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The role of developed country institutions: Is there a meeting point between the top-down and bottom-up?

Robin Grimbi

The need for client-oriented and participatory research and planning is unarguable; a large measure of responsibility for this rests with local institutions. But what role is there for international and developed-country research organisations, largely dominated by natural scientists, that are more development than academically orientated?

A major problem is that demand-led and participatory research is, almost by definition, specific to local conditions to a particular set of environmental and socio-economic conditions. Identifying constraints and opportunities for research and development is a particular skill that social scientists (including economists), preferably working alongside natural scientists, can provide but the task can only be done on site. Identifying needs, whether for research or development, depends on detailed local knowledge and understanding that an overseas-based institution is not best placed to provide.

A related problem particularly peculiar to some research organisations is that research orientation is supposed to be 'strategic' rather than specific to one particular country, location or community. This type of research can easily become driven by science or technology, or by the scientific interests of the individuals concerned. The chances of such research ending up as appropriate to the circumstances of any group of farmers or rural people, would therefore appear to be distinctly uncertain (though the value of an occasional breakthrough may be high).

If it is going to be increasingly difficult for outsiders to undertake bottom-up research and planning - and also if research is designed to

yield broad or strategic results - what is the role in research for international centres and developed-country based institutions? Clearly the answer will vary from case to case, but one possible way forward is to concentrate attention on strengthening the capacity of local institutions to do the work themselves. The need and opportunity would appear to be greatest in the public sector but NGOs could also receive support.

Appropriate assistance would depend, in the first instance, on an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the collaborating institution and would need to take full regard of the perspective and attitudes of that institution. However it is likely that assistance would be useful in some of the following ways:

- strengthening systems and methods for diagnosing problems and identifying development and research needs and priorities;
- facilitating interdisciplinarity, through working with common (development) objectives and establishing structural links between disciplines. Economics and socio-economics should be at the beginning and end of research and planning;
- strengthening multi-way information flows between farmers, researchers, extension agents and rural developers;
- feeding back information from the field to natural scientists working at a strategic level (and interested in developing principles, processes and methodologies);

- making available information on new science and technology. This includes facilitating information flows through training, seminars, publications and networks;
- strengthening systems for monitoring and evaluation of research and development;
- anticipating spontaneous structural changes and the effect of these changes on research and planning needs;
- anticipating technological developments and analysing the place of these developments on farming systems (with a view to suggesting priorities and non-priorities); and,
- improving the focus of research by identifying key questions that should be addressed - by policy-makers, research managers, extension managers and, of course farmers.

But for international and developed-country institutions to consider institution-strengthening as their primary role would require in some cases a radical change in direction and attitude.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Robin Grimble, Natural Resources Institute, Central Avenue, Chatham Maritime, Chatham, Kent ME4, UK. |
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