

THE ROLE OF THE INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT
RESEARCH IN DEVELOPMENT:
AN EVALUATIVE SURVEY

By

Dr. Alula ABATE *

I. *Research experience at IDR*

The initial research effort of the IDR was based on the priorities set for it at its inception. A group of consultants from the Social Sciences Departments of the present Addis Ababa University and various government agencies identified in 1972 three broad research areas of the highest priority. The first of these revolved around the study of the relationship between growth and equity in Ethiopian rural development. The primary equity objective of rural development were identified as an improved distribution of income, more equitable distribution of rights to land use, and expanded opportunities for employment. The need was also felt to know much more about how these objectives are interrelated with the means of increasing output, productivity, and efficient resource use.

The second area of research relates to socio-economic evaluation of planned agricultural development. The distinguishing characteristics of these studies are: (1) the focus on a carefully delimited area of planned development, and (2) the study in depth of the total systems of inter-relationships among social, economic and civic aspects of change effected by the development project. There was a felt need to define an analytical framework for evaluating the broad social and economic consequences of development programs, and to perfect the techniques for gathering the quantitative information and indicative data by which the consequences of these development programs can be measured and utilized to evaluate both plans and implementation.

A very broad consensus supported the recommendation that initial and intensive effort should be concentrated, with active participation by the Institute of Development Research, on the conduct of baseline socio-economic studies of the areas of planned development before the beginning of operational activities. It was also felt that provision should be made for systematic subsequent study of how operational activity produces change, who and what is affected, and how socio-economic behaviour and institutions are related to the operational activities and among themselves as change proceeds.

* *Director of the Institute of Development Research (IDR)
Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.*

The study of the means to stimulate local participation, motivation, and initiative was designated as a third major research effort. While many aspects of the need to enlarge participation in development activities and to engage local initiative were identified, the primary research need was, however, linked to the prospective reform and reorganization of local government institutions in Ethiopia.

It was recognized that there are many examples in Ethiopia of local initiative and that local expression of need is often ahead of government. So there remains a critical need to know how to mobilize local institutions and initiative. The baseline projects have given the social science staff of the University as well as development agencies a rare opportunity to learn about the dynamics of underdevelopment and the most important characteristics hindering socio-economic transformation. To a certain degree, the lessons learned from the surveys conducted for the evaluation of ongoing rural development projects have made it possible to identify the bottlenecks for efficient implementation of development programmes. It has also been possible to derive from these studies ideas for making improvement on the development model particularly in the area which is commonly described as integrated rural development.

IDR's objective in conducting baseline and evaluation of socio-economic research projects is to contribute to that body of data needed for sound planning for new projects and feed back for the improvement of existing ones. Although it possesses no way of evaluating its impact in this regard, the dissemination rate of its findings and the interest in the acquisition of its materials seem to indicate that good use is being made of the research findings.

On a more conceptual plane, IDR has tried to participate in efforts to evolve a workable model for integrated rural development. Though there is considerable interest in rural development ventures to alter the low economic standard of the world's rural poor, there still seems to prevail a lack of conceptual clarity of what is meant by integrated rural development. And because of this, planning for rural development has been a very frustrating exercise full of guess work and at times badly managed. IDR believes future research should be centered on the problem of planning, programming and implementing of integrated rural development projects. The question that one usually faces at the conclusion of a research project on rural problems is how to go about designing a sound development project to solve. While such a role was considered potentially valuable, particularly in the absence of a government archives, it was recognized that IDR would have to take the initiative in seeking out information on current Ministerial and agency activities, cultivate informal access to information, and maintain continuous and personal contacts with each of the armatures of government. It was also felt that IDR might gradually assume a responsibility for evaluating

current research, including that completed within government, and disseminating a register of such information.

