

FAMILY PLANNING OPERATIONS RESEARCH IN THE PHILIPPINES

Marilou Palabrica-Costello

This issue of the Philippine Population Journal presents findings from family planning operations research (OR) studies which have been undertaken for the Philippine Family Planning Program (PFPP). As the reader will note, each of these analyses holds considerable interest and utility not only for program managers and decision makers but also for researchers and members of the academe.

Before turning to the studies, it may prove helpful to provide readers with additional information regarding the Family Planning and Operations Research and Technical Assistance Program (FPORT) which sponsored this issue of PPJ. The program is being coordinated by the Population Council as part of a larger project entitled Asia Near East Operations Research and Technical Assistance (ANE OR/TA) which has been supported by a grant from USAID under contract Nos. DPE-3030-C-00-0022-00 and DPE-3030-Q-00-0023-00. This project aims to use operations research and technical assistance to improve the access, quality and sustainability of family planning services. At present, five countries are involved in the project namely: Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Indonesia and the Philippines.

The expected result of the program is to improve family planning services by increasing access to a full range of family planning services and methods; developing service delivery strategies that are client-oriented and acceptable to various population groups; improving the operations of programs to make them more efficient and sustainable; improving the quality of existing services; and strengthening the capabilities of family planning program managers to use OR to diagnose and solve service delivery problems. In each case, the approach is to ensure that the program works within the political and socio-cultural contexts of the specific country.

The Philippine office of the ANE OR/TA was opened in October 1992. An initial project activity was the sponsorship of two OR workshops for program managers of the PFPP and researchers from the academe. Workshop participants were introduced to the concept of OR, given an orientation to a number of procedures for conducting quality OR and encouraged to collaborate on preparing an actual OR proposal. It was essential that the workshop provided an opportunity for program managers to participate from the initial process of program assessment and problem identification .

Seven proposals were drawn up, five of which were eventually funded by the FPORT. All of these were diagnostic in nature, and were carried to a successful conclusion within a period of seven to ten months. These are represented in this volume by the first five articles found herein. We have also been very fortunate to obtain permission from Drs. Corazon M. Raymundo and Eduardo Roberto to include the results of the OR studies which they conducted under the aegis of an earlier OR program which had been sponsored by the United Nations Population Fund.

Why do research? There are many responses, both personal and institutional, which can be given to this very basic question. Hopefully, one of the foremost reasons along these lines will concern itself with the applications of the new knowledge which research can generate. Good research will help bring about a better (healthier, more comfortable, more egalitarian, happier) society, or so we would hope. And yet, it is precisely here that we find one of the paradoxes of Third World social science; namely, the frustration which is felt by both the social scientist and program administrators about the inutility of most research outputs. Academics complain of being marginalized and say that few policy makers read -- much less act upon -- their reports. Program managers respond by pointing to the irrelevance and impracticality of most research studies, their inaccessibility and the fact that they take "too long to complete". Both sets of actors seem to have their own sets of priorities, their own world view, their own jargon.

This is where operations research comes in. OR may be defined as a "continuous process of problem identification and diagnosis, program experimentation and evaluation, and information and dissemination and utilization. (It) ... is designed to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of... services delivered by providers..." (Stoeckel, 1992, p. 2). Further still, OR "seeks practical solutions and viable alternatives to unsatisfactory operating methods" (Fisher, *et al*, 1991, p. 1). In brief, OR "is the systematic application of research methods to improve programs and policy, and better satisfy the needs of users" (Townsend, 1991, p. 45).

Simple as they are, these defining principles hold within them a potentially revolutionary impact. The problem with revolutionary ideas, however, is that they are rarely accepted immediately. They disturb our comfortable preconceptions, threaten vested interests and call us to move beyond disciplinary and institutional boundaries. For social scientists, this will require a willingness to overcome some very strong prejudices ("OR is 'only' applied research") and to accept new reference groups and career goals other than the publication of learned articles in scholarly journals. Program managers, too, will have to change, e.g. by relying less on hunches and by approaching their job with an outlook which stresses the definition, operationalization and solution of specific operational problems. Both parties, too, must learn to work as a team, to

concentrate on identifying an evolving series of research problems and to test proposed solutions.

