

**RESEARCH UTILITY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT GOALS: The Interplay between Poverty Alleviation Strategies and Social Science Research in Kenya**

By

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## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on the extent to which social science research has contributed to Kenya's national development agenda and poverty alleviation in particular. Discussions draw from research activities at the Institute for Development Studies, within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Nairobi spanning a period of slightly over 40 years.

At independence in 1963, poverty was, alongside hunger and disease identified as Kenya's main developmental challenges. Over the years, government has pursued several policies with the aim of alleviating poverty. However, poverty remains elusive. Average incomes remain very low and the actual incubators of poverty are yet to be identified and adequately addressed.

This paper therefore aims to assess the extent to which social science research has been consistent with the country's development agenda. In particular, the paper looks at the relationship between Kenya's poverty alleviation efforts and the type of social science research that has taken place over the years. Among the topics covered are: the issues under investigation; the geographical coverage; source and type of data; and the mode of dissemination.

It is generally observed that dissemination of research findings has shifted over the years, moving from making of recommendations to government for uptake if they so wished, to the current mode where central government works closely with other stakeholders in the search for answers to development challenges. The paper concludes with suggestions on what is required for governments to truly embrace research as the starting point in the endeavour to realise national development.

## **Poverty Alleviation Strategies**

A general analysis of Kenya government policy documents shows that poverty remains a major challenge and strategies towards alleviating the situation are organised around several assumptions (Alila & Omosa 1999).

In the 1960s, policies pursued by the Kenya government were based on the premise that economic growth would translate into poverty alleviation. Poverty alleviation was then seen as synonymous with raised incomes and these were perceived as a natural outcome of investment in industry, human resource development and improvement in export earnings. The assumption was that once the economy prospered, benefits would trickle down to all Kenyans and rid them of poverty, ignorance and disease (Kenya 1966, p.7).

Subsequent plans, however, noted that in spite of commendable growth in the economy, the expected trickle-down failed to take place. Instead, average incomes were still very low and poverty levels were on the increase. In response, government sought to re-distribute the benefits accruing from growth through the provision of basic needs, such as free primary education and health care, with intentions of subsidising the poor. The

purpose was to shift the focus from the rich minority to the poor majority, guided by an emerging understanding that the Kenyan society could not prosper before all Kenyans were able to share in the benefits and costs of development (Kenya 1984, p.38). However, in spite of these realisations and interventions, subsequent years were found to be no better. Instead, it was realised that the poor were not drawing on these benefits, they were rising in numbers and they could not be easily identified.

Henceforth, poverty alleviation strategies shifted their strategy to popular participation with the hope that this would mobilise the most-needy members of the society while bringing their needs to the fore. To consolidate this further, government sought to decentralise and de-bureaucratise decision-making through the introduction of the District Focus for Rural Development strategy (DFRD). The aim was to address regional disparities that were seen as delaying efforts towards poverty alleviation. It was argued that the only feasible way to reduce poverty was 'to assist the poor to become more productive' through an increase in opportunities for constructive participation (Kenya 1979, p.22). While the DFRD approach may have succeeded in making the target population active, the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and subsequent globalisation of the national economy reversed the gains.

According to the 2001 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP 2001), there emerged a new realisation on the part of government, that poverty is not just about being hungry and malnourished, lacking adequate shelter and housing or being illiterate. It is also about being exposed to ill treatment and being powerless in influencing key decisions that affect one's life (World Bank 2000; Kenya 2001). In other words, because the poor lack voice, power and representation, they become more vulnerable to hunger, ill health, illiteracy, unemployment, disasters and violence.

The rest of this paper therefore looks at the extent to which social science research activities have responded to and informed some of the policies and strategies put forward by the Kenya government in the fight against poverty. In particular, we focus on the issues under investigation, geographical coverage, source and type of data under review, and the mode of dissemination employed.

### **The Interplay between Poverty Alleviation and Social Science Research**

The desire for evidence-based policies and other interventions has dominated the list of justifications for social science research. In Kenya, these researches have attempted, generally, to focus on providing answers to the development challenges facing the country. Another dominant characteristic is the fact that researchers are drawn mainly from academic institutions the world over, and in many instances, the studies are externally funded. The question, however, is whether these studies have been in tandem with the country's developmental needs and in particular, the extent to which these studies constitute a basis for some of the interventions put forward by government. In other words, how relevant has social science research been in the search for solutions to poverty? Answers to this question and related issues are sought through a comparative

historical analysis of research activities in the country vis-à-vis the emerging development challenges.

