The Potentials for Co-operative Research

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An International Development Research Centre Perspective

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In addressing myself to the question "The Potential for Cooperative Research", I would like to observe at the outset that there is at the International Development Research Centre a strong determination to foster and promote cooperative research for reasons that are no doubt similar to those which influenced the conveners of this meeting to place consideration of this subject on the agenda. The need for -- aside from the desirability of -- cooperation has become evident. The countries of Asia share many problems, and the solution to these problems reasonably calls for the pooling of all available resources. The interdisciplinary nature of many development problems calls for the sharing of knowledge and experience. And hopefully cooperation may prevent costly and unnecessary duplication and waste. Further, cooperative research, carefully delineated, may go a long way toward allaying the fears and suspicions which have grown during the past decade -- the period when actions were taken, and decisions made reflecting priorities infrequently those of the developing country.

But however much we extol the virtues of cooperative research as the new and preferred style of operation early in this second development decade, we must recognize that there are obvious limitations, limitations which must be respected. The potential benefits from cooperative research must be carefully assessed with an awareness of the difficulties that may arise because of the uneven development of knowledge, skills, and resources among cooperating institutes, or the fact that interests are not identical but often competitive, or the need to stand apart from the age-old political difficulties existing among neighbouring countries -- boundary disputes, ethnic rivalries, personal feuds -- which might hamper effective cooperation. I am suggesting that cooperative research should not be pursued simply for its own sake, but fostered when conditions are right, i.e. when the interaction among researchers and institutions can be beneficial, when costs are high and therefore best shared, or when potential results will benefit the partners.
It is now recognized that research and training assistance in the past which may have been beneficial for both donor and recipient countries have often been negated by controls and qualifications so often an ubiquitous adjunct to assistance. We believe that through true cooperation and partnership such pitfalls can be avoided. This does not mean that responsibility should be abandoned by donor institutions. The developmental experience of technologically advanced countries has some relevance to the problems faced by less developed countries, and the oft cited fear that ideas and values may be imposed by the former over the latter should not inhibit the exercise of professional judgment. At a more practical plane, aid institutions spend public funds. They have a duty to their own tax payers to make certain that public monies are spent legally and properly. And proper care can be exercised even while permitting the developing country partner to exercise the control and authority over the research and the resources required to do the job.

As I speak from the view of the International Development Research Centre, it may be useful to place before you the objectives of the Centre as they have been stated in the Act which created it. "The objects of the Centre are to initiate, encourage, support and conduct research into the problems of the developing regions of the world and into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions, and, in carrying out those objects:"

(a) to enlist the talents of natural and social scientists and technologists of Canada and other countries;

(b) to assist the developing regions to build up the research capabilities, the innovative skills and the institutions required to solve their problems;

(c) to encourage generally the coordination of international development research; and

(d) to foster cooperation in research on development problems between the developed and developing regions for their mutual benefit."

As we strive to achieve the objectives for which the Centre was created, we recognize that cooperative ventures among persons and institutions in the developing regions and cooperation between these institutes and institutions in developed countries will contribute to the realization of these goals.
But we recognize too that there are problems that are, or have been, almost inherent in the donor/recipient relationship. These arise from differing priorities reflected in what researchers in developing countries consider important and researchable and what the aid-giving institutions see as relevant and manageable. There is the fear that values held by donor countries may undermine and supplant those held by people in recipient countries. There are emotional charges of neo-colonialism, of research safaris by Western consultants and experts, of political and ideological quid pro quos in the terms of aid. Finally, there are problems arising from what has been called by the President of the IDRC "mismatches in competency and dedication brought to the collaborative task by the representative of each culture."

The Centre, we trust, will make a significant and sometimes unique contribution to the field of development research as it fulfills its role of encouraging, fostering, initiating and supporting such research. In our view, cooperative research and training efforts are most likely to yield fruitful results if the following conditions exist: (a) if research and training activities reflect the priorities of the persons and institutions in the developing countries, (b) if the developing country participants have been full partners in determining the nature of the research, (c) if the research undertaken seeks answers beyond the unique national problem, (d) if research results can expect to influence policy and/or be translated into action programmes, and (e) if the developing country institutions are prepared to undertake the burden and responsibilities of full partnership.

This listing of Centre criteria is far from exhaustive, but does provide in inkling of what the Centre seeks as it ventures forth to fulfill its mandate.

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