RESEARCH NOTES

Research for planning: Notes and issues

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The following notes and issues were prompted by an experience with a government planning office. They are a reflection on the occurrences and procedures encountered in a research project.

The typicality of the occurrences and procedures cited here would be highly questionable had not one of the administrators admitted that the observations made concerning the operations were rather not surprising — in relation to the issues to be discussed presently — because many "things of this kind" took place in the office. But even if the typicality of the occurrences and procedures is not established, the point is that these may be repeated in other planning or research activities.

Although the focus is directed to the research activities, other matters relevant to the planning process are discussed in order to have some idea of how planning and research can promote or hamper the achievement of development, especially in the Philippines.

The value premise of this paper is: Efforts towards the achievement of development must be evaluated or appreciated on the basis of their results as these affect the client population.

Time Constraints

The research project under consideration was part of the feasibility studies intended to yield input data for planning — to justify plans. It was given a duration of 5 weeks. Unfortunately, the study required the routine gathering of background materials, which included inter-

views with resource persons. Moreover, a social survey was needed in the area of the client population, because use of secondary data was deemed inadequate for the purpose at hand.

The duration was deemed too short to produce a reliable study; however, the administrator concerned said that the deadline had to be met. Data were needed to justify plans for the client population. The researcher, then, had to make the most of whatever was available. It was even admitted that perhaps, all that could be gathered was background data.

A talk with another administrator of the office towards the completion of the report (which failed to meet the deadline after all) revealed that the research project had already been set a few weeks before the researcher was hired by the office. The recruitment of personnel was included under the period for the research proper. At any rate, the deadline was not flexible.

The urgency of the study was due to the priority given by the government to the projects in the region of the client population. Some political considerations could not be concealed from the priority — the current troubles in the region complicated the obvious need for development plans in the region.

Now, administrators set deadlines for the completion of plans and research projects. How well are so-called scientific norms and technical requirements considered vis-a-vis the demand for action? From whose viewpoint is action urgently demanded in a given situation? Or,

what is urgently demanded: a project or an authentic improvement in the lives of the client population? If, say, scientific norms and technical requirements are given secondary importance in relation to political goals, would such a move not defeat the purpose of research, which is to understand phenomena as adequately as possible? Or, are technocrats mere instruments of political decision-makers and thereby should not contribute to the formulation of goals?

Handling of Data

Effects of the unrealistic time constraint on the research project can be seen by the manner in which the data were handled. The data-gathering process was highly questionable. Since there was no time to translate the interview schedule to the dialect of the sample population, English questions were translated into the dialect on the spot; and responses in the dialect were translated into English also on the spot! The interviewers were given an idea of the working hypotheses of the study. But there was no dry run on the interview — to adapt to some traits of the interviewers. (A staffer of the field office advised the researcher to dispense with the dry run.)

Moreover, the period for the gathering of data could not start in accordance with the timetable because of the holidays peculiar to the region. The delay ate into the 5-week duration given to the study. It was rather providential that the section head involved had persuaded the researcher to set the sample size at less than one percent of the whole client population.

When the raw data were shipped to the Manila office, tabulation started as soon as possible and, since the researcher was indisposed upon his arrival from the field visit, it was without his knowledge that the sociographic data were entirely omitted in the tabulations. There was, then, no way of checking for correlations, or of presenting hypotheses regarding the client population. It was also quite surprising that the office was interested in the variables only — in the sense that relationships did not seem to matter.

Furthermore, the responses to the open-ended questions were tabulated just like the responses to the close-ended questions. The tabulation was done by a number of research assistants who did not know the framework of the study, which required content analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions. At any rate, the categorization of the said responses was highly questionable.

In the course of the analysis and interpretation, an accomplished interview schedule was checked by the researcher. It turned out that a response (to one of the open-ended questions) could fall under at least two of the categories imposed by the research assistants. A quick check with the overall tabulator who received the instructions from the section head showed that the similarity of responses could have been on as many bases (and thereby hypotheses) as there were tabulators. The distortion of the data can not be overemphasized. To meet the deadline, the content analysis and the tabulation of the sociographic data had to be waived. Activities at this stage had to be tailored to the constraint of time.

This manner of handling data gathered from an inadequate sample inevitably raises the question of reliability. When unreliable data and tentative conclusions are used to justify plans — especially when such data are taken to speak for the socio-cultural aspect of the lives of the client population — how appropriate and effective would be the plans in the context of the situation of the client population? And, if the plans are implemented, how will the consequences be faced and dealt with?

It is submitted that it is a task of technocrats and political decision-makers to distinguish between situations that demand a thorough study before an engineered intervention may be posited and those that do not. It is also necessary to bear in mind the responsibility for one's acts to the citizenry; i.e., one's accountability to the client population for the deliberate change in the environment of the latter.

In order to prevent development efforts from lapsing into mere rhetoric, it might be of help if political decision-makers and technocrats entered into *dialogue* with each other and with the client population. It would be more useful if technocrats reminded political administrators of technical matters, and if the latter reminded technocrats of the urgency of action in certain situations.

Otherwise, technocrats can be perceived by the political administrators as a hindrance to the pursuit of development. Or, political decision-makers can be perceived by the technocrats as undue constraints to technical work. In either case, one can be made to feel subservient and thereby *merely instrumental* to goals set by people of different persuasion. These goals may even be deemed to defeat the purpose of one's profession. How would the client population be affected by the relationship between the political decision-maker and the technocrat?

