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Foreword

The late Dr. Pearly F. Ayre, a sociologist who spent several decades working with people in Appalachia, finally became disenchanted with the long-term effectiveness of many of the Federal development programs aimed at that region. He is remembered for his memorable observation in praise of local initiative: “We must do for ourselves, or be done for.”

This OTA study addresses the question of local development and the opportunities for—and appropriateness of—various technologies that can help local people to take advantage of local resources in meeting the needs of their own communities. In many instances there are also close connections between local and national needs; as a result, these local solutions can sometimes add up to national solutions.

OTA has made extensive use of case studies to assess a variety of community projects. One clear conclusion that emerges from these cases is that individuality, ingenuity, and initiative are far from lacking in the United States. It is also evident that many communities are strongly attracted to the principles of local reliance and self-sufficiency. When a community evaluates and chooses a technology for local development, it should take into account nonmarket goals and priorities, as well as purely market factors. In many cases this broader perspective—the attempt to find and develop an “appropriate technology” (AT)—can greatly influence the overall utility of the project.

OTA found that neither “big” nor “small” technologies are consistently more attractive or effective. The historic progression toward larger scale is not universally optimal; indeed, some large-scale projects can result in a diseconomy of scale. Recent developments in science and technology have created an increasing number of opportunities for economic activities on a smaller scale, as well as on a decentralized basis.

Because AT by definition reflects local goals and values, as well as local resources and conditions, the broader adoption of AT may well lead not only to a more diverse and resilient economic system, but also to one that better serves the social and human needs of communities throughout the Nation.

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