

**Dilemmas of Social Science Policy Research in Africa:
Reflections on Experiences of the Human Sciences Research Council in South Africa**

Roger Southall
Executive Director,
Democracy and Governance,
Human Science Research Council.

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Social Science Policy Research in Africa

Contemporary Africa is faced by a huge catalogue of desperately pressing social needs. As NEPAD's foundation documents reads:

In Africa, 340 million people, or half the population, live on less than US\$1 per day. The mortality rate of children under 5 years of age is 140 per 1000, and life expectancy at birth is only 54 years. Only 58 per cent of the population have access to safe water. The rate of illiteracy for people over 15 is 41 per cent. There are only 18 mainline telephones per 1000 people in Africa, compared with 146 for the world as a whole and 567 for high income countries (Paragraph 4).

Child and juvenile death rates, it goes on to say, are 105 and 169 per 1000 respectively as against 6 and 7 per cent in developed countries, and life expectancy is 48.9 (and falling) against 77.7 in developed countries.

The recently released UNPD Development Report for 2002 elaborates this message but is more forthright in asserting that in Sub-Saharan Africa, at least, human development is regressing. The proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day was about the same at the end of the 1990s (47%) as at the beginning. In Sub-Saharan Africa, only South Africa has a less than 10 per cent incidence of child malnourishment, and in six countries that figure is more than 40 per cent. 40 out of the 44 Sub-Saharan African countries, with 93% of the region's population, grew at less than 3.7 per cent per capita GDP per annum during the 1990s, the somewhat optimistic rate reckoned necessary to achieve the Millennium Development goal of cutting by half the number of people living in poverty by 2015. Indeed, the UNDP Report maintains that Sub-Saharan Africa ended the millennium 5 per cent poorer than in 1990.

It is conditions such as these which have conventionally framed the debate about social science research in Africa. As a political scientist, I can go back, for instance to a presentation made by Eme Awa (1983), who after dismissing the dangers of African social scientists engaging in work that is supposedly "value-free", cited approvingly a statement that "Social science theory fails us when it does not focus upon our pressing problems". Hence he rapidly arrived at threefold categorization of research activities that should have immediate relevance to Africa's condition. First, there is basic research in connection with methodological questions and the foundations of political analysis. Second, there was research centred around "fundamental problems" such as ethnicity, revenue allocation, voting behaviour (and we could add conflict, violence, corruption and so on and on). Third, "issues of the moment" relating to the functioning of particular institutions, often governmental, the objective of such research being to analyse problems and suggest solutions.

At one level, Awa's approach represents a recasting of the related debates about the role of African universities: should they pursue 'pure' research, whether or not it is relevant to society's immediately pressing needs, or should their research be 'applied', that is, oriented to addressing pressing societal issues? And what are the implications of any suggestion that social scientists 'should' or 'must' do certain types of research (or equally importantly, suggestions concerning what they should *not* be allowed to do) for academic freedom in general, and the rights of the individual? However, although such debates provoke fundamental philosophical questions (and hence cannot by their nature be given a definitive answer), I would suggest that the terrain on which such battles is fought out in Africa have shifted considerably over the last few decades.

First, most social scientists – of whatever ilk- are increasingly wary of accepting a dichotomy between 'pure' and 'applied' research as if only the latter was 'relevant'. As Enver Motala (2002) has recently observed (in an HSRC

Council Research Committee seminar), the debate about the relative roles of what he terms 'scholarly' and 'critical' research are inseparable from the question of *research accountability*. Most certainly in Africa there are not unlimited public resources for research, so it cannot be presumed that 'anything goes'. The state and public agencies do have a right to value-for-money. Even so, scholarly and critical research should not be posed as standing in a contradictory relationship. First, it is wrong to assume that government (or other societal bodies) do not have use for, or need, proper theorization and scholarly critique. (As has been remarked in other contexts, 'bad theory kills'). Second, although there is a strong relationship between applied research and the work of government, the concerns of government are no less the concerns of communities and social organizations. Third, the concern of doing any research whatsoever can hardly be to produce work which lacks theorization, scholarship and relevance, and no responsible or democratic government or agency should ignore the importance of serious enquiry. Hence whilst social science should in no way stand 'outside society', there remains the need for 'intellectual space' to go beyond the 'immediate and pragmatic', and it is most certainly unhelpful to polarize the roles of 'research' and 'theory'.