With the aim of encouraging and effecting staff inter-changes between the university and government, it was believed feasible to have government personnel assigned to the IDR, perhaps on a sabbatical arrangement or by a formula of secondment under supervision. In many cases, this was thought to prove more useful than sending Ministry personnel abroad for studies, particularly in view of the possibility that the IDR in future could constitute a base for post-graduate instruction and supervised research on development problems of Ethiopia. The anticipated interchange has largely been unrealized mainly because post-graduate instruction did not start at the University. But as of the 1978/79 academic year the University is going to launch a graduate program and this would definitely make a significant contribution to encourage Ethiopian graduate students to conduct their thesis research at the IDR, and on Ethiopian problems, rather than at Universities abroad from which they hope to receive higher degrees.

During the previous regime there were some problems associated with government secrecy and with taboo areas of research with respect to the structure and institutions of government or the functioning of the administrative and political systems. When this fetish with secrecy is seen together with the paucity and unreliability of data, research under these circumstances could be quite a frustrating exercise. In general, recognizing that approval must be obtained before publication of research, experience indicates a ranking: research which described existing situations gained easy approval, criticism of existing institutions tended to raise more questions; prescriptive advice encountered more difficulty. It was envisaged that if an advisory committee of government were to be constituted, it would be useful to consult with researchers on questions arising in this area.

III. *The IDR as Contract-research facility for government.*

Since there has not been much past experience in Ethiopia with government contracting for research to be conducted by the University, at least in the social science fields, it was felt that an expansion of such activity would be of interest to some Ministries. Right from the start problems were encountered, and these problems are still with us.

A number of Ministries have established their own research units, Government may prefer to assign needed research to their own units, where problems of official secrecy are obviated and the applied character of the studies can be emphasized. The intention was for the IDR to seek association and close consultation with these units, while giving greater attention to long-term problems and avoiding involvement in the day-to-day informational requirements of official agencies.

Initially, some promising areas of IDR contract research were identified. Some of these included development of methodologies

applicable to program and project evaluation; the definition of standardized data – collection units, i.e. stable statistical areas for surveying change through time; and delineation of a standard series of base maps for development purposes.

For a variety of reasons, government often appeared to prefer contracting for research to be conducted by foreign institutions and scholars. Obviously, failure to utilize Ethiopian research capabilities, where this is feasible, has reduced the opportunities for training of Ethiopian researchers and expanding the capacity of domestic institutions to fulfill development information needs. There is indeed an educational role for the IDR, which has not hitherto been fully realized, in its relations with government. Foreign donors and financing sources ought also to reconsider some present practices which have a similar effect in favouring overseas research institutions, to the disadvantage of efforts to strengthen Ethiopian research capability, such as tied financing of feasibility and evaluative studies of projects considered for financing in Ethiopia.

IV. The IDR as an interdisciplinary research instrument

It is generally acknowledged that the critical research capability gap in Ethiopia is in the interdisciplinary study of development problems and projects. The difficulties of conducting effective programs in Ethiopia's rural environment is partly attributable to the fact that the country's problems generally require study from several disciplinary viewpoints. Since its inception the IDR has tried and still continues to concentrate on facilitating inter-disciplinary research programs and stimulating an interest in cross – disciplinary and development of methodology, among the presently specialized research units. However, while many priority research needs might require an inter-disciplinary approach, others did not. Consequently, the IDR did not confine its attention only to problems that require inter-disciplinary study.

V. The IDR in relation to the Addis Ababa University

The University has established the Institute of Development Research to pursue several goals, some external and some internal to the University. With respect to external objectives, the IDR has, with only limited effect, tried to strengthen the University's liaison with government and to broaden the dialogue between the community of scholarship and public authorities. Through mobilizing the University's social science research capabilities, it sought to provide an alternative to government commissioning of foreign groups and institutions to carry out depth study of sectors of Ethiopian society and economy. The pre-revolution state of complete dependence on the capitalist world had

virtually ruled out a significant role for the IDR to conduct major government research. Happily this state of affairs has now changed since 1974, and the IDR will increasingly assume greater responsibility in this area, in relation to its research capabilities. Hopefully too, it will help identify directions in which the university should go, to help ensure, that university training programs are geared to national needs as enunciated in the country's central plan.

