An Observer Writes

Colin Rosser of the Ford Foundation’s office in Jakarta recently attended in Bali the third working meeting of researchers in the IDRC-supported cooperative regional development project in Southeast Asia. He subsequently drafted an inter-office memo, which he has kindly given The IDRC Reports permission to publish as an illustration of how others in the development field see the Centre’s activity.

Since this is an interesting example of a different contribution by another aid agency (IDRC) in a field in which the Foundation appears to have a growing interest, I thought a short note on how this project is organized and on what its strengths and weaknesses appear to be would be a useful addition to the Foundation’s record.

The structure of the project is simply explained. Four country ‘teams’ (Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, and Nepal), each based in a national research institute, were invited by IDRC, with full IDRC financial support, to select a ‘region’ within their respective countries for intensive ‘planning-oriented’ regional research over a two-year period.

The four teams met at Baguio at the commencement of the project to discuss the characteristics of the four regions selected for study, to exchange views on the identification within these regions of the development problems requiring regional research analysis within a planning and policy framework, to design a research timetable and discuss research objectives and methodologies.

After this first meeting in the Philippines, subsequent working meetings were held in Thailand and Indonesia to review progress and exchange experience, with a final meeting to be held in Nepal in November, 1974 to discuss the final research reports.

The total cost of the project, provided by IDRC, is $400,000 over the two-year period (or $50,000 a year for each country team).

Several useful points can be made about this project format. First, while the emphasis is on regional research, the pre-occupation in each case (which clearly came out at the Bali meeting) was on the complex relationship between regional development research and regional development policy — i.e. the use of research for regional planning.

Second, there was much conscious stress on the fact that in each case this is regional research being undertaken by Asians themselves, unassisted by foreigners, determining their own regional research priorities (as they see them in terms of their respective countries) and their own methodologies.

IDRC’s role seems purely administrative (apart from its finance) with no professional contribution. This note of self-reliance was a particularly noticeable feature of the Bali discussions. For all the theoretical and methodological weaknesses which the individual team presentations exposed (though these were a

Exposé sur le Centre

Colin Rosser, du bureau de la Fondation Ford à Jakarta, assistait récemment au troisième atelier de travail des chercheurs réunis autour du projet coopératif de développement régional dans le Sud-Est asiatique financé par le CRDI. Il a par la suite rédigé une note à usage intérieur qu’il a aimablement autorisé le CRDI Informe à publier pour montrer comment les activités du Centre sont vues par d’autres qui oeuvrent dans le domaine du développement.

Il s’agit d’un intéressant exemple de la façon dont un autre organisme parrain (le CRDI) contribue dans son propre style à la recherche dans un domaine où la Fondation est de plus en plus présente. J’ai pensé qu’il serait utile de verser à nos dossiers une courte note sur ce projet, son organisation, ses points forts et ses points faibles.

La structure même du projet est simple. Quatre “équipes” nationales (Indonésie, Thaïlande, Philippines et Népal) ayant chacune pour siège un institut national de recherche ont été invitées par le CRDI — avec son aide financière totale — à choisir une “région” au sein de leurs pays respectifs en vue d’une recherche régionale intensive, dans le domaine de la planification et ce pendant une période de deux ans.

Les quatre équipes se sont rencontrées à Baguio lors de la mise en œuvre du projet pour définir les caractères des quatre régions choisies pour étude, pour échanger des vues sur la détermination des problèmes de développement régional qui commanderaient une recherche dans le cadre d’une planification et d’une politique, pour établir un calendrier et pour discuter d’objectifs de recherche et de la méthodologie appropriée.


Le coût total des études menées au titre de ce projet s’élèvera à 400,000 dollars pour les deux années (50,000 dollars par an pour chaque équipe nationale). Les frais seront supportés par le CRDI.