The second major development which has shaped the way in which social science enquiry has come to be a recasting of the meaning of academic freedom. Traditionally, as expressed, for instance, in the constitution of the old University of East Africa, this referred to universities right to "determine who may teach, what may be taught and who may be admitted" (Southall 1974:98). Yet African universities, as with numerous universities elsewhere, were soon being subject to the demands of government, who funded them and had manpower needs, to structure the types and number of students they admitted, whilst various forms of pressure, whether direct (in terms of localization programmes or financial requirements) or indirect (immigration policies) made inroads into universities' autonomy to select "who may teach". Indeed, such was the legitimacy of the principle of such demands (versed, for instance, in post-apartheid South Africa in terms not only of the abolition of legalized racial restrictions to universities but also by pressures to render the more privileged 'historically white universities' representative in terms of their student populations and staff profiles) that, essentially, the traditional liberal paradigm of academic freedom has become increasingly meaningless, except in so far as refers to the right of academics to the freedoms of inquiry and social criticism, and of universities to provide a forum for the exercise of such rights. Indeed, whereas there was some implication in some early demands that social scientists should – in pursuit of 'relevance' – follow only particular lines of enquiry (eg socialism is good, capitalism is bad), assaults upon social criticism by authoritarian governments, which often led to direct action against critical academics (dismissal, imprisonment and so on) has only led to a reinforcement of the valuation of the liberties of individual academics, and indeed of individuals outside universities, in terms of the freedoms of speech and thought, within the wider context of wider popular demands for democracy in Africa.

However, accompanying the contemporary redefinition of academic freedom has been the major change that has taken place in the funding of social scientific (and other) research, alongside a massive shift of research *outside* the universities. On the one hand, increasing financial restrictions imposed upon universities (for a mix of reasons) have forced academics to look to external non-government sources – whether foreign governments, international organizations, aid agencies, foundations or private capital – to provide them with the material resources they need to undertake research. On the other, a host of organizations which themselves undertake research as one or more of their core functions have sprung up outside the universities, and have themselves begun to provide highly effective competition for scarce research funding from both government and non-governmental sources. Yet whilst this shift (which is a global one) has in the African context provided a hugely valuable underpinning to the development of civil society and political plurality, and hence to the democratization of society, it has brought in its wake increasing concerns that finance, rather than social need, is becoming (if ever it wasn't!) the major driving force behind research. And in Africa, that raises the further issue that research agendas may be increasingly being imposed by external forces, which even if they have benevolent intentions (which may not always be the case), cannot or do not themselves have the imprint of democratic legitimacy or African ownership.

The dilemmas posed to research by the above developments are highly familiar to all scholars, whether they are inside or outside universities. There is clearly no one way in which they can be, or should be, addressed. However, one way of exploring them is provided by examining the contemporary HSRC.

The HSRC: "Social Science with a Difference"?

The Human Sciences Research Act of 1968 established the purpose of the HSRC as being "to provide for the promotion of research and the extension of knowledge in the field of human sciences" either at the request of the responsible government minister, or by its own initiation or that of other "persons and authorities". The objects are defined as being to:

- Promote, support and co-ordinate research
- Advise the minister of research priorities
- Distribute the results of research
- Facilitate and evaluate the implementation of the results of the research
- Stimulate training in research, and

- Place the full spectrum of disciplines in the human sciences at the disposal of South Africans.

There is clearly nothing particularly objectionable about this mandate as it is stated, and that is indeed why the HSRC has been able to continue acting under the 1968 Act, without any difficulty, after 1994 (although a new Act is destined to be formulated in the near future). Equally clearly, therefore, any 'problem' with the 'old' HSRC operated related to the political context in which it operated (for instance, the obvious point that according to the Act the HSRC was apparently not under obligation to provide its findings at the disposal of those Africans who had been deprived of their South African citizenship by the 'independence' of their 'homeland') Hence what is unstated by the Act is, in essence, that the HSRC was being established under the apartheid government because the social scientists who had most influence, whether academically or politically, tended to be located in the liberal, English speaking universities, and used those as a platform for assault upon apartheid assumptions and policies. Such was the situation that, in effect, the HSRC came to be deemed, rightly or wrongly, as the handmaiden of government and the body of its work, as directly serving government and thereby scientifically suspect. Although in probability the reality on the ground was far more nuanced, working for the HSRC was none the less widely deemed to be 'politically incorrect'.

