

THESIS FODDER - A NEW ROLE FOR THE THIRD WORLD

Peter Bowbrick¹

ABSTRACT

The harm that academics in rich countries can do when they research the Third World.

INTRODUCTION

There has been an upsurge in the number of research projects carried out by western academics in the Third World, helped by the fact that funding can be obtained from the aid budget rather than from a shrinking education budget. Unfortunately, most of this research is of no value at all to the host country: on the contrary, it draws resources away from priority areas. The Third World is being used to provide Thesis Fodder. This is of course a service akin to tourism or prostitution and would be perfectly acceptable if an economic charge was made, which is not the case now.

The conclusions presented here are based on my experience as a civil servant or consultant in many Third World countries, and on my experience in a research career in Europe. I have avoided citing individual research projects, which would be unfair, as the malaise is general.

I believe that nearly everybody who undertakes research in the Third World does it out of a commitment to the poor and the hungry, and that other motives, like career advancement, are a long way behind. This genuine commitment, however, means that they do not spend as much time as they should, perhaps, in analysing the impact of their work.

DOES IT MATTER?

The first test of any research project is "Does it matter?". An economist who allocates his time and other resources to trivial tasks fails in his first and most important task. Research that does not tackle key issues is of minor importance, and research that does not lead to action is wasted.

One might expect therefore that before initiating a research project, a researcher would talk to the key decision makers in a country in order to identify the key issues and the areas where information is needed. The decision makers may not be too clear on this, but they will have very strong ideas on what research is not needed and what

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research can have no impact on decisions. An agricultural economist, for example, might talk to:

The Minister of Agriculture, the Permanent Secretary, the Director of Agriculture, the Director of Planning, the Director of Pricing and Marketing and their professional advisers.

The chief executive of the appropriate marketing boards.

The Ministries of Finance, Development and Trade and Industry.

In practice it is rare for these people to be consulted in advance, and almost unknown for an academic to call on a civil servant and ask "What do you want to know? How can I help?". This might be because an academic has to submit a detailed research programme before he can get funding for the project and actually visit the country, or because political clearance for a visit is not given by the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Development until a complete project has been submitted (and the possibility must be considered that neither the host country nor the donors want the main problems identified, quantified and brought to notice.)

There are researchers, though, who have a technique or type of study in mind and are quite indifferent between South Korea or Zambia as a suitable country to try it. They may be influenced by such factors as the belief that field work is more virtuous than work done in the capital city, and that it is particularly virtuous to live for three years in a village in the bush, or that it is more virtuous to study the effects of a famine than the price policy that could prevent it.

In practice, most studies do not aim to produce policy recommendations. Most are purely descriptive, producing survey results, econometric or statistical description. They have no economic analysis and they do not set out policy implications or recommendations. It would be naive to expect a small, under-staffed civil service department to study these carefully, re-analyse the data and feed the results into a decision-making process.

Even when the studies relate to a key subject like food price policy, they tend to be descriptive and remote from reality. In two countries I have worked in as a civil servant there has been no formal analysis of agricultural price policy within government for the last thirty years. Decisions have been made without the slightest attempt at economic analysis, without even the most basic data, and without the input of an economist qualified in this area. They have been based instead on such factors as Treasury's tax requirements or the state of the marketing board chairman's Swiss bank account. While this was perfectly obvious to most people, there was a string of academic papers examining the prices set in the past, and trying to determine what the policy objectives must have been, on the assumption that the decision making process was perfectly rational, perfectly informed, made by perfect economists, and based on purely economic criteria.

COMMUNICATION OF RESULTS

Even the best targeted, best designed and best implemented research is useless if its results are not communicated to the decision makers. The attitude of the Western universities to the Thesis Fodder countries is shown by the fact that they do not send their results to any of the university libraries or ministry libraries in the host country. Still less do they send them to the officials responsible for making decisions or preparing policy documents. Neither the officials nor the Third World academics would have access to the results through other channels like reading them in the journals: few of the relevant journals are available in a poor country, and photocopying is often physically and financially impossible.

