

Development Centre Seminars

Technology and Poverty Reduction in Asia and the Pacific

Preface by

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ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK
DEVELOPMENT CENTRE OF THE ORGANISATION
FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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OECD Development Centre

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The Centre has a special and autonomous position within the OECD which enables it to enjoy scientific independence in the execution of its task. Nevertheless, the Centre can draw upon the experience and knowledge available in the OECD in the development field.

Foreword

This publication was undertaken in the context of the International Forum on Asian Perspectives, jointly organised by the Asian Development Bank and the OECD Development Centre. It forms part of the Centre's research programme on Globalising Technologies and Domestic Entrepreneurship in Developing Countries, and the Centre's External Co-operation activities. The Forum held its seventh meeting in Paris on 18 and 19 June 2001 on the theme "Technology and Poverty Reduction in Asia and the Pacific". Contributions to the meeting are included in this volume.

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Preface

The seventh International Forum on Asian Perspectives chose to focus on technology and its potential benefits for the poor at a time when technological progress seems to be occurring at a bewildering pace. The poor remain in vast numbers around the world, mostly in Asia. No enterprise can be more important than to explore ways to harness the technology for the alleviation of poverty.

Transforming stagnant economies into dynamic ones poses formidable challenges for many developing countries. Technology can contribute in two mutually reinforcing ways. First, sustained technological progress can generate a steady rise in output per person, hence in real incomes. Second, these rising incomes can stimulate higher educational attainment, which generally leads to smaller families and higher living standards, while also facilitating further technological and economic advancement.

Two key sets of technologies served as the principal focus of discussion during the two days of the Forum: agricultural technologies, beginning with the green revolution and moving on to modern biotechnology; and new information and communications technologies. Academics, policy makers and business executives were able to exchange views on how these two sets of technologies have impacted the lives of poor people in the developing world, and what constraints must be addressed if they are to become even more effective in alleviating poverty in the future. A particularly thorny issue is that of intellectual property rights. How does their protection contribute to ensuring developing countries' access to technology developed elsewhere and to realising their own technological achievements? How can they be designed and enforced so as not to exclude the poor from technology's benefits?

The distribution of benefits from green revolution technologies has been widely debated since the 1970s. While those benefits were no doubt unevenly distributed among farmers, there can be little doubt that, without the agricultural productivity gains they made possible, many millions of poor people would have subsisted on far inferior diets, died earlier, and suffered even dimmer developmental prospects than they have over the past quarter century. The challenge for the future is to ensure that the green revolution continues to extend the benefits of affordable nutrition to the less fortunate segments of society.

If one were to prioritise, the new agricultural biotechnologies would rank high on the list of technologies of potential benefit to the poor in the developing world. Information and communications technologies would figure largely in a supportive role. In the longer run, they may prove very important to the development prospects of poor countries. This is because these technologies — notably the Internet — have only begun to diffuse in much of the developing world. Further progress in policy and institutional reform must precede a more rapid diffusion. Also, basic literacy must become near universal if the poor are to benefit fully from the use of the Internet.

The analytical parts of this book advance our knowledge of how technology flows operate and how they may impinge, for the better, on populations in poverty. The policy chapters go far to provide not only a setting but also guidelines for policies that can effectively use technology to pursue poverty reduction.

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