It was this heritage that the HSRC in democratic South Africa has been forced to confront. The full story of the transition process to an organization which now pronounces itself as one which is dedicated to "social science that makes a difference", ie one that is dedicated to serving the needs of *all* South Africa's people, especially the poor and those otherwise disadvantaged by the previous regime, cannot at present be told, not least because it is still far from complete. However, key thrusts of the transformation, and the way that the HSRC is attempting to bridge the gap between its researchers and the wider policy community are as follows:

The re-orientation of organizational goals and development: The immediate curiosity about the HSRC has always been its status as a 'Research Council'. What are the characteristics of such an animal, and how do they compare to universities? Traditionally, research councils, where they have existed, have been conceived of as largely undertaking government-driven research, usually in fields like agriculture or medicine. Whilst this cannot have absolved them from normative or political dilemmas, they have not usually been conceived of as possessing the 'autonomy' to which, traditionally, universities have aspired. For the HSRC, given its prior reputation for subservience to apartheid ends, the dilemma has been particularly acute, because there has been clear recognition that if 'transformation' were now to mean merely having swapped one political master for another then, even if the post-apartheid government can claim democratic credentials, this would immediately become problematic, for it is recognized that *political subservience* and the production of credible research, capable of withstanding independent external scrutiny, simply do not go together. At the same time, although established formally and legally as a body 'independent' of government, the HSRC (like South Africa's other research councils) reports to the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, which provides government funding. Hence the dilemma has been posed of how to ensure that, whilst recognizing the need to be responsive to government and public needs, the piper does not play the tune.

The response that the HSRC has fashioned to the dilemma has been, in essence, two-fold. First of all, it has defined its goal of undertaking "social science that makes a difference" as follows. The HSRC promotes itself as:

- Supporting development nationally, and within the Southern African Development Community, and in Africa generally;
- By conducting (mainly) applied social scientific projects;
- And by coordinating research programmes that are large scale, collaborative, policy-relevant, user-driven and public sector oriented.

In so doing, the HSRC has moved away from any uncomplicated, university-type disciplinary departments to the creation of some (at the moment) eleven 'New Priority Areas' which are deliberately inter-disciplinary, and which are deemed to be organically linked to tackling social problems and crises (whether social aspects of HIV-AIDS, social equity, educational backlogs, social delivery or governance issues generally).

Critically, the HSRC has attempted to implement these goals by expanding its funding beyond what it receives from government and diversifying its financial base away from its statutory government revenue by securing funding from external sources, whether these be additional contracts won from and/or awarded by government, aid agencies, other donors and so on. Hence HSRC has substantially increased its external research earnings from just R6 million in 1999/2000 to R28 million in 2001/02, with a target of R45 million (which already seems to have been exceeded) for 2002/03. Of the R28 million earned externally in 2001/02, 38 per cent was earned from the South African government, 27 per cent from private South African sources, and 35 per cent from international sources. Meanwhile, this financial shift has been underpinned by an organizational restructuring which has seen a significant change in the proportion of administrative staff from 141 or 31 per cent in March 2001 to 93 or 52 per cent in March 2002 (HSRC 2002).

Responsiveness to the needs of the new South African situation have also versed in terms of concerted efforts to increase the demographic representivity (by race and gender) of the HSRC's researchers (and indeed of its

administrative staff), with the overall proportion of black employees having been increased from 46 per cent to 52 per cent between March 2001 and March 2002 (although the proportion of women employed actually declined from 59 per cent to 54 per cent during the same period). Suffice it to say that although numerous imbalances remain, very real efforts are being made to achieve representivity at all levels of the organization, whilst improving the quality of research output.

