

Getting More Facts Straight: Proposals for a Research Agenda

Introduction by Reginald Herbold Green and Michael Faber

The papers in this volume reveal a wide area of consensus on the definition of critical issues and on some of the short term initiatives needed to grapple with them. This represents a significant change from 1981-82 when the dialogue appeared to be far more highly polarised. This move toward a short run operational consensus is admittedly stronger among academics and other analysts than among bureaucrats and policy-makers, but it is by no means negligible even amongst the latter.

It is equally apparent that significant gaps in knowledge of what has happened in SSA generally, and what is happening now, still persist, and this is even more true concerning events at national and local level. This ignorance contributes to divergences in the interpretation of present realities, in analysis of their causes and in views as to whether what is currently happening is best regarded as one relatively homogenous crisis affecting SSA as a whole, or better analysed as a series of crises differently affecting specific countries or groups of countries.

Lack of knowledge affects analysis and impedes attempts to reach agreement on policy prescriptions in four ways:

- a. Certain topics are more amenable than others to policy prescription on the basis of readily ascertainable facts. For example, official grower prices for export crops are readily known, and analysis can be made of the implications of such prices for production. By contrast, it is difficult to measure the effect upon production of a breakdown in transport services or the absence of practicable field-tested research results. In consequence the first category of topics tend to receive disproportionate attention relative to the second.

- b. Topics on which data are particularly fragmentary attract limited analytical dialogue and receive little policy attention or priority on future research agendas. One could cite such questions as whether low official prices for food crops result primarily in lower production or increased parallel marketing? and how agricultural policies affect the majority of SSA food production devoted to producing household consumption?
- c. Confronted with widely divergent alternatives and equally shaky estimates of facts, any analyst is likely to use those least inconsistent with his own working hypotheses, rendering subsequent dialogue a confusing argument which at one level may be purely ideological and at another turns on whose 'facts' are least inaccurate.
- d. When analysts cannot agree either on conclusions or on facts, policymakers - not unreasonably - do not pay great attention to their advice and tend to operate on their own initiatives, responding to the relative pressures on them in an attempt to find 'easy' answers.

Some of the disagreements on facts at SSA level stem from the generalisations that are made from limited country experience. Quite contradictory statements about the micro economic structures, price policies and results in domestic food production may be true at country level - and yet may all be wrong as generalisations applying to the whole of SSA. Similar apparent contradictions can arise when such generalised assertions relate to different time periods. For example, SSA as a whole had lower economic growth in the 1970's than in the 1960's; but over 1976-79 it had its highest recorded four year period of growth. Indeed this is the only period during which the SSA growth rate exceeded the developing country average.

Systematic cross country comparative studies on specific structural or policy topics are particularly rare, and are even more rarely conducted across the Anglophone - Francophone - Lusophone divide. As a result it

is hard to identify which facts and analytical implications are general to SSA, which specific to certain groups of countries and which relatively country specific. This situation prevails whether groups are envisaged in terms of institutional membership (eg SADCC or ECOWAS members), climate (eg the Sahel), region (eg Eastern African) or in terms of their institutional/intellectual heritage (eg Anglophone, Francophone - with a possible Belgian sub-category, Lusophone).

It follows that a central research priority, and one directly relevant to improving the coverage and quality of analysis and policy advice, is simply getting the facts straight. It is not possible to analyse the effect of various influences on a country's food production, let alone to prescribe policy changes, when estimates of trend growth range from minus one to plus three per cent a year and when there are equally serious disagreements about what institutional structures exist, what marketing patterns prevail and about the ways in which stated policy has (or has not) been implemented. Equally the conclusions that can be drawn from such analysis are much weaker in the absence of comparable work on other SSA food production sectors.

From the papers in this volume it is possible to identify at least a score of key topics concerning which it is now urgent to get the facts straight. These topics are set out as the concluding section of the present paper. Their common purpose is to focus on areas in which key issues of analysis and policy arise but where the present data and information base are demonstrably so inadequate as to render much analysis nugatory and to make policy prescription a very tentative or high risk activity. Each topic in itself provides a cluster of sub-topics. All are amenable to - and most require - a variety of research approaches.