Internally, the roles of the IDR have been and still are to expand the involvement of university staff in development – problem oriented research; to generate teaching materials on development problems, and, when graduate studies in the social science commence next year, to provide a foundation for the conduct of graduate research programs. In addition it provides the opportunity for younger staff members to get experience in research design and execution, through seminars, conferences, and summer research projects – for example, by organizing relatively large-scale projects in which interdisciplinary teams are required to define the topics, narrow down the focus of study, and manage the research enterprise.

VI. Broad Areas of continuing interest for the IDR

a) *Emphasis on improving techniques of information gathering and evaluation:*

There is an urgent need to test the reliability and cost – effectiveness of techniques for gathering and analyzing information about development problems and programs in the Ethiopian environment. There is still a great deal more to learn about what methods in quantitative, behavioural, and attitudinal research. Much can be learned by evaluating past work of researchers and the techniques employed by existing institution as ARDU *, agricultural research agencies, and government research bodies as well as by units of the University.

b) *Develop capacity to evaluate government programs and projects:*

A good deal of effort has been put to link IDR research activities to on-going or prospective government development programs to strengthen the nation's capacity to evaluate their effects on the economy and society. Socio-economic base-line surveys of areas scheduled for development projects, investigation of the broad social impact of programs for resettlement, modernization, improvement of

* *Arsi Development unit initially started as a minimum package program in a smaller sub-administrative region.*

production practices, and land and other economic reform, and the collection of essential information to improve the predictability of effects and assess the consequences of government policies and implementation of development programs defines the areas in which the IDR finds the highest priority needs for more effective mobilization of the University's social science research capabilities.

c) *Assist in identifying research and development priorities:*

Four proposals for future activities of the IDR in helping to establish the priority areas of development research action are forwarded

- (i) Broad and regular consultation, than hitherto, among government and University personnel is felt to be useful. There is general concurrence in the proposal that one way for the IDR to achieve this is to convene an annual consultative seminar, with broader participation of development promoting Ministries and agencies of government.
- (ii) Coordination of research and information – gathering might be facilitated within government and University research capacities more effectively focused on priority development needs, by constituting a number of advisory groups, upon the initiative of the IDR, consisting of specialists and representatives of government bodies concerned with specific aspects of development. In some cases, these advisory groups might more closely correspond to traditional academic disciplines, and in other cases be oriented toward critical policy problems.
- (iii) The IDR would be exploring with the Central Planning Office what useful contribution it could make to the process of formulating national development plans. To this end, we are considering to establish machinery for consultation between the IDR and the sectoral departments of the CPO and related Ministries, to hold sectoral meetings as strategy papers are reviewed, and to look for research needs of emerging strategies and critical information gaps.
- (iv) Future research emphasis at IDR would mostly focus on the study of the impact of the new revolutionary legislation particularly those that affect the rural masses. The Institute is now in the process of launching research to measure the impact of the land reform legislation and related proclamations with the purpose of identifying the problems of implementation. It is hoped that the findings of this research would aid appropriate response

by relevant government agencies in having a close look at the socio-economic impact of the various measures. The IDR research on this would particularly focus on the variables that relate to changes in levels of living, monetization and spatial mobility.

The IDR has fallen short of its professed aims and objectives for two main reasons.

a) Ever since the inauguration of the Addis Ababa University, there seems to be a general misguided view prevalent that research is a luxury which the University would do without. This view had been sustained largely because AAU continued to be involved only in under-graduate programs where class-room teaching always assumed a position of priority. In the history of the AAU, in particular, the shortage of teachers has been so chronic that there has always been a tendency to deploy the very few researchers to teaching wherever possible.

b) The second reason relates to the structure of dependence of the ancient regime on the capitalist world in the political and socio-economic fields. This position of dependence and the half-hearted commitment of the Government to development did not help research institutions like the IDR to grow and to contribute in meaningful ways towards the nation's efforts to solve its social and economic problems. The 1974 Revolution and the New Democratic Revolution Program have laid a sound structural basis for research to be properly co-ordinated with the national plan.