

## Rice Production, Rats, and a Consumption-Function Conundrum<sup>1</sup>

*"Food grows by 1, 2, 3...  
but population grows by 1, 2, 4..."*

The Dismal 'Song of Malthus'

**Dr. Kenneth F. Smith, PMP**

**Foreword.** This is the first in a series of stories -- rather I should say 'Parables' -- from my professional past, as each contains one or more project management '*Lessons Learned*' for you.

During 1968, despite the on-going war in South Vietnam, *concurrent with several other ongoing in-country humanitarian programs*, as an active participant in the world-wide 'Green Revolution' to alleviate famine, the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) Saigon Mission turned its attention to increasing Vietnam's rice crop production. USAID contracted several consultants from Colorado<sup>2</sup> and researchers from the University of the Philippines Los Banos Rodent Research Institute (UP/LB) (RRI) to join forces and focus on Vietnam's field-rat problem. Collectively, we called them "rat men" -- *or "rat finks" after a contemporary cartoon character* - - jokingly of course; which they all took in good humor.

The collaborative cohort concluded a statistically-significant amount (*as much as one-third*) of South Vietnam's rice pre-harvest potential was being lost to *Rattus argentiventer*, commonly called rice-field rats; *Chuột đồng lớn* in Vietnamese.



To address the issue, the rat research team proposed that USAID assist the Vietnamese government

<sup>1</sup> How to cite this article: Smith, K. F. (2026). Rice Production, Rats, and a Consumption-Function Conundrum. *PM World Journal*, Vol. XV, Issue VII, July.

<sup>2</sup> Not sure at this late date whether the Americans were from Colorado State University or the University of Colorado.

launch an intensive rat control program<sup>3</sup> consisting of trapping & killing rats in the rice paddies, as well as the drying & storage areas after the harvest. To encourage farmer participation, and also to assure the rats had actually been killed, they suggested an incentive system – i.e. paying a token bounty for every rat killed.

Body-counting was not an ‘*out of the box*’ concept; contemporarily US/MACV<sup>4</sup> was applying it to estimate battle performance *vis a vis* the Viet Cong. But although the prospect of being able to assess post-program results in terms of “body-counts” statistically-correlated with post-harvest production levels<sup>5</sup> was intriguing; the mental image of thousands of farmers catching, retrieving, collecting, transporting -- *and the Agriculture Ministry accounting for, storing and ultimately disposing of*-- millions of rat carcasses was abhorrent. However, the Team decided ‘tails’ would be a sufficient proxy for their purposes, leaving disposition of the remaining carcass to the catchers.

The program was promptly approved, funded and announced as a joint USAID-Ministry initiative<sup>6</sup> in selected provinces; procedures & processes were established, and guidelines disseminated. Farmers were to turn in bundles of ten tails -- *nine tails tied by a tenth* -- to their local Agriculture field station as proof of kill, whereupon they would immediately be recompensed a small amount<sup>7</sup> per bundle. The provincial agriculture station agents were briefed on their additional administrative duties to maintain records, and make immediate payments on deliveries of rat-tail bundles. USAID provided, and advanced local currency which the Ministry distributed for the transactions.

Farmers eagerly responded to the program, turning in bundles of rat tails. Ag. Station agents promptly paid for the bundles; dutifully stacked them outside their offices; periodically photographed them for “evidence;” and ultimately disposed of the detritus in various ways.

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<sup>3</sup> **Note:** Rather than the Project Management Institute’s formal distinction between the terms “Program” and “Project” – *i.e. that Programs are comprised of smaller contributory Projects* – USAID and the Vietnamese government used the terms interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> US MACV: US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

<sup>5</sup> *i.e.* correlation rates between participants pre- and post-harvest production rates compared and contrasted with non-participants, adjusted for respective levels.

<sup>6</sup> **NOTE:** Although USAID personnel were designated ‘Managers’ and/or Advisors for USAID-sponsored Programs and Projects, actual day-to-day responsibility for implementation management rested with the host-country Ministry departmental staff, contractors &/or NGO-designated personnel. Our role was essentially advice, coordination, monitoring & facilitation, and post-project evaluation; as well as being USAID’s “Contract Office Technical Representatives” (COTARS); while other USAID personnel were responsible for funding & auditing.

<sup>7</sup> I’ve forgotten exactly how much but I think it was 10 dong/piasters per bundle; *i.e.* 1 dong per tail; a very small amount.

Judging by the pyres of rat tails being reported everywhere, and the funds reportedly disbursed, it was apparently a popular program; and USAID had high hopes for its ultimate success.