Some Issues As to Approach

The nature of the research agenda we identify and the character of the context in which research currently has to be performed in SSA together have several implications as to approach:

- a. The emphasis needs to be on applied research or upon research the results of which are potentially applicable.
- b. Selective emphasis should be placed on creating a base of individual country studies which will be so designed that much of the material, by topic, may be analysed comparatively; these need to be complemented by selected multi-country studies in which a single topic or problem is subjected to cross-country analysis; and one of multi-country topical studies based on more detailed country base work than has normally been used in the past.
- c. Coordination among researchers and research institutions must be deliberately fostered with special attention being paid to creating a leading role for African institutions, with recognition that any such effort will require cooperation among funding agencies, SSA Governments, and researchers themselves.

The applied/applicable approach will be especially important in the immediate future. There is very little disagreement that substantial elements in the post-independence (as well as the pre-independence) social and political economies of Africa are unsound and that, at least since 1979, the process of change has been predominantly in the wrong direction. Under such circumstances a strong case exists for focusing research on issues the correct understanding of which could lead to an improvement in the ability to manage these processes.

Equally important, research in Africa today usually requires government clearances and a degree of government support (access to data, to senior personnel's time, to official analytical and policy thinking) which are only likely to be forthcoming if governments themselves see the research as likely to be relevant to their problems and thus justifying allocations of those precious resources - senior persons' time, confidential knowledge and the power that such knowledge is presumed to embody.

There is likely to be a built-in tension when research seeks government backing and concentrates on seeking applicable results. It is not that governments are too restrictive as to research topics or that they have a research agenda markedly different from the one outlined here. Nor, in most cases, is there any overall unwillingness to consider facts, analyses and recommendations which may suggest substantial policy changes.

But three potentially serious problems do arise:

1. Governments want speedy results and definite proposals - their need to make pressing decisions on the basis of better information imposes a time scale shorter than that normally seen as appropriate for serious research.
2. Researchers dislike formulating recommendations strictly within the context of the major goals and policy constraints seen as binding by particular governments. This attitude may be intellectually valid, but it tends to limit the effectiveness of advice and may also create a hostile reaction based not so much on the proposals themselves but upon an assumed divergence in political viewpoint.
3. Access to confidential data and the presentation of recommendations to governments can and often does lead to a limitation on more general publication. This problem is by no means unique to SSA countries, and a formula can often be agreed by means of which most of the data, the basic analysis and the broad lines of any conclusions can be publishable fairly promptly.

The emphasis on a comparative approach involves several requirements. The most evident is the need for a series of systematic studies on a comparable basis of economic, political and/or social institutions, processes and structures in several countries. Arguably this kind of exercise - at least in its traditional form - may be too broad brush and shallow when the basic data are as weak and incomplete as at present. More narrowly focused comparisons of, eg, farm management at peasant

through state level or overall budgeting processes or foreign currency price (exchange rate) management might prove to be more practicable and might give rise to more applicable conclusions.

Studies undertaken primarily within one country can at the same time be made more useful for subsequent comparative work if there is some general comparability in key questions tackled and data utilised. A broad discussion of which are the key questions, leading to a degree of consensus - as in the agenda presented here - might help achieve such comparability.

Coordination may be the most crucial of these issues as well as the most complex and least readily manageable. At present several inefficiencies are evident:

1. Northern researchers conduct their work with commendable autonomy but limited knowledge of what others are doing, or indeed have done, and therefore with substantially less efficient division of labour, sequential building on past work or mutual support than would appear desirable.
2. African researchers are even more isolated, often within their own countries, from knowledge of or involvement in Northern research and from that being carried out or planned in other African countries. This chronic isolation is seriously exacerbated by lack of research funding in general and of foreign exchange in particular.
3. Academic - agency - government research interaction, information flow and interrelationships are uneven, particularly within SSA countries and in respect of SSA researchers.

If academic research is to receive substantial support and cooperation (and to have significant short and medium term influence on results) it needs to be policy and programme oriented. Mutual comprehension of goals and working agreement on agendas is important. Academic researchers do not take kindly to imposed topics or terms of reference,

agencies to proposals which cannot be seen to address their concerns, SSA governments to being handed ready made imports of policy oriented research complete with external funding and staff. Each group may seem to the others to be oversensitive, but each has a valid point and the only way to reduce tensions is through discussions of topics, approaches and personnel, that start early and continue throughout the project.

Exchanges of information, and the building of teams to do research - in the North, in Africa and among both - has evident risks and costs as well as potential. Coordination can become a full time activity, crowding out research. It could also weaken indigenous SSA research because money for conferences, travel, acquisition of documents and data processing is more available in the North than in Africa, and North-Africa communication is clearly easier and stronger than intra-African communication.

