



Reflections of a Conflicted Economist:

How can we be useful to society?

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Agricultural economists:

- What is our role?
- Who are our clients?



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- Most of the time, we view our clients as policy makers
 - Do we accept their priorities as given?
 - Should researchers be willing to accept certain policies as “given”
 - and then develop 2nd best solutions?



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- What is our role when government’s objectives are not accepted by society?
 - Is it a legitimate role to become “agents of change”
 - “social activists?”



One possible *modus operandi*:

- “Joint products” approach:
- (def): undertake research as an process that combines:
 - Research
 - capacity building (of policy makers)
 - outreach



“Joint products” approach to research

- Seek to work with policy makers – *as collaborators in the research process* – to build ownership and thus build effective demand for the findings.

“...as collaborators in the research process”



- Meet to explain why a particular issue may be important to stated government objectives
- Incorporate policy makers' concerns and objectives into the research process
- Work collaboratively with local researchers – builds legitimacy
- More likely that the collaborating policy maker will embrace and possibly advocate the policy implications of the analysis




- The “joint products” approach can work well when there is a motivated policy maker willing to collaborate



Brief personal experience:


- Maize market policy changes – 1993
- Prior to 1993, a farmer or trader could not move more than 1 bag of maize grain into urban areas.
- Defining conditions:
 - There was a “mover and shaker” in government who was willing to advocate the need for change
 - fiscal crisis – government willing to take bold steps
 - coalition of interests rallying around the issue (small millers, traders, farm lobby groups who saw benefits to dismantling the barriers on movement of maize across districts)

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- Frequently, the approach of engaging policy makers in the research process cannot be achieved
 - if the issue is politically too hot!
 - Political economy problems
 - → little effective demand



Problems with “technical analysis”

- On the one hand, our clients are often policy makers
- But the research is often funded (and the topic often identified) by external donor organizations.
- Governments aren't always interested in the issues that donors want researchers to examine.
- Who are our clients?

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- What if government does not want to discuss a policy change that could
 - improve living conditions and reduce malnutrition for millions
 - Should economists therefore not engage in such research?
 - Can we remain socially/politically neutral?



Role of Donors

- There are limited numbers of local analysts and limited capacity of Government officials to participate in research.
- If donors set up one research project after another, it can overwhelm government counterparts' ability to contribute
- Government officials become more concerned with managing donor projects rather than carrying out the activities of the Ministry



Role of donors (cont.)

- Effective donor coordination could improve impact of research on the policy process
 - support existing locally-driven initiatives
 - Empower regional policy analysis networks to work with national policy initiatives
 - don't create parallel policy outreach systems
 - (SAKSS, ECAPAPA, COMESA)
 - (SAKSS, FANRPAN, FANR, SADC, COMESA)
 - Focus on building local analytical capacity
 - Focus on building interest groups with a "voice" to build effective demand (e.g., farmers' unions, traders associations)