*Rattus* researchers wrapped up their field studies and analyses; and after the first crop season I did a “*quick & easy*” in-office assessment for USAID’s Ministry-coordinating Program Manager Bill Averill, based on production data from a couple of nearby provinces. However, despite the reportedly huge quantity of tail deliverables, I could not discern any significant increase in overall rice production, “before-after” &/or “with-without” correlation by provincial program vs non-participant ‘control’ farmers. **The complete lack of correlations was a red flag the program wasn’t working as anticipated**, so Bill wanted a field follow up, to try to determine why. Accompanied by USAID Ag. Deputy Director Bill Jansen, I then took a quick ‘*ground truthing*’ trip to a nearby province – *again I’ve long forgotten which one* – to see what we could find out from an informal, unannounced “ocular inspection.”

On the way, Bill decided to stop at a USAID provincial warehouse to check the status of some of his ag. equipment and other supplies; during which a perfect illustration of the triumph of “*literal bureaucratic-bloody-mindedness over common-sense*” ensued.

The Vietnamese warehouseman said he couldn’t let us in, nor show or tell us anything without a letter of authorization from Mr. Jansen of the USAID/Agriculture Division in Saigon. Bill replied “***I am Mr. Jansen,***” and showed his ID Card. Nevertheless, the warehouseman said he was sorry, but he still needed a letter of authorization. Bill offered to write one, but the warehouseman was adamant that would not be acceptable; *the letter had to come from Saigon*; and apologized he was “*just following orders!*” Unlike me, Bill had a very placid and even-tempered personality, so instead of blowing his cork he patiently persisted. But try as he might, he couldn’t persuade the warehouseman to relent.

*As an uninvolved bystander, I had a flashback to an episode when I was on guard duty at RAF Ahlhorn during post-WWII occupation of Germany, and was berated by an officer entering the base (actually my day-to-day supervisor) for “just following orders” from the Duty Officer; orders which were contrary to my daily supervisor’s opinion! So now, in a role-reversal situation, I told Bill at least he should be reassured no unauthorized personnel were going to access his warehouse either.*

Rebuffed and exasperated, we then continued on our way to the provincial Ag. office, wondering what our next encounter might be like; and whether perhaps we were on a futile trip if our first encounter with the Ag. Ministry’s obdurate field staff was *de riguer*, and would prevail.

However, our reception at the Ag. office was much more congenial. We noted the mound of rat tails outside the office; introduced ourselves, and -- with the ag. agent’s assistance -- even got to

review some of his book-keeping records on rat tail purchases; which all appeared to be in order. After some small talk, the agent directed us to the hamlet where a ‘high-contributor participant’ farmer- lived.

On arrival, the Hamlet chief recognized USAID’s “Shake Hands” logo on our vehicle and greeted us with a big smile.<sup>8</sup>



Through an interpreter, Bill and I chatted with him for a few moments; then he accompanied us to the residence of the farmer whom the Ag. officer had referred us. We learned from the farmer he was very happy with the rat tail program, and indeed had earned quite a bit from it. The farmer then told us his two sons were really the ones responsible for his success, and called for them to talk with us. **They, in turn, took us to the back of their property and showed us several cages with encaged rats!**<sup>9</sup>

In essence, in response to the provincial agricultural extension agent advising the Hamlet Chief to inform the farmers “Shake Hands” wanted to buy rat tails, they had initially constructed a couple of rat traps; then chased around the rice paddy to catch more. But after a lot of effort, they didn’t catch many. Then, they hit on the idea of catching and breeding a few rats, and cutting off their tails to sell to the Ag. Station! Since the agriculturist paid a fixed fee per bundle, they realized they didn’t even have to wait until the young rats matured, but could sell tails any time, regardless of size. Business was good. They built several cages to breed more rats concurrently, thus producing more rat tails for “Shake Hands” assistance program ‘from the People of the United States’!

Bill asked the boys why they thought Americans wanted to buy rat tails. They said they didn’t know -- *and didn’t really care*, as long as they got paid for providing them! But they then

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<sup>8</sup> USAID was generally regarded like ‘Santa Claus’ by both the general South Vietnamese populace and the communist Viet Cong guerillas.

<sup>9</sup> Just as I kept – and bred -- pet rabbits when I was a kid.

tentatively suggested . . . *maybe Americans ate them?*<sup>10</sup> They said Americans were ‘strange’ people in many ways and probably also had different dietary practices.<sup>11</sup>

When we asked what they did with the tail-less rats, as rats multiplied very quickly, the boys said that was not a problem. Their family -- *and their neighbors* -- ate them.<sup>12</sup> But of course, they saved the apparently-delectable tails for the Americans!