These dangers, although real, can be contained. Institutions and individuals working on the same topics can devise means to exchange information without large bureaucratic structures. Coordinated projects such as the Paris Conference from which this research agenda comes, can be arranged, as can specific comparative studies pooling country strengths. Research based at one institution can be designed so as to involve a network of individuals at other institutions.

Similar ideas and arrangements have been advanced in SSA. They deserve Northern support both in respect to the funding of foreign exchange costs and the provision - if desired - of technical assistance. For such coordinated projects to be effective, they are likely also to need some form of input from ongoing Northern research. Ideally this would be from those African participants in such projects who have had recent and relevant Northern experience. All too often there are no such participants, in which case supplementary channels by way of guests invited to SSA regional research conferences and the regular, planned provision of data to regional African data centres would seem worth exploring.

The issue of full African participation is perhaps the most difficult. Research, especially applied research, and, most of all, applied comparative research is an activity in which SSA is still, relative to other developing regions, far too dependent upon imports! This is a structural and institutional characteristic deserving serious attention. Twenty-five years after independence neither the colonial legacy nor the absence of competent African analysts is any longer, by itself, a satisfactory explanation.

Several contributory problems can be identified:

1. Many Northern researchers in SSA do not seek to collaborate substantively with SSA researchers while at the same time they gain better access to data and to important people than their African colleagues enjoy.
2. Some African researchers - perhaps in reaction to the phenomenon mentioned above - are not very eager to pool information or to work collaboratively with Northern researchers unless they can define and dominate the relationship.
3. Much Northern research on Africa is not made available to those institutions and individuals directly concerned even when they have facilitated it - an oversight that provides a foundation for accusations of data plundering and academic exploitation.
4. International academic conferences on African subjects often have very few African participants, especially in substantive roles, to a degree that no longer applies in respect of other regions of the Third World.
5. Similar recruitment patterns are reflected all too often in teams commissioned not only by the Northern and international aid agencies - that might be understandable - but in those commissioned by SSA

governments. Such patterns are not wholly explicable in terms of the personnel potentially available.

6. African academic personnel often believe they are excluded from consultancy contracts, and as a result from access to data and senior personnel, while SSA governments criticise these same academics for being unwilling to do applied (as opposed to more theoretical and speculative) research and for the uneven quality and late delivery of such work when they do attempt it.
7. Much African research is inhibited by limited access to data, by restrictions on discussion and publication, and by plain fear. When support is provided by governments for applied research, the result is often a critique of a pure ideological nature which appears to policy makers to provide negligible guidance as to what actually needs to be done.

Let it be said at once that most of these problems can be solved in the course of designing a specific, policy-relevant research project. Yet each needs to be kept in mind, because any individual research initiative can be a step either toward exacerbating or toward reducing such problems.

Collectively, if matters go wrong, these problems could not simply weaken or frustrate particular pieces of research but could create a climate in which SSA - Northern research collaboration would become increasingly difficult. On the other hand, step by step resolution of such tensions in particular cases can build up greater SSA researcher participation (including participation in project design and leadership), could create a more balanced "external trade in knowledge" and could build up a climate in which there is greater acceptance for different styles of research and different structurings of projects.

In the spirit of the foregoing remarks, the conference from which this volume springs contributed the following issues to what is intended to be

An Agenda for Further Policy-Relevant Research

General Themes

1. How can operational goals be set for stabilisation, rehabilitation, and adjustment programmes?
 What time frames are appropriate?
 Which are the leading key factors?
 How can adequate levels of domestic and external resources be mobilised and/or reallocated?

What can be learned from those SSA economies which have sustained/regained balance - such as Cameroon, Botswana?

2. What interrelationships exist among population growth, adequacy of food supply, employment possibilities, environmental degradation and basic worker and peasant living standards?

Can birth rates be reduced rapidly in the absence of lower infant mortality rates and rising basic living standards? Is population policy narrowly defined likely to have much impact unless and until these topics can be addressed?

How can environmental degradation - deforestation, erosion, desertification - be limited or reversed in the face of increasing numbers of increasingly poor people forced into marginal, cyclical and/or fragile ecological zones?

3. How can both the quantity and productivity of employment (including self employment) be increased?

What strategies to further these objectives are likely to be growth enhancing (especially in respect to food) and import-intensity reducing? Could they be furthered by devaluation? If so in conjunction with what parallel measures?

External Policies

4. Can export strategies be devised for different types and clusters of SSA economies?

How can these be made to relate to other, parallel reductions of import requirements by effective import substitution?

What roles can be played by:

Regional trade?

Regional industrialisation coordination?

