

THE INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

MEMORANDUM

To: Fellows in the U.K.
MH

Date: 19 September 1972

From: Dudley Seers

D.S.

I undertook to provide ESCOR with a suggestion for a new initiative in development research - in response to criticisms of existing facilities, mostly by Atholl and myself. The attached is the result; I would be grateful for criticisms, this week if possible.

Enc.

DS/JH

A Suggestion for a national research programme
in Development Studies

My starting point is that the total research in the field of development studies in Britain is inadequate in the following respects:-

- (i) volume
- (ii) disciplinary scope
- (iii) geographical balance
- (iv) coherence
- (v) depth
- (vi) links with practical work

(i) The great majority of social science research in this country is devoted to British problems.¹ Increased research in the development field would help build a professional corps in this field, strengthening work overseas; provide better-informed criticism of British policies towards the Third World; and help create a concerned, non-naive, public opinion. It would also be healthy for British social sciences; it would incidentally, but not unimportantly, lead to a better understanding of our own problems.

(ii) The research which is currently in progress in the development field is dominated by uni-disciplinary projects,² mostly in economics - projects which often ignore the crucial political and social context. The development field is distinguished by one special feature: it does not take institutions (economic, social or political) as given. Indeed it is precisely about the change in institutions. Research projects involving conventional economic (or for that matter sociological) variables are therefore in a technical sense trivial.

(iii) Most projects are concerned with either tropical Africa or India. The work does not therefore provide an adequate basis for assimilating and comparing the rich varieties of experience, or for identifying and analysing

¹ Reference: Report of SSRC Development Studies Panel

² This and point (ii) will be documented from analyses of the IDS Research Register.

common problems, or for constructing a theoretical framework on the level of either Third World or the world as a whole.

(iv) Generalisation is made more difficult to achieve by the very "bitty" nature of the total work. There is no central core, no relation between projects in various fields and various continents.

(v) Partly because of the characteristics just described, there is little critical examination of the concepts and statistical categories in use, most of which have been borrowed from industrial countries. Recent work e.g. on the ILO missions, has revealed the inadequacy of concepts such as 'unemployment', 'labour participation', etc.

(vi) Few of the projects arise out of practical problems, let alone from the requests of overseas authorities; not many are integrated with practical work; sometimes there is no provision for co-operation with overseas institutions; rarely is there provision for communicating the results to those who might make use of them.

Apart from the consequent irrelevance of much of the work, this means that development studies hardly offers young people a satisfactory career. Practical experience, research, teaching and theoretical studies are all essential to a proper career structure. They reinforce each other. They therefore need to be linked together.

In my view, a major new initiative, over and above existing facilities, is necessary to increase significantly the volume of research work, especially of inter-disciplinary research, and that this should be genuinely international, i.e. covering, at least in principle, all the parts of the Third World. The organisation to implement the programme should be sufficiently flexible to draw in several British universities and other institutes. The programme should be such that it enables (indeed requires) exploration of conceptual issues and also provides opportunities for technical assistance and training, to meet the other weakness indicated above.

Further the programme should draw on our special expertise in Britain, i.e. it should be focussed on one or more subjects which are recognised internationally as those where we enjoy some advantage. The choice of field should also take account of possible Xenophobic resistance overseas.

There are a number of ways of achieving these objectives, or at any rate many of them. It would be possible simply to create a new agency for funding development research which would welcome, and if necessary initiate, projects designed to correct the biases indicated above.

But there would be advantages in a narrower, more specific, programme. I will suggest, for the sake of starting discussion, one field of research, and the organisation needed to carry it out.

That field is data and research needs.

Speaking very generally, there is now an obvious disproportion between, on the one hand, the quality of data and on the other the sophistication of summary indicators and especially of the analyses built upon them.

These fields could be interpreted in a fairly broad way, but it would perhaps be best focussed on one area, the measurement of the various dimensions of poverty - the central problem of development.

Work in this field would meet the requirements indicated above, especially since it is flexible and could lead into the whole question of the information needed to adjust policies. It would open up issues of public administration as well as social and economic questions; it would be genuinely universal in its scope; it would provide a way of linking together many British centres; it would raise questions of concept and technique, including the major issues of how to adapt techniques to the requirements of particular problems; it would be very welcome to many overseas governments and international organisations and readily lend itself to technical assistance and training, including scope for young people.

This seems also to be a way of drawing on special British experience.

We have acquired much experience through setting up statistical offices in many parts of the world, and other professional work in this field. We also have some specialist skills in the technique of formulating research projects, arising out of work at home.

In particular, we have already (from the days of Charles Booth and even earlier) pioneered in the development of social and economic statistics, especially the measurement of poverty, and are continuing to do so.

I envisage a number of specialist centres in this country, setting up teams in response to an invitation to apply for resources, - e.g. Reading in the rural field, London in nutrition. Each team would carry out field research in co-operation with overseas institutions. This could include new sample surveys, but with the object primarily of pioneering new types of data collection, not of doing the work of the statistical office. Meanwhile, work would continue on basic conceptual problems, such as the measurement of rural and urban unemployment or nutritional needs, and on the problems of constructing usable coefficients and global indicators.

The scheme could be supervised by its own executive board, which would be provided with its own funds out of the aid programme. (These would be new resources, not a diversion of existing funds.) At least 50% of the members of the executive should be representative of (preferably appointed by) international organisations and "developing" countries - in this way one would ensure that the total programme was (in Rothschild terms) consumer-oriented. The programme would have a small secretariat, and initiate conferences, in collaboration with the UN Statistical Commission international agencies, and other interested parties, to exchange information on work in-progress and to discuss central issues.

DS/JH

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