

Social Science Research and National Development in Kenya: The Case of the Institute for Development Studies University of Nairobi

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This paper outlines the role played by the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi in the conduct and organization of social science research on development in Kenya. There is also a brief discussion of the major strengths and weaknesses of the Institute.

In a sense the discussion in this paper reflects the authors' personal experience in the Institute. It should be pointed out however, that the views expressed here are shared widely among colleagues at the Institute and other social scientists at the University of Nairobi.

ORIGINS OF THE IDS

The Institute for Development Studies (IDS) was established in October 1965 as a separate department within the Faculty of Arts of the then University College, Nairobi. Hitherto the main centres of social sciences research were university departments and notably the East African Institute of Social Science Research then located at Makerere University, Kampala (1). It would appear that at its inception the IDS was indeed modelled after the Kampala Institute, for its mandate included research activity on the whole range of social science disciplines, including cultural anthropology, musicology and archeology. But soon after its creation the IDS was divided into two divi-

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sions : the Cultural Division which eventually branched out to become what is today the Institute of African Studies, and the Social Science Division which remained to develop into the present IDS.

Until 1965 there had been a small Economic Research Unit, largely within the Economics Department, that attempted to coordinate research activity and disseminate the findings among members of University faculty and visiting economists working as advisors in the various government departments. When it was established the Social Science Division took over and expanded the functions of this Unit to include the following major objectives :

- a. Sponsoring and facilitating research relating to economic and social development with specific reference to East Africa, and particularly Kenya ;
- b. Providing for the discussion and dissemination of the proposals for the findings of this research through a series of staff seminars, public seminars, workshops and several series of publications ;
- c. Allocating its staff for teaching in the University departments of Economics, Sociology and Government (Political Science) ;
- d. Training East African social scientists ;
- e. Serving the wider community through public service activities of individual staff members.

It is important to note that, like social science research anywhere in the newly independent countries during the 1960s, research in the IDS during its early years took place in an environment in which the USA, in particular, and western governments and private interests in general, were omnipresent. A mixture of US academic, commercial and security interests manifested themselves in the presence of large numbers of Americans « trying to help ». And although nothing of the magnitude of « Project Camelot » was exposed in Kenya, the predominance of US personnel in the IDS became a legitimate subject of some serious suspicion and speculation by the end of that decade.

But perhaps such suspicion and speculation was not entirely malicious given the source of finance for the majority of the IDS activities. Until the early 1970s, the major sources of finance for research activity in the IDS were the Rockefeller Foundation, Ministry of Overseas Development of the United Kingdom, Norwegian Agency for International Development (NORAD), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), the Population Council (New York) and the USAID. Until recently, such financial support was given in the form of research personnel and their research expenses. A few of the agencies also supported professional training for local academics overseas with the aim of integrating them into various departments of the Faculty of Social Sciences upon their return. While this in itself is commendable, it is instructive that it was not until the mid 1970s that the IDS started to build a stable core of local researchers. We shall explain this later in the paper.

It is perhaps not very significant that the previous research experience of the foreign scholars in the IDS should have been relevant to Africa — for after all African Studies was just beginning to take firm root, particularly in the non-colonial countries of the West. It should however, be notable that the first director of the IDS although a member of the faculty at the Food Research Institute, Stanford University, had just previously been on secondment at the Rand Corporation. This was possibly an insensitive choice by the donor of technological aid, given the well known role of that Corporation in foreign espionage. There seem to have been some improvement and the second director, appointed through the Rockefeller Foundation, who was a well accomplished social scientist with considerable African experience. Upon his departure in 1972, the IDS has had Kenyan directors, although the position with regard to research personnel has remained unstable until very recently.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND ORIENTATION

Since 1970 when the IDS was instituted in its present form, it has been a separate organization within the University and having the status of a faculty. The Institute is governed by a board whose membership includes the Director, all full time members of the Institute's academic staff occupying established positions, plus half this number elected from the other full time academic staff; heads of all social science departments, agricultural economics and education department, and the Director of the Institute of African Studies. In addition the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning and the Ministry of Agriculture are represented by their Permanent Secretaries. The National Christian Council is represented by its Secretary General. The recently established National Council for Science and Technology is represented by its Secretary. In its day to day activities however, the Board has set up an Executive Committee which consists of the Director as Chairman, three members of the Institute's established staff and one member representing all other categories.

