ON THE CIRCUIT IN EAST AFRICA

A.A. LAQUIAN

Dr A.A. Laquian, former Associate Director of IDRC's Social Sciences Division, spent two years based in Nairobi directing a project aimed at contributing to the development of young social scientists and research institutions in East Africa. In this article he gives us a personal account of those two years and provides a candid overview of the state of social science research in the region as well as of the most pressing needs.

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Jambo! The cheerful note of the universal East African greeting broke the morning chill around a thorn enclosure housing a Samburu family deep in Kenya's northern frontier.

An answering jambo from a hut within the enclosure. A man came out, wrapped in an orange robe, a business-like knobkerrie discreetly tucked in its folds. A Samburu guide quickly informed the man that a person from a foreign country wanted to talk to him. His long explanation was met with stony silence. The guide explained that the foreigner was doing a research project on living conditions of the Samburu. More silence, tinged with suspicion. The guide offered the man a pinch of tobacco. He handed candies to half a dozen children who had shyly gathered around. The Samburu in the orange robe smiled, made himself comfortable by the fire tended by one of his wives, and signalled his willingness to answer questions.

Another IDRC project was launched in East Africa. I was the "person from a foreign country," and as director of the Social Sciences Development Project (SSDP) in East Africa, my task was to encourage social science research in the region. The research projects covered such varied subjects as the changing role of women among seminomadic tribes in Kenya, the impact of urbanization on former pastoralists in the new Tanzanian capital of Dodoma, the impact of World Bank sites and services projects in squatter areas of Lusaka, and the implementation of the tribal grazing lands policy in Botswana. So varied and far-flung were the projects supported under SSDP that I earned the name "circuit rider," a term borrowed from travelling pastors and judges common in America's pioneer days. My appointment to a job with such an unlikely name best typifies the idrc style of technical assistance. In Nairobi, people were hard put to figure out what a Filipino, who had been trained in the United States, was doing as a "circuit rider" in Africa, supported by a Canadian agency. The answer was in the SSDP's objective — "to contribute to the development of younger social scientists in East Africa."

To achieve the SSDP's goal, I was given rather broad authority: I could recommend small research grants for young scholars, support seminars and conferences, fund publication and dissemination of research results, donate books and equipment, teach courses and give lectures, and lead young social scientists in field research studies. The first two years of the project were experimental. The idrc did not want to come to East Africa with preconceived notions of what had to be done to help develop the social sciences.

FLYING THE CIRCUIT

The 2-year period between June 1977 to July 1979 was not a particularly auspicious time to be circuit riding in East Africa. The week I arrived in Nairobi, East African Airways was disbanded. Soon after, the East African Community composed of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda was dissolved, and the border between Kenya and Tanzania was closed. The Ugandan border was open, but stories of atrocities were enough to discourage anyone from going in. Ethiopia and Somalia were embroiled in a war over the Ogaden. In Southern Africa, punitive raids were launched by Rhodesian forces deep inside Zambian territory. Finally, Tanzanian and exiled Ugandan forces invaded Uganda and overthrew Idi Amin.

The climate for social science research in East Africa was also not conducive to development. In relatively progressive countries like Kenya and Tanzania, more than two decades of local university and international training had created a body of social scientists with the skills to do research. Even here, however, scholars found themselves too involved in teaching, administration, and consultancies to do much research. Conditions were much worse in the small landlocked countries of Southern Africa. There, expatriates often made up 70 percent of university faculties, and while they were involved in research, the results were often pub-
lished abroad and not available locally. Most universities saw teaching as their primary role. Research was not encouraged. University financial administration was not geared to managing research funds. International research funds were also inequitably allocated.

Despite these difficulties I was able to help develop a number of projects. Carried out by younger social scientists, the grants were relatively modest, averaging about $5000 each. They usually paid the researchers, assisted by a number of research associates and assistants. Projects rarely lasted longer than a year. All of them required that the younger students be trained in the actual processes of field research.

Being both personally and professionally involved in all the projects, I gave lectures to researchers, often in safari camps around a bonfire, under the stars. The research seminars were held in unlikely places. One session dealing with correlation analysis linking a Christian education with female circumcision and prostitution was held, appropriately enough, in the back room of a bar in northern Kenya. Another session analyzing health statistics that showed venereal diseases as second only to malaria in incidence among nomadic pastoralists was held in a Roman Catholic mission.

Personally attending to all these small projects located in a dozen countries really meant flying the circuit. Jets, buses, Land Rovers and sometimes, just walking, took me out of Nairobi almost 60 percent of the time. The students and researchers who joined in the field work, however, learned how to do research in the best possible way.

LEARNING BY DOING

I believed that research skills cannot be adequately taught in the classroom, unless that classroom is the big real world. I taught a graduate course in research at the University of Nairobi, but every opportunity was taken to take students on field work. Other researchers supported by ssdp were also encouraged to do the same.

Research traditions in East Africa have primarily been set by Europeans interested in ethnography, anthropology, history, and linguistics. Many African researchers, for example, are studying such topics as the historical background of Arabic influence on the coast, the spread of Swahili into the interior, the ceremonial uses of royal poetry among the Bamba, the deciphering of aboriginal rock paintings in caves around Kondoa, or the practice of polygamy and bride wealth among the nomadic Pokots. The techniques are participant observation or gathering of oral histories. The use of social surveys, quantitative techniques, and statistical analysis are often considered inappropriate, if not irrelevant.

Teaching quantitative methods in research was also hindered by the poor mathematics background of students. Often, graduate students were innocent of knowledge of even the most basic statistical approaches. Courses in mathematics, when given, stressed make-work exercises following standard formulas. The object of teaching research methods therefore required more than showing how certain data gathering or data analysis techniques were used. Their relevance to reality and the cultural foundation of social science concepts had to be demonstrated as well.

Taking young researchers out on field trips was not a problem. They saw it as an exciting safari, a chance to get out of the drugged lessons of the classroom. Formulating questionnaires and interview guides was also no problem, although linguistic challenges arising from the many tongues spoken in East Africa abounded. Interviewing forced young researchers to lose their shyness. Often, it also showed how far removed and alienated they had become from the basic foundations of their culture. University students in most East African countries usually come from middle and upper income groups and thus they often found it difficult to adjust to the lack of comforts in the field. Some had also developed attitudes of superiority, which pastoralists and villagers quickly sensed, thus creating some difficulties.

Happily, there are a number of trained AIC researchers in the universities who could take the time to help train younger researchers under apprenticeship arrangements. These researchers were given ssdp grants that enabled them to pursue their research interests. Part of the deal was that they would take young indigenous researchers under their wing and show them research techniques. In a few cases, the researchers were international visitors. In others, they were nationals of African countries other than the place where the studies were conducted. Thus, a few Ugandan professors living in exile became primary researchers in ssdp projects in Botswana, Tanzania, and Zambia. Even a national tragedy such as the exodus of trained Ugandans from their country therefore, could be turned into an advantage when the resources were available.

PIGGYBACKING

The ssdp, with only $25 000 a year for operations and activities, could only provide modest grants. However, idrc was supporting projects requiring almost a million dollars in East Africa, on such topics as an evaluation of the decentralization program of Tanzania, a study of rural development in Kenya, the impacts and effects of sites and services, projects on former nomads and slum dwellers in Zambia, and the resettlement of nomads in Somalia. Idrc’s human resources development program also provides scholarships for researchers involved in projects. In monitoring and managing idrc projects, therefore, I was on the look-out for young African researchers who could benefit from further training.

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