After further discussion with the farmer, his boys and the Hamlet Chief -- with Bill trying to apprise them of the real reason for USAID’s rat-tail procurement program -- the light finally dawned. They then freely acknowledged field rats were also eating their rice; ***but they accepted whatever the rats consumed was simply a condition of nature, rather than the farmer’s loss.*** Furthermore, they didn’t really think there was much they could -- or should -- do to try to change the situation.

In any event, I don’t think we changed their mindset about breeding rats for income, as long as there was a customer for the tails; ***and at least they got some protein as a nutritional side-benefit!***

When we returned to Saigon, we reported our experience to USAID and the Ministry officials. Since this was an isolated incident, I don’t know how widespread the malpractice was, how the program may have been used &/or abused elsewhere;<sup>13</sup> or whether it was continued, curtailed or terminated. I then bade farewell to both Bills and moved on to assist and assess other programs & projects in Saigon as well as in other country Missions.

FYI, *Rattus argentiventer* continues as a major constraint to rice production, even today.

### **In Conclusion:**

*“The best-laid plans o’ mice & men*

*Gang aft a-gley!”*

Robert Burns 1785

While in this instance the farmer and his boys were very entrepreneurial, and inadvertently benefitted from the program in the short term, ***they were blissfully ignorant of its real objective.*** This failure in communication of the program’s purpose -- *from the Ministry Program*

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<sup>10</sup> Similar to the Chinese -- when eating fish -- save the heads and tails for their honored guests!

<sup>11</sup> *They proffered they’d also been told by the VC that Americans ate babies!*

<sup>12</sup> *“Taste ‘same-same’ chicken”!*

<sup>13</sup> You can’t -- *or rather shouldn’t* -- make generalizations about a single anecdote.

*Management office level through the intermediary provincial Ag. Agent execution chain, to the Hamlet officials and target beneficiaries; without adequate explanation, understanding, monitoring and follow-up in the field by both Ministry agents & program consultants -- resulted in the objective of the rat-tail bounty – and consequently the larger program objective -- being completely missed; at least in this case!*

**As the USA celebrates its 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this month & year, while not historical, the reminder of the lesson I learned from this tale of tails in my 58-year flashback is still relevant; namely that intercultural and interpersonal**

**Communication**

*from the top, down to the ‘rice roots’ target beneficiaries,  
with adequate technical follow-up monitoring for understanding,  
compliance and, rectification where appropriate*

**is Essential; & Timeless**

*Rather than centralized plans and procedures developed & decreed  
to address perceived issues,  
followed by mindless bureaucratic procedural performance at the working level;*

**and will now be applied in your interpersonal relationships,  
programs & projects of every type, everywhere.**

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## About the Author



### **Dr. Kenneth Smith**

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Initially a US Civil Service Management Intern, then a management analyst & systems specialist with the US Defense Department, Ken subsequently had a career as a senior foreign service officer -- management & evaluation specialist, project manager, and in-house facilitator/trainer -- with the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Ken assisted host country governments in many countries to plan, monitor and evaluate projects in various technical

sectors; working ‘hands-on’ with their officers as well as other USAID personnel, contractors and NGOs. Intermittently, he was also a team leader &/or team member to conduct project, program & and country-level portfolio analyses and evaluations.

Concurrently, Ken had an active dual career as Air Force ready-reservist in Asia (Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines) as well as the Washington D.C. area; was Chairman of a Congressional Services Academy Advisory Board (SAAB); and had additional duties as an Air Force Academy Liaison Officer. He retired as a ‘bird’ colonel.

After retirement from USAID, Ken was a project management consultant for ADB, the World Bank, UNDP and USAID.

He earned his DPA (Doctor of Public Administration) from the George Mason University (GMU) in Virginia, his MS from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT Systems Analysis Fellow, Center for Advanced Engineering Study), and BA & MA degrees in Government & International Relations from the University of Connecticut (UCONN). A long-time member of the Project Management Institute (PMI) and IPMA-USA, Ken is a Certified Project Management Professional (PMP®) and a member of both the PMI®-Honolulu and Philippines Chapters.

Ken has two KENBOOKS: 1. Project Management PRAXIS which includes many innovative project management tools & techniques; and describes a “Toolkit” of related templates, and 2. MUSINGS on Project Management -- a compilation of contemporary concerns in project planning, monitoring & evaluation, with some tools & techniques suggested for their solution. Either or both books are available from Amazon, and their related templates are available directly from him at [kenfsmith@aol.com](mailto:kenfsmith@aol.com) on proof of purchase.

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