Plusieurs points peuvent être utilement dégagés du cadre de ce projet d’études. Premièrement, bien que l’accent ait été mis dès le début sur la recherche régionale, la préoccupation dans chaque cas était (la réunion de Bali l’a bien montré) portait sur la relation complexe entre recherche pure et recherche appliquée dans le cadre du développement régional, autrement dit sur les moyens politiques d’appliquer les découvertes de la recherche.

Deuxièmement, les participants ont ressenti profondément et consciemment que chaque cas à l’étude relevait d’une recherche régionale entreprise par les Asiatiques eux-mêmes sans l’assistance d’étrangers et qu’ainsi ils déterminaient leurs propres priorités de
good deal less than I expected), this strong sense of working things out for themselves, unassisted by foreign mentors, seemed to me a healthy and encouraging sign: and one of the strong points of the project format.

Third, the intention of the four-country participation is clearly not comparative research (of the familiar type) and this is a point that needs some stress. Though all the field efforts fall under the general heading of ‘regional planning research’ no attempt has been made to select ‘comparable’ regions in the four countries — or to select similar development problems for analysis or to adopt a common methodological approach.

Certainly common themes emerged in the Bali discussions, as one would expect, but the object of the exercise is cooperative discussion, the presentation of individual cases for critical comment by fellow Asian professional concerned with similar attempts at research understanding, rather than with strict comparative analysis — and platitudinous generalization. This approach, I thought, facilitated useful case-oriented discussion based on the voluminous and specific progress reports of each team.

Having attended far too many high-flown conferences on ‘regional planning’ based on general theoretical papers, I thought this working meeting concerned with specific (if far from identical) case studies of the real world is something of a pleasant change. It is an approach, given our interest in the exchange of experience among developing countries, that the Foundation might well find ways of encouraging in future programs in this and other fields.

The minor note of professional competitiveness between the four teams (in this case) also seemed a

Building a road in Nepal

Construction d’une route au Népal
healthy stimulus to the raising of research standards — and not least to the maintenance of the project timetable, punctuated as this is by the working meetings at which progress has to be demonstrated to one’s colleagues in the other country teams.

Fourth, while there is no formal training ingredient in this project (other than the indirect do-it-yourself ‘training’ experience of regional planning research that the project provides for those directly involved), there was a clear interest in the Bali meeting in the subsequent use of these case studies as a contribution to the base materials for regional planning training programs in the individual countries concerned (notably and most strongly in the Philippines and Indonesia).

It is clear that the individual case studies could provide a valuable contribution, if published with this intention, to training programs in regional development planning and also as useful examples of policy-oriented regional development research.

While the greater part of the working meeting at Bali (perhaps too great a part) was taken up by the four country presentations and related discussions, it may be of interest to note that through these discussions — and particularly in the sessions devoted to general assessment of progress achieved — the following themes dominated the discussions in the sense of being perceived as being of fundamental importance to all four regional research studies (different as they were in other respects):

1. The governmental structure of decision-making in regional development;
2. The methodology, and usefulness, or regional income studies;
3. Past investment, public and private, within the regions;
4. Central-place theory.

While none of these themes was adequately discussed at the Bali meeting, it seemed clear the four detailed research studies of selected regions within the respective countries did form a very useful practical basis for the exchange of views and experience among the four country teams — with some convergence of views on the relationships between regional planning (and research) and development action. The major and common weakness of all four studies seemed to me the failure to work out the theoretical or conceptual basis of the studies being undertaken as a clear basis for selective data collection.

Comprehensive regional planning is too easily interpreted as requiring comprehensive data collection — i.e. data on everything. But, subjected to the situation of mutual criticism at these useful working meetings during the course of the exercise, each team appeared to be going through a very useful learning process.

In this respect, the format of this project is of considerable interest to those of us concerned with the building of indigenous skills in this field. I particularly liked the marked absence in this project of foreign technical assistance. Whether the project format is a useful idea or not (I think it is), it should perhaps be noted that the particular organization of the Foundation ‘country programs’ in Asia and the Pacific is not conducive to the organization of projects of this type.

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