The Institute's academic staff interacts closely and collaborates with all the social science departments. In addition to their research activities the IDS academic staff are required to teach a certain minimum number of hours per week in their professional departments. This ensures that the results of research are incorporated into teaching and it also enables the departments to widen the range of courses offered. From the point of view of university administration however, teaching is seen as the predominant role of the university staff; and that includes the IDS staff. There exists, therefore, a very uneasy balance between the role of the IDS as a research organization and the view about it by the rest of the University as a pool of teaching manpower resource. Such ambiguity has tended to affect the local researcher at the IDS more adversely than the foreign researchers. We return to this later. Let us for a moment look at the Institute's staff complement.

In addition to the Director whose role it is to provide administrative and scholarly leadership in setting up the Institute's research prio-

rities and coordinating the efforts of its various researchers, the IDS has established positions for eight full time Research Fellows. All these positions are now occupied by Kenya citizens, as are the training positions of Junior Research Fellows which are restricted to younger scholars who have completed the Masters degree and are working toward a doctorate. Currently there are six such JRFs at the IDS. It is, of course, not automatic that such JRFs are employed in the IDS upon the completion of their Ph.Ds. It is indeed the case that the IDS has acted as a training organization for practically all the major social science departments, for often JRFs have been transferred to the teaching departments as lecturers upon their completion of the Ph.D. An additional training position that of Graduate Research Assistant for graduate students working for their Masters degrees has recently been discontinued.

Of the foreign researchers, there are two categories: Visiting Research Fellows and Research Associates, although the latter is a category not reserved exclusively for foreigners. Visiting Research Fellow as the name implies are scholars from institutions outside Kenya. Generally, they have been scholars on sabbatical leave from the USA, Canada and United Kingdom supported by a grant either from their own institutions or by agencies such as the Rockefeller Foundation, for periods ranging from one to two years. Because of the lack of local researchers in the early years most of the development research at the IDS was carried out by these expatriate researchers. And if it had impact on government policy it was partly because it found receptive audience among the expatriate advisors in government departments. For it was similarly the case that the high echelons of the civil service during the early 1960s were occupied by expatriates.

Research Associates are scholars from foreign universities or residents of Kenya with research interests related to the current priorities of the Institute. Generally, this is the category in which the majority of foreign scholars have come to the IDS. Research Associates tend to be mostly graduate students from United States universities gathering data for Ph.D. dissertations, and until recently they have been a visible predominating element in the institute. For instance, in June 1977, there was a total of 21 Research Associates and Visiting Research Fellows, plus 4 pending appointments for associates. At the same time, the IDS was employing a total of 14 academic staff, including the Director. Not surprising, such heavy expatriate dominance had earlier made the Institute an easy target of attack, particularly from within the University. But it should be reported here that a fairly thorough review has recently been completed in which more stringent criteria for the selection of applicants for both VRF and RA were adopted. Because the research methodology including the selection of variables is usually tailored to the demands on the students at their home universities, there is usually little of immediate policy application in the studies conducted by Associates.

The focus of research during the early 1960s when expatriate researchers predominated in the IDS was more basic, seeking to document and analyse economic and political organizations, internal market

structures and issues related to social stability such as urban migration and later unemployment among youth. As manifested in the publication of the time concern with political stability or communism, investment opportunities and market viability usually overlapped. This may have been explained in part at least, by the central positions occupied by Nairobi and Kenya as a whole in a wider East African market, until the late 1960s.

Research Priorities

In recent years there has been more emphasis on research by Kenyans in order to have the desired impact on policy. The assumption here, not always borne out in fact, is that the research interests of foreign scholars are motivated by factors which may not always be in the national interest. On the other hand, native scholars would tend to see research primarily as a way of attacking problems of national urgency. Clearly, such a divergence of focus is likely to cause some basic differences about methods of research and priority of research topics. But ultimately they must also relate to sources of funding. In the IDS the bulk of research support has so far come from foreign sources, except for salaries of local staff and administrative costs. Such foreign funds, even if not strictly controlled with respect to permissible topics tend to be deployed on projects which are not likely to offend the sensibilities of the established political power. Thus a local researcher is often concerned not only for the welfare of his own work, but for his very survival as a researcher qua researcher. It is no wonder therefore, that very few studies by local scholars have raised serious questions about the political or economic order. Instead, it is the expatriates who have sometimes raised some challenging criticism. But this is really to moot the question about ideological orientation of research on development, something on which agreement can hardly be expected given the diverse functional interests represented at the IDS Board which is ultimately the governing authority.