Rendering the HSRC's Knowledge Production socially useful and accessible: As a Research Council, primarily devoted to applied research, the HSRC recognizes its somewhat different role from universities, who see an important aspect of their function as being to undertake basic, theoretical, 'pure' or fundamental research. Although as we have seen already, any attempt to dichotomise 'pure' versus 'applied' research rapidly runs into trouble, the HSRC would admit to undertaking work towards the 'applied' end of any spectrum. Yet rather than viewing its knowledge production as engaged with grappling with an artificial dichotomy, the HSRC sees its role as responding to 'what society wants' in terms of:

- first, developing internal research programmes designed by its own researchers in response to what they consider to be pressing social problems, and as approved by an internal and external peer review process, which are funded by the research monies provided by parliament. Hence for instance, my own Democracy and Governance programme has developed projects around such issues as the impact of the new electoral system in Lesotho as a conflict resolution device, the nature of non-racialism within the African National Congress, and the philosophical and empirical bases of indigenous knowledge systems.
- second, winning government or other organisations' tenders, which by their nature are issued to secure answers to perceived immediate problems. Again, the Democracy and Governance is presently working on a number of projects which have been developed in direct response to tenders issued by one or more of the different levels of government in the broad area of local government, 'delivery' and development. It has also recently undertaken a 'good governance' survey for the UK Department for International Development, is undertaking the coordination and analysis of survey research for the Electoral Task Team (which is considering possible changes to the electoral system) and has committed itself to examining the role of Mr. Mandela in helping to resolve the conflict in Burundi (on behalf of the Nelson Mandela Foundation).
- third, developing research projects attempting to grapple with major societal issues, either in direct response to programme areas defined by donors/funders or by convincing the latter that such projects are in fact of major importance. In this sphere, the Democracy and Governance programme is putting forward a major (related) projects to donors on regional stability in southern Africa and South Africa's corporate expansion into Africa.

Similar illustrations could be provided by the research programmes of all the NPAs.

Meanwhile, it is integral to the HSRC's new orientation that its research agenda cannot be carried out unilaterally, in isolation from other bodies and persons undertaking research for whatever reason, whether that be pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, social outcomes of direct utility and impact, or indeed, financial profit. Hence much research is pursued via research partnerships – whether as 'lead' or 'junior' partners – with:

- universities (and technikons) within South Africa, the immediate region, the wider continent and internationally
- other South African research councils, such as the Medical Research Council and the Africa Institute
- non-governmental organizations and policy research institutes
- international academies and councils, such as the CNRS (France) and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
- not least, non-profit or private consultancy firms

Hence in 2001/02, for instance, some 61 per cent of external projects were conducted with external partners of one sort or another. Such collaboration provides, potentially at least, for:

- appropriate combinations of skills, research experiences, social presence, and resources;
- linkages across the public and private, government and civil society divides;
- empowerment and capacity building, as in partnerships between more skilled and experienced research organizations and organizations which have been historically disadvantaged;
- realization of 'best practice', not least via international linkages
- promotion of specialized research networks (such as the HSRC's Southern African Research on Poverty Network)
- South-South linkages as well as relations with Northern partners.

Whilst such research initiatives will usually be geared to readily recognizable national, African and international development goals such as the reduction of poverty and inequality, economic growth and human development, regional integration and product diversification (as for instance, proclaimed by NEPAD), they can clearly feed into both 'pure' and applied research agendas.

Meanwhile, the full potential of any social research is unlikely to be realized unless it is properly and adequately disseminated. Considerable attention has therefore been paid to how HSRC research findings and analysis can reach beyond their immediate users. Accordingly, beyond the traditional means of presenting research findings via reports and academic articles and books, the HSRC has adopted what it terms a 'Publishing for Impact' strategy which, as well as providing for increased uptake of its 'traditional' publications (in the form of papers and books), includes a radically different digital publishing approach which means that:

- All future HSRC (non-confidential) publications will be accessible via the internet website
- Registered browsers will be able to freely download sections or entire publications, with printed copies being able to be ordered via the internet; in addition to
- A print on demand model facility for older and archived publications or extending print runs.

These initiatives are being matched by concerted efforts to promote successful research dissemination events beyond immediate clients, and to efforts to ensure that HSRC research contributes to national debate via the attraction and promotion of media coverage.

New Approach, New Problems?

So much for the propaganda! What's the reality? What are the problems? How really 'different' is the new HSRC from the old, is it having increased impact upon government and other agencies in the public interest, to what extent is it realizing its noble goals, and not least, what extent is it adding to the body of scientific knowledge?

