditions. Control of the flow of people and goods across borders was also determined centrally, but with adjustments for special claims in particular regions (as in the recognized right of Baluch residents within 50 miles of the Iran-Pakistan border to cross freely, and in the exceptions made for Baluch to carry in small amounts of trade goods from the Arabian sheikdoms). Local populations in Baluchistan were also subject to national policies and structures aimed at delivering services to rural areas, most notably by means of the plethora of "Corps," including the Health Corps, Educational Corps, Agricultural Corps, which in addition to trained specialists made use of army recruits who were seconded to the Corps after basic training. Travelling health teams gave inoculations, agricultural stations offered new strains of seed, and teachers in remote one room schools endeavored to educate an elusive and ever changing body of local children. In most cases, what was offered was determined from above. The schools, for example taught reading and writing in Persian, the national language, rather than in the regional language, Baluchi, the use of which was not permitted; and the curriculum was a national one, containing subjects and materials quite far from the experience of local children and often of little relevance to local conditions.

Direct contributions to local economic life, modest though they were, took a somewhat different form. Various projects were advocated by local people through representations to government agencies. In two notable cases, these initiatives bore fruit. The most expensive and far reaching (metaphorically and spatially) was a road building project to smooth the mountainous way between the highland pastures of the Sarhad and the date palm groves of the Mashkel drainage basin. The objective was to establish a short route through the Mopish Mountains passable for (hardy) motorized transport, and thus to make available a temporally and monetarily economical alternative to the traditional seven day camel caravan migration. The nomadic relocations between the Sarhad highlands and the Mashkel depression, which are shifts between pastoral and arboricultural areas, involved the most ambitious migrations of the annual cycle, at some 200 kilometers far outstripping the pastoral migrations which, as responses to micro-environmental variations, usually cover no more than dozens of kilometers. While pastoral migrations on the Sarhad usually involve one day of movement, and only exceptionally two, the camel caravan migration between the Sarhad and Mashkel takes seven days. To this long migration by the tribal population must be added the two additional trips each year by numbers of tribesmen, once in the spring for pollinating the date palms and another after harvest (but before the return of the population at large) to transport loads of date-filled sacks to winter residence areas on the Sarhad. With the establishment in

1970 of a passable dirt road through the mountains between the Sarhad and Mashkel, heavy trucks began to make the trip at appropriate times, selling space for passengers and baggage, carrying those (such as the young, the elderly, pregnant women) less able to make the trip by camel and foot and carrying a substantial portion of supplies and dates. Thus the government funds, well over a million rials, provided a major easing of transport problems for tribesmen, saving considerable amounts of time and energy, which then became available for investment in other activities and spheres, as well as adding a temporary income supplement to tribesmen for labor in building the road and an opportunity for local entrepreneurs to provide motorized transport.

The second major case was that of a government supported irrigation project. Most cultivation on the arid Sarhad plateau is based upon qanat irrigation using long underground tunnels to tap the water table at higher altitudes. The southern portion of the tribal territory on the Sarhad had no qanat, partly because of unsuitable soil. But in any case, qanat irrigation is capital intensive, because of the high cost of building and maintenance, and so expansion of irrigation cultivation is financially prohibitive for the tribesmen. One solution envisaged by the tribesmen, particularly the Sardar (tribal chief), was the use of modern technology provided by the Government. In the mid 1960s, in response to a petition by the Sardar, the Government supplied a diesel-driven pump, at a cost of hundreds of thousands of rials. And when the engine broke down in 1973, the Governor-General of the province authorized a replacement in response to the direct entreaties of the Sardar. Grain cultivation was thus established in a previously agricultureless area, with some thirty tribesmen having shares of water (although over half of the shares have been kept by the Sardar and his brothers). And because grain is one of the main staples of the tribal diet, this increased capacity for production is an important addition to the tribal economy.

It is noteworthy that in both of these cases, the building of the road between the highland pastures and the lowland date groves and the opening of a new irrigation cultivation area, the developments were initiated by the tribesmen and the particular projects chosen were based upon the tribesmen's assessment of local needs. On the face of it, both projects were appropriate to local conditions and needs and successful in bringing about the envisaged benefits. In these cases, the usefulness of drawing upon the competency of local people in formulating development initiatives that are both workable and beneficial seems to be supported.

Of course, if development planning is based upon interests different from or antithetical to local interests as conceived by local people, the capacity of local people to deliberate intelligently in their own interests is at best irrelevant and at worst a political obstacle to be suppressed.

In arguing that nomadic people are fully capable of participating in development planning for their future, I have assumed that development means improvement of local circumstances and increased productive efficacy leading to greater benefits for the effort invested by local people, and have taken the position that the enthusiasm and abilities of local people are extremely important elements in successfully bringing about development. What have not been dealt with in this discussion are the two primary political issues in development, namely the interests of the wider society as conceived by the representatives of the state and the extent to which these diverge from the interests of nomadic peoples as locally conceived, and the divergent or potentially divergent interests among the nomads themselves. Both of these factors are potential inhibitions to effective participation by nomads in development decisions, and are issues that must be to some degree resolved before the capacity of nomadic

peoples to participate effectively in development decisions can be fully tapped.

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