The ideological orientation of the Institute's research is therefore, not surprisingly, eclectic. And the topics reflect this diversity of interest and priorities although certain areas of emphasis have emerged from time to time. Among these the most dominant are agriculture and rural development, education, industrialisation and urban development and the Kenyan society. Until 1977 these are the categories under which research activities in the IDS have been listed. Since then two more categories have been added namely, nutrition, health and family planning, and conservation and utilization of natural resources. These additions are partly a reflection of recent diversification in recruitment as well as changing fads in research interest and funding.

Recently the Institute has completed a major exercise in reordering research priorities for the next few years. During this exercise an attempt was made to set broad areas of emphasis in evaluation research covering all topics. These were :

(a) distribution, access and equity : (b) employment generation and (c) effectiveness in meeting basic needs. Within each of the broad categories

already enumerated, specific areas of focus were identified as listed below :

1. *Agriculture and Rural Development*

- a. Price policy analysis
- b. Land use and development
- c. Impact of commodity production
- d. Rural employment, labour market and mobility.
- e. Land tenure and land market in rural areas
- f. Capital formation in agriculture
- g. Farmers' response to incentives
- h. Role of cooperatives and other institutions of rural development
- i. Impact of agriculture related industries, trade and service on small scale farmers
- j. Impact of rural infrastructure

2. *Industrialisation*

- a. Appropriateness of industrial technology
- b. Income distribution and product choice
- c. Global context of production, accumulation, trade product development and technology generation
- d. State participation in industry
- e. Role of direct foreign investment
- f. Development of the service industries (especially tourism)

3. *Resource Management and Environmental Studies*

- a. Rural water supply
- b. Irrigation and flood control
- c. Urban water supply
- d. Energy sources
- e. Internationally shared resources
- f. Cost and benefit of conservation
- g. Fisheries
- h. Minerals
- i. Wildlife
- j. Forestry

4. *Human Resource and Development*

- a. Pre-school education
- b. Agricultural, technical and vocational education
- c. Employment of school and university leavers
- d. Adult literacy
- e. Distribution of education resources
- f. Monitoring educational trends
- g. Education and qualification escalation
- h. Appropriateness of health care

- i. Activities of pharmaceutical MNCs in Kenya
- j. Access to health facilities
- k. Housing situation in Urban and Rural areas.

Disciplinary Specialisation

While the Institute itself is not formally restricted to any specific disciplines in the social sciences, it is clear that its research programme depends very much on the disciplinary specialisation of its research staff. For a long time economists and agricultural economists have predominated in the staff of the IDS. But because of the relative insecurity of the two year contract given to everybody, including Kenyans until a few years back there has been a very rapid turnover especially among economists for whom there has been high demand in the country. Thus the majority of economists in the Institute have been largely foreigners. In 1975 the total number of economists at the IDS exceeded that of other disciplines put together. Only in the last two years has the number of economists been less than half the total. But this does not represent the devaluation of economists, rather it reflects the diversification in recruitment which is wide ranging; including in 1977: 10 economists, 2 political scientists, 5 sociologists, 3 anthropologists, 3 educationists, 2 lawyers, one urban planner and one ecologist.

IMPACT ON DEVELOPMENT POLICY

As the first Kenyan Director of the IDS once argued, « the ultimate objective of research on development is... to influence the development strategies and policies pursued by a country » (2). But as we have already suggested, there are often a number of factors, particularly in developing countries, standing on the way of an easy realisation of such objectives. But perhaps the most important among these has to do with the existing relations between the University and government bureaucrats, which are often characterised by suspicion if not outright hostility. But even if such relationships were good, it is a moot question if the policy mechanism would itself be responsive to suggestions emanating from outside the system. The experience of the IDS with policy makers, while somewhat encouraging has not given any but only marginal hope of significant impact of research on policy.