It is possible for an expatriate civil servant to get the money for a bibliographic search and to obtain most of the papers over a few years by writing to the authors, though they are not always traceable, and some do not bother to reply. However, they refuse to supply books without payment, and even universities insist on payment for departmental reports. It is out of the question for an LDC to pay \$75 for a book which may or may not turn out to be useful, when it can hire an economist with a post graduate degree from a European university at annual salaries of from \$150 (Sierra Leone) to \$2000 (Malawi) per year. Even when money is available from aid funds, it is prohibitively expensive in time and trouble to get the foreign exchange allocation. In practice the LDC is deprived of the results of the research and can get no benefit from it.

Worse than this, researchers and consultants steal any reports, papers and consultants they can lay their hands on. For example, I gave Sierra Leone 30 copies of a consultancy report in 1982, and when I returned four years later, none could be found in the country. One consultancy firm left Pakistan at the end of a contract taking the Ministry's whole library on horticultural economics with it. The consultancy reports would have cost thousands of dollars apiece, but the real cost is the loss in productivity of a key department. In Zambia in 1964, before the era of consultants and researchers, the Ministry of Agriculture library was four times as big as it was in 1984, in spite of the vast quantity of research and consultancy produced since then.

In the end, the developing country is a net supplier of literature, with a large number of statistical bulletins, economic reports etc. being given away or sold at subsidized rates and irreplaceable documents being stolen, while nothing is received in return.

WHEN DO THE RESULTS COME?

For results to be useful, they must be communicated to the decision maker before the decision is made. In practice the researcher usually does not produce any results for several years, until the thesis has been presented and the paper or book has gone through the long process of refereeing, revision and publication. The academic's only concern is that the results are not prematurely released to his real audience, other academics.

CAN ANYONE UNDERSTAND IT?

If economics is to affect decisions, one version of the results must be written in a form that is comprehensible to the decision maker. After a lot of trouble I obtained the results of someone's 3 year study of price policy in Sierra Leone, only to find that it was in German and meaningless to anyone in the Ministry. Many of the other reports might as well have been written in German. They are gibberish to the administrators and politicians and hardly more comprehensible to civil service economists who specialized in slightly different areas of economics.

QUALITY OF RESEARCH

Most research is badly done. This is particularly serious where there is money for only one project on any topic so the results are not challenged or examined and may become the received wisdom.

Sometimes the object of the study is to give the researcher field experience and practice in survey work, so there is no economic analysis before or after the survey is complete.

The data constraints - lack of data on critical aspects and highly inaccurate data elsewhere impose serious limits on what forms of economic analysis are practicable. Economic analysis can be done and meaningful results produced under these constraints, but it is not easy.² However, it is to be feared that economists coming to a country with a given technique in mind are determined to use it, and if the right data series is not available, they will use another that might be positively correlated, and if there is no realistic calculation of elasticities, for instance, they will assume convenient constant elasticity curves.

Research designed and analysed in Western universities rather than in the host country ignores key features of an economy. For example, a household consumption study in a collapsing economy with plummeting real incomes and massive inflation is meaningless, as the figures are obsolete before they go onto the computer, yet I see people publishing analyses of ten-year old data from Sierra Leone in prestige journals.

Again, I have seen a researcher coming into a country for the first time with ready-designed questionnaires assuming individual ownership of cattle, only to find in a casual conversation, after a year of planning and pilot studies which did not reveal the problem, that there was communal ownership in that area, and his survey was completely invalid.

Poor survey work appears to be the rule. Western academics appear to have forgotten the accumulated wisdom of the market research industry. Questionnaires are produced that, even before translation into the local language are incomprehensible to anyone but the researcher himself. Too often they are collecting vast quantities of information on any factor they can think of, without having the slightest idea what they are going to do with it.

² See P. Bowbrick, **Effective Communication for Professionals and Executives**. London/Dordrecht/Boston, Graham and Trotman. ISBN 1-85333-081-7. 1988.