An overarching purpose of the present volume then, is to encourage the sort of dialogue (among researchers, program personnel, policy makers, donor agencies) that will be needed before a full institutionalization of OR in all development programs can be attained. The studies included herein have already undergone a thorough process of research dissemination and utilization but this has generally been limited to a local (city, province, region) context. But why stop there? There are family planning outreach workers in areas beyond Iloilo or Mindanao, just as there are far too many program dropouts in provinces other than Bukidnon. By reviewing and reflecting upon this issue's seven articles, program managers in other locales will hopefully be able to perceive common problems and to initiate like solutions.

Better still, the dissemination process represented by this volume may serve to convince both managers and social scientists that OR can hold a personal relevance for their own programs, their own careers. The present studies are not the end, but only a beginning, and a painfully modest one at that. There are still so many questions unasked and unanswered, so many other research tools and perspectives that can still be used. What about IEC campaigns, logistics, social marketing, quality of care? Have we tested solutions to identified problems, or evaluated the impact and cost-effectiveness of these strategies? Have we done enough rapid assessment techniques to identify problem areas in service delivery? Have we addressed the needs of NGOs involved in the delivery of family planning services?

Operations research is sometimes accused of taking an atheoretical stance towards its subject matter (e.g. Simon, 1969, p. 225) but there is no reason why this should necessarily be the case. If one approach to theory building is the search for empirical regularities across time and space, it may be of interest to note the many convergences that can be found among the conclusions reached by the different study authors represented in this volume. We thus find two or more studies identifying similar programmatic weaknesses, such as the lack of home visits by Barangay Health Workers (Sealza; Lacuesta, et al.), suboptimal clinic conditions (Rood, et al.; Roberto), inadequate provision of FP information (Sealza; Rood, et al.), and the virtually nonexistent reliance upon outreach workers as FP resupply agents (Sealza; David and Chin; Lacuesta, et al.). Similar policy proposals are also in evidence, e.g. that outreach workers really do need a more thorough training (David and Chin, Lacuesta, et al.) and that greater attention must be paid to quality of care issues in general and users' perspectives in particular (Sealza; Roberto; Raymundo). Larger issues, too, such as sustainability and decentralization (David and Chin; Cabigon and Magsino), and institutional roles and

role complexes (David and Chin, Lacuesta, et al; Cabigon and Magsino) are also raised in a somewhat parallel fashion throughout.

As John Townsend (1991, p.84) has noted, there continues to be a huge "unmet need for OR", despite the more-than-adequate track record that has been turned in by studies of this type during the past four decades. If the present volume will have helped in some small way to fill this gap, we in the Philippine office of ANE OR/TA shall rest content. So also, I would hope, will the many individuals who have helped in preparing this special issue of the PPJ. I include here, of course, the authors of our seven studies as well as colleagues who helped to edit one or more of these into an article format. These included Dr. Josefina Cabigon (who worked on an article by Rood, et al.), Dr. Michael A. Costello (Lacuesta, et al.), Dr. Trinidad Osteria (Cabigon and Magsino), and Dr. Aurora Perez (David and Chin). Drs. Raymundo and Roberto prepared their own articles while I served as editor for the paper of Prof. Sealza.

I wish to thank Dr. Richard Chabot for providing significant editorial inputs for all articles as well as for his role in designing the format of this volume. Secretarial and administrative chores were very ably handled by Jackie Cabrias and Jovy G. Juan. Myra Arenas and Carmela Patron assisted in proofreading the manuscripts.

I would like to acknowledge the funding support provided by USAID, through the Population Council's Asia Near East Operations Research and Technical Assistance Program. The support of the Philippine Population Association is also acknowledged, particularly in sponsoring the launching of the FPORT in the Philippines.

Finally, appreciation is due to Dr. Carmencita Reodica, Undersecretary of Health and Dr. Rebecca Infantado of the DOH Family Planning Service for their continued support and commitment to operations research in family planning.