Perhaps, unrealistic deadlines and unreliable data are manifestations of the manner these groups treat each other.

In a talk with an administrator of the office, the procedures being sifted were "justified" by the assumption that lending institutions do not study project proposals in depth: what is important is to get the money to finance development projects. Hence, it is not necessary to be very concerned about the quality of data to justify plans and projects. Revision of plans and more careful (and thereby more reliable) studies may be made later — when the money is already at hand.

The validity of this assumption — and the justification of the borrowing strategy — may be highly questionable. But assuming, without granting, that the assumption is valid, i.e., the conduct of the lending institutions abet the said borrowing strategy, government planning offices may as well play the game with the lending institutions. This is especially so when even government offices compete among themselves in terms of output considered as performance. In terms of research projects to be financed by these offices, the government can avoid wasting money by having thorough studies only at the time of revisions of project proposals.

Another defense for the research procedures was the distinction between academic research and practical (applied) research. Standards from textbooks cannot always be applied because there are constraints (which textbooks also consider). The validity of the distinction is not the issue in question. The issue is the way the distinction is made use of to justify somehow the observed lack of scientific procedure in this particular project.

Bias

As the staff ran out of time, the researcher was instructed to submit a report on the interviews with the resource persons. At that time, the results of the social survey were to be disregarded. The recommendations of the researcher were to be based on his observations during the field visit and on the opinions of the resource persons who were of different socioeconomic class in comparison to the assumed majority of the grass root client population.

The instructions betray a bias: the resource persons could adequately represent the client population in terms of attitudes towards the national and provincial governments, of attitudes and practices regarding land ownership and lending operations, of attitudes concerning community development and taxation. To what extent and in what manner are the perceptions, attitudes and aspirations of the grassroots portion of the client population considered as constraints or guidelines to the so-called development planner? What goals for whom are clearly defined?

Attitude Towards Criticism

The limitations of the study which could not be explained without resorting to the conduct of the office, e.g., the handling of data, were explained in the report accordingly. Said explanations were deleted by the section head on the ground that they were biased — so the researcher was informed. But since he was not made to proofread the report, it can only be guessed what could have happened to the cautions regarding the use of the data.

Hence, the recommendations included those which dealt with the conduct of the office in relation to the planning process. Previous weekly staff meetings probably did not treat, say, careful handling of data. The consideration now is the willingness to learn from experience.

A case in point: The interviewers were instructed to tell the respondents that the latter were being interviewed so that the government office would have a sound basis of development plans for the area. But the data were too unreliable to be used for justifying plans. And if another survey were to be conducted without adequate and effective deceptions, the client population could be made to lose some *trust* in the government (since the planning office was identified with the government). This could mean difficulties in eliciting the cooperation of the client population in projects. It is not sound to raise the level of expectations of the client population when it is uncertain that such expectations can be satisfied.

A more important issue is: If people who are assumed to share a more or less common outlook and are involved in a common task — that of development — can hardly take criticism submitted for the purpose of somehow lessening the chances of failure? How can technocrats offer technical advise to political decision-makers who are probably of different persuasion? How either the technocrat or the political decision-maker reacts to some frustration arising from certain disagreements regarding the approach to development is not as important as how the chances of failure may be lessened to a minimum — so that the client population can be given some guarantee of authentic development.

Office Communications

Channels of communication may be reviewed from time to time for improvement. The case under consideration suggests that the content and manner of communications can not be neglected.

The use of technical terms in the description of the research project — both written and verbal — was rather indiscriminate and even confusing. Hence an aspect of the situation of the client population other than that which the administrator wanted was studied.

But the loss of effort, time, and money on account of the gathering of "wrong" data could have been prevented had the section head not approved the research framework. The criticisms of the framework were made towards the end of the field visit of the researcher — the time when the data-gathering was already nearing completion.

Parenthetically, the tenor of the criticisms was: it is not necessary to study casualties in the situation of the client population; what is needed is prediction of the behavior of the client population, given a specific project. If the research was to justify plans, the criticisms suggest that plans were made before the research was completed, i.e., the research had to justify the plans.

Even if one disregards the glaring bias here, he might as well ask how appropriate and effective the plans would be. Or, the necessity of research before formulating plans might be questioned.

The foregoing inevitably leads to some review of the training of technocrats. Contents of communications can fit into any bureaucratic channel. What the technocrats were trained to communicate — in relation to their task — is quite a different thing. If the training is assumed to be adequate, then individual competence is to be considered. Recruitment of personnel would then, have to be reviewed.

Conclusion

The case studied here need not be generalized from — and it must not be generalized from. What is needed is, perhaps, some concern for the issues raised here if they are of any importance at all.

It is submitted that the conduct of a planner or a planning office does affect the success of the planning process and thereby the development among the client population. And it is an inadequate approach to focus attention on the planning process to the neglect of the conduct of the planner or of the planning office. It is

not always safe to assume that the planner, the political decision-maker, or the client population is given. Each move towards development is better considered as problematic and dealt with accordingly.

How is the development of the Philippines being pursued?

Note

At the time he submitted this report, Florencio R. Riguera was a candidate for the degree of Master in Environmental Planning at the University of the Philippines System.

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