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?
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?

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 possible 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)

- 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?

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)