Research is particularly poor when Western universities send out undergraduates primarily to get field experience, carrying out a programme designed to be published, by a lecturer who remains in Europe. Work by an inexperienced, unsupervised PhD student may be little better.

REALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

At first sight it appears that the country is getting extra resources, free researchers and foreign exchange to cover expenses. However, Western researchers can and do use their financial power to bribe local researchers to switch from their own research and teaching, to being, in effect, research assistants and field supervisors to less experienced PhD students. They can do this by direct payments or giving research grants which poorly-paid Third World academics are in no position to refuse, or they offer them postgraduate courses with guaranteed PhDs in two years. The opportunity costs are enormous.

These bribes may also move other university resources from their correct use: fuel, computers, vehicles, enumerators, research students etc. all move with the academic to his new project. A small bribe may lead to a large shift in resources.

Similarly, a ministry may agree to transfer urgently-needed staff to a USAID-financed research project in the hope that it will attract big USAID funding where it is more urgently needed. I have seen a Ministry's economists, survey staff and other survey resources shifted to such a nutrition study. Apart from the fact that it showed no sign of producing useful or meaningful results in a reasonable time, it would not affect decisions, because, firstly, it was already assumed for all policy purposes that everyone was underfed, particularly those in certain areas, and, secondly, there were, quite literally, no economists left in the Ministry headquarters who could have converted any results into policy.

One EEC project provided funds to the local Central Statistical Offices of African countries for a Brussels-designed study of no conceivable value to that country, or indeed to the EEC. The CSO of one country was so desperate for funds that it had to accept. The cost was several months delay in preparing national accounts.

Another resource being used up is goodwill. The head of a marketing board is interviewed time after time by local and foreign undergraduates, PhD students, researchers and any number of IMF, World Bank, FAO, EEC, GTZ, etc teams and consultants. This makes it very difficult for the Ministry officials who have to work with him on a day-to-day basis to get his co-operation. Similarly, even a quarter of a century ago the peasants near Harare were oversurveyed to the extent that it was believed that their replies had ceased to be meaningful.

The diversion of academics and civil servants to such research projects has the same effect as other aid projects. Either government pays local costs during the project period, or it is landed with the full costs, including salaries at the end of the project. Either way, the country's tax base is overstretched, salaries fall for all public sector professionals, and poor morale and high job turnover become a serious problem.

EFFECTS ON LOCAL RESEARCH

Local academics naturally feel that what the visiting academics from prestige universities do is what they ought to be doing, and they would act accordingly even if there were no research grants and fees. They end up with a balance of research that would be totally unacceptable in the west. Fieldwork and survey work dominate, because Western academics go to Third World countries mainly because they can do it cheaply there. There are very few analytical economists indeed, because Western academics can do all the analytical economics they want at home, and it is a great deal more difficult and time consuming to do it in LDCs.

A look at any mainstream journal will show a very different balance, with very little survey work, and that used mainly as a prop for economic analysis.

By its nature, little of the work done in the Third World will be submitted to mainstream journals. It will be written up for PhDs and departmental reports, it will appear in regional subject journals, and will appear in those international journals specializing in this type of study. It is questionable how far they are ever submitted to the discipline of critical comments and refereeing by the economist outside the field who will ask awkward questions like "Does it matter?".

CONCLUSIONS

The remedy is first and foremost in the hands of the researchers themselves. They are undoubtedly committed, and I have no doubt that they will adjust their approach if they are aware of the dangers. Their university departments, too, are committed.

The financing agencies should take a much harder line on relevance, on competence and on communication of results. It is not enough to send half a dozen copies of a paper to selected libraries and academics.

The host countries should submit all such research proposals to a thorough, professional scrutiny. This means that agricultural economics research must be examined by officials in the economics divisions of the Ministry of Agriculture, and not by political officers in the Ministry of Education or Development.

REFERENCES

Bowbrick, P., **Effective Communication for Professionals and Executives**. London/Dordrecht/Boston, Graham and Trotman. ISBN 1-85333-081-7. 1988.