In the 1960s, much of the concern in post-independence Kenya revolved around putting in place and nurturing a young central government, spurring economic growth and realising national prosperity. Almost in search of this, social science research at the time also centred on those aspects that would translate into growth. These included: public finance, industrialisation, rural development, education, health, housing, income distribution and governance.

Indeed, a closer look at the research topics of the 1960s further suggests that the need to free the country from poverty, ignorance and disease actually informed national development plans and the nature of efforts put in place towards this end. The strategies included macro-economic stability, securing rural livelihoods, provision and access to basic services, and income distribution. Seemingly, poverty alleviation was seen in terms of national growth and this was perceived as arising from, among others, having a vibrant economy and thereafter, enabling the citizenry to enjoy the benefits of growth including being able to access basic services.

Unfortunately, although there were early signs of failure to squarely address poverty alleviation, research activities during succeeding periods and the 1970s in particular, continued with the trends already established. Efforts were directed towards expanding areas of focus without questioning the fact that the poor were lagging behind, in spite of existing interventions.

Social science research in the 1970s continued with the themes of the 1960s such as trade and finance, public finance and taxation, industrialisation, resource allocation, and economic development models. However, in addition to being the most research intense decade, there were attempts to bring on board new or emerging topics. These included: population and demography, labour and employment, and environmental issues.

organisation, and the role of donor agencies and other international players. It is also during this period that we see an emerging focus on basic rights, the fuel energy crisis, informal sector concerns, tourism, and the importance of the arid and semi-arid lands. Seemingly, the fight against poverty had moved from putting in place basic infrastructure to managing the off-shorts of growth such as disparities in resource distribution and unequal access to the benefits of development. These challenges continue to manifest themselves in the form of general poverty and especially through widespread hunger and disease.

In the 1990s, persistent poverty and widening inequalities brought to question the country's governance structures. This period was characterised by withdrawal of government subsidies, a general movement towards cost sharing, and demand for multi-party democracy. Surprisingly, these issues did not dominate the research agenda and for the first time, we see a break with past practice. Topical issues and national concerns were no longer informing the research agenda. Instead, research topics in the 1990s continued to focus on traditional areas such as enterprise development, access to basic services, and inclusion versus exclusion. It is not until the new millennium that we start seeing a rise in the number of studies focusing on governance, the electoral process, and institutions. This delay is partly explained by the fact that although these were topical issues, the political environment at the time did not allow for free academic discourse. It is also the case that poverty alleviation was not yet seen in the wider spectrum that includes lacking a voice.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing discussions suggest that there is a relationship between research and the development goals of a country. We have seen that over the years in Kenya, social science research concerned itself with the same issues as those on the country's development agenda. What is, however, not clear is who informs who between the researcher and the development planner and therefore, who drives the process. Generally, the actual utility of research is dependent on whether the end-user is in a position to appreciate the usefulness of research findings and who then decides what needs to be researched into and what may be left out.

In Kenya, during the first two decades of independence, university level research was largely commissioned and carried out on behalf of government. This means that the government identified areas where they required answers and further knowledge and sought to be informed. However, as the country progressed and the challenges of planned development began to emerge, government remained conservative and sometimes resistant to evidence-based policies. It is at this point that we see a break with tradition. Instead of employing research to directly inform government policy, universities were now focused on informing the general public. As a consequence, we see the public becoming more and more informed and in turn making legitimate demand on government to be accountable. Currently, there is a shift towards seeking and working in partnership.

In conclusion therefore, research remains central to national development. However, there seems to be a reduction in demand for research among policy makers. Therefore, instead of concentrating on providing the necessary evidence for government-driven policies, research should seek to be the prime mover by setting its own agenda. This then means that social science research should seek to open new frontiers of knowledge upon which governments and others can base their development policies. Success in this direction is really then dependent on the extent to which universities are able to fund and therefore initiate and drive the research agenda and whether their focus remains relevant to national development. This then calls for a clear and balanced combination as universities endeavour to create and disseminate knowledge through teaching, research and out-reach.

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