

**REGIONAL COOPERATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA-ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROSPECTS: The case of the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC)
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The Principal Objectives

The African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) was established in July 1988 with the principal objective of strengthening local capacity for economic policy research in Sub-Saharan Africa. Its mission rests on two basic premises. First, development is more likely to occur where there is sustained sound management of the economy. Second, such management is more likely to happen where there exists an active, well informed group of locally-based professional economists to conduct policy-relevant research. Hence AERC's limited intervention is targeted at enhancing the capacity of locally based researchers to conduct policy-relevant economic inquiry, promote retention of such capacity and encourage its application in the policy context.

Networking

Networking is the key strategic instrument for implementing AERC's activities. The Consortium currently brings together 15 funders to support a commonly agreed program of research activities, its dissemination and the training of future potential researchers. Members include Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), International Development Research Centre of Canada (IDRC), The Ford Foundation, USAID, The World Bank (IBRD), The Rockefeller Foundation. Overseas Development Agency of the UK (ODA), Swedish International Development Agency (Sida/SAREC). Government of Denmark, Government of Norway (NORAD), Government of Netherlands, Swiss Development Cooperation and non-member funders

The Programs

Research

The research program, the oldest of the three components of the AERC program, has achieved significant success in building a credible local capacity for policy-oriented economic research, promoting retention and self-confidence of professionals in the region. It has also raised the potential for utilization of the researchers' skills in support of development by expanding professional opportunities through the exposure of their work locally and internationally, and building links with policy makers. The success of this program is also demonstrated by the increased adoption of the networking concept in other disciplines as a cost-effective approach for attaining a critical mass of professional activity in the region and application of peer review for professional excellence. A spin-off of sub-networks often in collaboration with professionals outside the region, has further widened research opportunities and firmed up interest in African research. This has helped create a potential for sustainable funding of such research outside of the AERC itself. AERC has also adopted a flexible but cautious approach to expanding its own thematic coverage in research. Longer term sustainable development issues are currently gaining ground in terms of research interest in the network.

The AERC research program has four principal objectives: to build a credible local capacity for policy oriented research, to generate research results for use by policy makers, to promote links between research and policy, and to promote retention of high quality researchers. It emphasizes quality and relevance of research to policy, so as to ensure credibility and encourage utilization of its results.

The key elements of AERC's research strategy are threefold. The first is to offer small grants to groups of individuals drawn from both academia and policy institutions to conduct research on a limited number of pertinent themes. The current thematic areas are External Balance and Macroeconomic Management; Trade, Trade Policy and Regional Integration; External and Internal Debt Management; and Financial Management and Domestic Resource Mobilization. While maintaining a focus on the selected themes, the current three-year phase ending in March 1997 has seen an evolutionary expansion and deepening of thematic coverage. This is aimed at a better understanding of how markets function in the African context, the institutional structures affecting economic behaviour and performance and the link between policy and growth.

Second is the establishment of the support system for research in the forms of peer review, methodological workshops and literature. The Consortium has a solid library and is linked to several other resource centres worldwide. Resource persons drawn worldwide enrich the technical base and the variety of relevant experiences. Methodological workshops are organized to sharpen research skills and expose the network to the relevant methodological developments.

Third, the biannual thematic research workshops provide a way to monitor the quality of research on a continuous basis, create effective peer pressure, foster interaction among the researchers themselves and with the resource persons, and enforce scheduled delivery of reports. The workshops have been central in building and maintaining a sense of ownership of AERC activities by participating researchers and institutions through providing opportunities for a feedback on the design and implementation of the AERC's programs.

To date, AERC has supported 259 research projects, with the number of participating researchers growing from 40 in 1988 to 127 in 1995/96. The geographic coverage expanded from 7 countries to the current 22 involving three linguistic groups - anglophone, francophone and lusophone. A total of 111 researchers participated in various workshops on the most recent developments in time series econometrics, survey methodology and economic modeling.

Over the last two years other modalities for research have been adopted. Comparative research provides for a cross-country synthesis of completed research on specific issues and for research on issues of regional/sub-regional relevance. Collaborative research forms a team of African researchers and their counterparts elsewhere on a mutually agreed theme. This has helped sustain interest in African research outside the region, build competence through interaction and creating self-sustaining arrangements for financing research outside of the AERC. Support for attachments to better research environments outside the region has been arranged in conjunction with the implementation of the AERC-supported research.

More recently, AERC initiated partnerships and intensified networking with African policy and research institutions, in order to augment comparative advantage, minimize tension between policy responsiveness and capacity building and enhance policy impact.

Training

The AERC training program was designed to augment the pool of potential researchers and policy makers. The focus up to 1992/93 was on support for PhD thesis research to speed up completion of degrees and on commissioned studies which led to the design of interventions to strengthen graduate training in economics for Africans at the masters level. To date a total of 117 grants for thesis research have been awarded. Sixty of the grantees have already completed their studies and 34 of them have begun participating in the AERC research program.

The AERC studies on graduate training in economics have led to three initiatives in collaborative subregional masters programs. The Collaborative MA Program for anglophone Africa (outside of Nigeria) is being executed by the AERC. The other two programs for francophone Africa and Nigeria are at various stages of preparation for implementation AERC continues to provide for cross-program interactions.

A major part of the AERC training program is the execution of the anglophone Collaborative MA Program

This program currently involves 20 universities from 15 countries which collaborate to offer a high quality Master's degree in economics. The collaboration features joint enforcement of standards through annual evaluation and assessment by external examiners, common curriculum and its development, joint facility for teaching electives, and development of teaching materials. An Academic Board with membership drawn from the participating universities is responsible for the substance of the program. Currently seven of these universities are deemed to have adequate capacity to offer core courses that fulfill, jointly determined and enforced standards. The rest of the universities send their students to these. Current enrollment for the two year program is 200. Provisions for expanding or contracting the number of qualified departments based on performance and performance are in place. The universities also collaborate in offering electives at a joint facility in Nairobi. A staff development program and studies towards strengthening PhD programs in African universities are geared towards strengthening the teaching capacity.

In addition to financing the program, the AERC facilitates curriculum development, jointly enforcement of standards, student and teacher movements. It also provides support for improved teaching facilities and library services and manages the joint facility for electives. As an executing agency it is responsible for all grant making and contractual arrangements among the collaborators.

Publication and Dissemination

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by the large number of requests through AERC and directly for involvement of the researchers in various professional undertakings internationally and locally including a recent meeting to consider the research agenda on Africa by the OECD Development Center.

On the policy front, national economic policy workshops, where initiated, have become very useful fora for policy dialogues. In some of the countries these have become permanent annual national events and are largely self-financed. Involvement of some of the senior researchers in policy advisory roles has increased considerably as confirmed by a recent questionnaire administered to the network, internationally the network has increasingly been used as a sounding board for major policy considerations by the multilateral financial institutions, e.g. the World Bank. AERC researchers have to date been invited as witnesses to four testimonies to the US Congress on matters pertaining to African development and the operations of the international financial institutions affecting it. Senior policy seminars provide a forum for the discussion of policy-oriented syntheses of AERC research and obtain feedback from policy makers on the AERC research agenda.

Although the implementation of the Collaborative MA Programs is still at an early stage, several positive results are already being achieved. The program has considerably enlarged the enrollment of graduate students in economics. The enrollment in the collaborating universities has already more than doubled in three years.