As presented by its own presentations to stakeholders, in the form of annual reports and similar vehicles, the HSRC is claiming significant achievements on the basis of its success rate as indicated by demand-driven indicators: its high success rate in winning tenders, and the fact that the marked expansion in its receipt of external funding demonstrates not only that it is increasingly recognized as a 'major player' in regional development research, but also that users return to it regularly. The fact that the HSRC probably now constitutes the single largest concentration of social science researchers in the region (there are now about 140 of them), and the fact that it is well resourced both financially and technologically, marks it out as an agency of increasing repute. Let me proclaim, therefore, as an HSRC loyalist (albeit relatively fresh from a university), that – even if the state of measurement of the Council's impact is in its infancy – that it can be safely stated that the organization is undoubtedly launched on an upward curve.

None the less, the 'new' HSRC is undoubtedly faced by a number of challenges to which is struggling to find satisfactory solutions. As expressed notably by researchers I would suggest these are as follows:

- First, client based research may well reflect user needs, but the agendas of users may not necessarily conform to the public interest. However democratic a government, however well-intentioned a funder, questions must always be posed about whether the research they are defining and buying is addressing the right issues in the right way. To be sure, any well managed research is interactive, with research bodies entering a dialogue with their funders to shape original research designs more appropriately. Yet Africa has been too subject to external imperialisms of one kind or another for research organizations to be rest completely happy about following externally defined agendas. Furthermore, the drive for money to finance research (as the HSRC takes on more and more researchers) can too easily dictate not only how and what research is pursued, but how critical a stand researchers may be inclined to take. Findings can be influenced by the need for the next contract.
- Client based research may also have an adverse impact on quality of output in other ways, not least that the stampede for money can promote a culture of 'quick and dirty', perhaps short-term oriented research as opposed to in-depth, carefully calibrated and 'scientifically respectable' work which seriously challenges any notion of a divide between applied and pure research. For instance, although researchers at HSRC are encouraged to translate their client based into 'academic' research in the form of books and articles, the recognized 'academic' output of the Council is less than satisfactory, with the each researcher producing only 0.23 of a refereed research article per head in 2001/2. This, at one level, may be a reflection that the HSRC is only slowly moving away from a culture of 'internal publishing', yet at another, it is also an outcome of a felt sense amongst researchers that they are under intense pressure to earn their keep, and that this does not allow for adequate time and space to produce academic outputs of internationally recognized quality.
- The transformation of the HSRC towards client based research has implied a 'corporatisation' of the organization which requires an uneasy balance between authority and intellectual collegiality. There are two sources of this tension. The first is the very status of the HSRC as a 'Research Council', which operates rather

more like a government department than a university. Although formally possessing autonomy from government, it is unlike a university in that it is hierarchically structured, headed by a Chief Executive Officer who works through Executive Directors in charge of their NPAs. Unlike a University, where formally at least, collective decision-making is taken by academics sitting in faculty and senate meetings, in the HSRC power is concentrated in the office of the CEO and delegated through Executive Directors, with there being no formal representative bodies through which research staff voices can be heard. From this perspective, research staff are simply knowledge workers employed in a knowledge factory, subject to the formally untrammelled control of management. This leads on to the second source of tension, for many recently recruited researchers have been drawn from universities (the universities would say 'poached'), and they tend to possess the more egalitarian mindset which is itself resistant to having 'their' research controlled from above, subject to imposed deadlines and so on.

- Finally, all this leads on to the further difficulties around what is meant by the term 'academic freedom' in the context of the contemporary Research Councils. 'Academic freedom', in the sense that individual academics in universities should have the right to articulate controversial and critical ideas without their tenure being endangered is already under threat in South Africa's universities, as the latter themselves come under the pressures of increasing marketisation. Yet perhaps the threat is even more explicit in the Research Councils, where the close relationship to government could serve to inhibit freedom of expression. To be fair, this has by no means been put to the test in post-1994 South Africa, and it is more likely that pressures upon individual academics not to publish critical findings would emanate from inside the Research Councils, which might be nervous of upsetting good relations with the government, than directly from the latter itself. Even so, there is a clear awareness of the potential costs of voicing politically unpopular messages and the consequences that this might have. However, perhaps the even more pervasive threat to academic freedom is the commercial one, the subtle danger that contract-driven research will increasingly cajole researchers into delivering messages that the 'users' want to hear, whether they do this consciously or otherwise.

The contemporary HSRC has undoubtedly moved a long way from its previous rather unenviable reputation as a handmaiden of the apartheid government, as it seeks to transform itself into a progressive research body undertaking significant and socially useful research. However, the challenges outlined indicate that there remain numerous and difficult challenges to meet on the road ahead.

Sources include;

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