We have already observed that a good deal of research in the IDS has been carried out by expatriate scholars who often have narrow theoretical or methodological interests. Such studies may therefore not focus directly on policy. Consequently their findings are often not useful to policy makers. But this was particularly true of basic research during the early years of the IDS. Beginning in the late 1960s and with increased Kenyanisation of research staff, the Institute has been involved more increasingly in evaluative research for various government agencies. Such exercises have ranged from the more general, such as the Evaluation of the Special Rural Development Project involving six districts in six different provinces and covering a period

of nearly six years, to the more specific evaluation of the narrowly specific such as the Foot and Mouth Disease Control Project in Masai country. As applied research, evaluation is committed to the principle of utility. Thus it may be argued that its recently increased involvement in evaluation research places the IDS, at least potentially, in a position where it can influence government policy. Yet evaluation often has other covert purposes the goal of which may be either or white-wash or eyewash. But even more significant is the fact that the implementation of research findings often require the continuing involvement of the researcher, and only in one case has the IDS itself been involved in such implementation.

A basic complaint often raised about government planning agencies is that they do not have trained and receptive personnel in influential positions so that they can initiate dialogue on developmental issues. While this may be a valid complaint, it is also true that academic research findings are often couched in esoteric jargon not readily comprehensive to the uninitiated. To face up to these challenges the IDS has instituted regular seminars where government officers and the interested public are invited to discuss research reports. The problem of wider dissemination has been dealt with by providing summaries of research reports in a non-technical language in the local news-media (3).

RELATIONS WITH OTHER RESEARCH INSTITUTES

We have already outlined the extent of the Institute's dependence on foreign funds and staff, especially during the early years. Following the patterns of communication generally in the country contacts with researchers in Europe and the USA are much stronger than those with scholars in developing countries. In one instance there was a formal link with the University of Glasgow, but this has not repeated. Throughout the entire history of the IDS there have hardly been any Visiting Research Fellows or Research Associates from developing countries in Asia, Latin America or Africa (except Uganda and Tanzania). This situation has been found unsatisfactory as it has tended to create the image of the Institute as a facility for European and American scholars and Ph. D. candidates. But it also exposes a narrow perspective which is essentially Eurocentric.

Recently there have been some deliberate efforts to diversify both the source of funds and research staff — especially Visiting Research Fellows. Negotiations are currently going on for the appointment of at least two Japanese scholars and the first Indian Visiting Research Fellow has only returned to Bombay after some six months in Nairobi. But the problems involved in the recruitment of research personnel from developing countries cannot be easily dismissed. In the first place, there is the question of funding. Given the financial constraints in most research institutes in the developing countries, and their manpower constraints, perhaps the lack of interaction between them is understandable.

In the last few years there has been a rapid expansion of consultant work by social scientists mainly for governments and international agencies. But the fact remains that even here the instinctive reaction is for such governments and international agencies to look for researchers from developed countries. It is perhaps the case that because of lack of communication among researchers, research institutes and government agencies in developing countries, the people responsible for commissioning such studies are not aware of the expertise in developing countries. Yet we should not overemphasise this point, for in reality consultant research, as indeed fundings for it, are at best in the service of reproduction of underdevelopment.

CONCLUSION

This paper has raised a number of issues concerning the problems that the IDS has had to grow through or growth with. No attempt has been made to suggest solutions for it is believed that in sharing these problems with researchers in other institutions a more realistic perspective may emerge which may suggest possible strategies for dealing with our problems.

FOOTNOTES

1. An active research organization during the 1960s was a private research consulting agency, the Marco Surveys Ltd., directed by Dr. Gordon Wilson, a one time government sociologist in Tanganyika and later Kenya. In addition to basic social science research this agency was also involved in market research public opinion polls and the publication of Who directories.
2. Dharam P. Ghai, 1974 «Social Science Research on Development and Research Institutes in Africa». Discussion Paper No. 197. Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya. P. 11.
3. A full-time member was employed in 1972/73 to carry out this task, but the post fell vacant within a year and has not been renewed. Some of the issues involved in the dissemination and utilisation of research findings are given full treatment in Occasional Paper No. 7, (1973) Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, entitled «In Search of a System for Dissemination of Research Findings and Technology in Kenya».