5. How can cyclical volatility of export earnings be managed - for mineral producers as well as for producers of agricultural products?

Can relative price movements during boom be managed to avert massive incentives to producing non-tradeables, and massive disincentives to developing non-traditional exports or cost efficient import substitutes?

How can boom revenues be frozen and used to reduce the impact of subsequent slumps? Is a slump an appropriate period to seek diversification in production of tradeables or to concentrate on maintaining and expanding production of the dominant existing exports?

6. What are the strengths, weaknesses of alternative approaches to economic co-ordination/integration?
- a. preferential trade zone accompanied by monetary union (e.g. la Communente Economoque de l'Afrique de l'Ouest - CEAD).
 - b. a "classical" Preferential Trade Area on the path to a Common Market (e.g. the Economic Community of West African States - ECOWAS).

- c. an approach oriented towards the coordination of production (e.g. Southern African Development Coordinating Conference - SADCC).

Monetary and Fiscal

7. What are the comparative effects of different African monetary systems (notably the franc zone and the individual national monetary systems):
- On real exchange rates?
 - On fiscal balance?
 - On design of taxes (particular export taxes)?
 - On external borrowing?
 - On real prices for agricultural producers?
8. What are the basic causes of inflation in SSA?
 What are the costs of inflation? On whom do they fall?
 By what means and policies can inflation be brought under control? At what cost? To whom?
 With what extra injection of resources?
9. Does Government recurrent account balance need to be regained?
 If so, how?
- What criteria can be derived (in the context of scarce resources) for reducing, sustaining, expanding particular services?
 How can real revenue levels best be stabilised and restored?
10. What elements are critical in achieving real exchange rate adjustment?
 How can nominal devaluations be made to stick?
 Under what circumstances are massive initial devaluations desirable/ineffectual?
 Once adjusted, how can an exchange rate be managed to avert a return to over-valuation? Is that mainly an economic or a political question?

Public Sector: Private Sector

11. What is the proper balance between the "managed" economic sector and the private sector in structurally disadvantaged economies? What are the possibilities and roles of foreign private capital inflows?
12. What can be learnt from comparing successful with unsuccessful parastatals?

How can success be defined? If the answer goes beyond enterprise cash flow, how can multiple targets be defined and enforced operationally?

Under what circumstances are parastatal real costs lower than, about the same as, higher than those of actual or potential private enterprises in the same line of business?

Why is strategic forward planning capacity often weak even in otherwise successful parastatals?

13. What capabilities do SSA private sectors have? How can obstacles to their use be removed? How can management abilities be strengthened?

In what ways can opportunities open to small entrepreneurs be enhanced, and access to relevant resources (knowledge, credit, markets, sources of supply) be increased without "smother love"?

Agriculture and Food

14. What should be done to introduce more cost-effective improvement of agricultural and food data and information systems?
15. What basic services - by their presence or absence - most effect peasant productivity?

Health? education? pure water? irrigation?

How can we learn better and more from the users of these services?

How can their unit cost be reduced consistent with maintaining acceptable quality?

16. What gender divisions of labour exist in agriculture?

And in associated rural activities?

Are those visible or invisible to research and extension workers?

How can technology design be introduced to reduce women's workload? and increase their productivity?

How can extension work (in agriculture, health, water etc.) be made "female friendly"?

17. What forward strategies can SSA governments adopt to cope with future climatic adversities (especially drought cycles)?

Are foreign exchange and or food reserves practicable? Is irrigation? If so when and how?

Why did the medium term response to the early 1970's Sahel drought cycle actually increase the weight of people and livestock on drought cycle prone areas by the time of the 1980's cycle?

Manufacturing and Services

18. In the context of stabilisation and recovery what roles can be played by the reactivation of manufacturing capacity?

How can reactivation be phased into:

restructuring industry
 to be less import intensive?
 and more regionally integrated?

19. How can productivity in the manufacturing and service sectors be increased? What has caused high real labour costs in SSA?

Do workers like peasants respond negatively to economic disincentives - eg falling real wages? With what results?

Education and Research

20. Is the quantity versus quality issue in education crucial? How real are the trade-offs? Do educated and semi-educated unemployed reflect poor quality or inappropriate education?

How can specialised secondary education to meet middle level personpower requirements be increased in quality, appropriateness and quantity? Why has it been handled so badly by most ministries of education?

21. What needs to be done and, what can be done to support and strengthen the capacity of SSA independent research institutions to engage in policy dialogue?

What is the impact of aid on SSA governments', institutions' and analysts' capabilities to address their development problems autonomously?