

CURRENT RESEARCH

The Meaning of Collaborative Research

A. S. Livingstone

The folk-lore of technical assistance is rich in anecdotes of self-seeking international consultants who exploit the circumstances of under-development for their own professional purposes. From bases deep in the recesses of western academia emerge strategies of development plans, designs of research projects, syllabi for training programmes, that reflect the historical, political and intellectual predilections of their sponsors rather than a proper understanding of needs and attitudes in poor countries. In this context, research projects, whatever their declared objectives, often appear to be designed principally to expand the resources of the research institution and to assist career development. A published PhD thesis or a circulated international agency report may be the first visible indication of the work and purpose of a former consultant in a developing country.

Is all this largely a legend, compounded of misunderstanding and distrust in both sponsor and recipient countries? A legend also arising from abrasive issues in past and present relationships between rich and poor countries? Any hope of fruitful research collaboration may well founder if such issues are not properly understood, although to understand the issues and the tensions they generate is not to redress them. Whatever the quality of our insight about the circumstances and needs of others, we suffer the predicament of Forster's people in *A Passage to India*—that we can be more easily forgiven for what we do than for what we are.

The terms 'sponsor' and 'recipient' betray an out-moded concept of the nature of relationships between technologically developed societies and those without such resources. Yet developing countries do possess resources of other kinds. Some are wealthy indeed in cash terms; many have unused reservoirs of professional talent; all have greater capacity for self-direction than is often recognised. The current trend in international aid programmes towards collaborative research projects is a healthy sign if it indicates a genuine wish to work with priorities and designs determined primarily by those whose lives and futures are most affected by the decisions—the governments and peoples of developing countries.

Attempts to establish cooperative ventures between indigenous and expatriate research teams are constrained, inevitably, by events of history that continue to influence the way they see their roles. In so many impoverished countries the domination of foreign occupation has given way, at 'independence', to a continued dependency relationship that perpetuates a psychological as well as an economic distance. Such events do not prepare either rich or poor for an equal association in joint research work. That some individuals and organisations seem able to surmount these historical and contemporary obstacles to mutual respect and help may be encouraging. For the present, doubts persist about our capacities for establishing and maintaining such shared responsibility.

A favourite exercise of the public media is the check-list game. Are you a successful lover? Have you the qualities for effective leadership? What kind of person are you to live with as boss, as husband, as wife? Who would you rather be than yourself? The participant replies to a number of questions that attempt to establish his or her rating on a continuum between perfect and execrable. Granting that such exercises may represent little more than biased answers to slanted questions, it may be worth examining what form such a check-list might take if we sought to determine the readiness of persons and institutions, on each side of the agreement, to undertake genuinely cooperative research. The following questions might be related:

1. Do I/we believe that research activity is indispensable to the effective planning of programmes and services within the context of national development?
2. Do I/we see priority being given to empirical research rather than to what is variously called pure, basic or fundamental research?
3. In developing a collaborative research programme, how much responsibility should be taken by us/them for the following: finance; staffing; planning; implementation; evaluation; publication.
4. Where circumstances may require it, have I/we the capacity to organise research projects within our own resources?
5. In preparing staff for research work within the field of development studies, should primary ex-

perience and training be obtained through programmes of overseas institutions?

These questions illustrate the issues surrounding any professed intention to pursue collaborative research. If, however, we were to pursue these questions in depth, some of the results might be a mixture of conventional responses, e.g., to question 1, and answers that supported a commitment to development research. We might also be offered replies that challenged our assumptions about the essential pre-conditions for effective research, collaborative or otherwise. These issues demand more thorough enquiry, although such research might itself be subject to the same constraints!

There are three different ways in which development research could be organised. First, the research institutions and research workers in developing countries might decide to go it alone. In another article in this issue, Dr. Boodhoo demonstrates the strength of this conviction in some quarters. Those who advocate this kind of approach must reckon with problems of meagre resources and limited experience in a professional area demanding certain basic competences for effective achievement of objectives. Second, what is often seen as the current domination of the research interests of aid donor countries might continue, albeit behind the facade of a professed support for the primacy of indigenous decision-making. Third, collaborative effort might establish research programmes in which the planning, implementation and evaluative activities recognise and demonstrate equality of partnership.

The first possibility, unilateral action in and by developing countries, may gather more momentum than is generally believed. If this occurs, the professional identity of numbers of research workers and research institutions would be at stake, in both rich and poor countries. From this situation it can be only a short step to parallel research programmes, one relying on local impetus and control, the other owing much of its existence to extra national resources; such separation has been common enough in other aspects of national development. At this point, one significant kind of research collaboration should not be

overlooked: that between research workers and institutions in developing countries, either on a bilateral or regional basis. Any decision by a developing country to go it alone does not necessarily mean isolation in the theory and practice of research, but rather a resolve to be free from the domination of various concepts and methodologies in the determination of research objectives and planning, and to forge a set of distinctive answers to national needs. In many places it may be felt that there can be no real hope of achieving this aim without at least some period of separation from the consequences of involvement with extra-national institutions and ideas.

The second possible type of research relationship, the continued domination of a country's research development by extra-national interests, is now internationally disavowed, however rife the practice may continue to be.

The third way, that of collaborative research, makes many new demands of the partners in the relationship. Briefly summarised, these include the following beliefs:

—that each partner is as intelligent, imaginative, and potentially able as the other;

—that each has the capacity to determine, in the light of his own circumstances, what he needs to do, how it should be done, and with whom he wishes to associate in fulfilling his aims,

—that each has as much to learn from the other, both in theory and practice.

If to some this set of beliefs should appear as obvious truths, there is no evidence that such recognition is widespread in inter-country relationships concerned with research development. If, on the other hand, they are held to represent incorrect views about the nature of people and events in other places, there is little prospect of fruitful collaborative research. If we are not convinced—on either side of the relationship—that these beliefs are valid, we cannot pretend to a form of research association which requires the acceptance of equality and mutuality as conditions for its successful fulfilment.