Dry mouths and empty stomachs – where was science?
Poverty eradication is best achieved through integrated strategies

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY ERADICATION

The upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development is a watershed event for the international community. The decision to hold this 10 yearly, highest profile event at a venue on the world's poorest continent, is not just an act of charity. It is an acknowledgement of the need for inclusiveness and a recognition of the fact that 'development' is not development, nor can it be sustainable, if the needs of the poorest – who make up the majority of the world's population – are largely excluded from the agenda.

An international - or a domestic - order that is not founded on the principle of inclusiveness and that does not ensure distributional justice is inherently unstable and is, by definition, unsustainable, however much 'development' may seem to be going on. Exclusion breeds misery, disease, frustration and desperation that cannot but be directed at those who are benefiting most from the system. This is the message of 11 September. We may have changed the dates of the Summit to avoid 11 September, but the influence of the events of that day on the Summit has been profound. 1992's Agenda 21, with its emphasis on conservation for the future, has been displaced by the 2002 agenda, with its emphasis firmly on poverty eradication in the present.

For us on the African continent, more than anywhere else, this means making response to human needs – and in particular response to the needs of the poor majority – the driving force behind our thinking and our activities.

INCREASING THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE SCIENCE COMMUNITY TO POVERTY ERADICATION – INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES

Insight 1: The science community is not just about 'scientists'

Most of us here today are from technikons, universities, science councils or private sector manufacturing or IT firms – institutions that are looked up to in the broader

community. It's all too easy for us – and for the broader community – to identify the 'science community' with 'scientists' in these institutions. In fact, the science community is far broader and includes, among others, teachers – and learners – in the natural, life, medical, social and human sciences in all educational institutions at all levels. Teaching in schools may be a whole lot less glamorous than professional research and/or development work but it's certainly no less important. It's the foundation on which not only successful R+D but also our international competitiveness will increasingly depend – Prof. Naude will probably tell us that it's one of the pre-requisites for stabilizing our currency in the long term.

Challenge: (one of many!) to stop the downward spiral of mathematics and science registrations at technikons and universities

Nationally, I understand that registrations in the natural sciences and engineering are now as low as 10%. At this level, we are simply not going to be able to generate the skills we need in these areas for more rapid economic growth – and the potential for net in-migration is small. Much of the problem can be ascribed to the shortage of well-trained and motivated teachers at schools, which, in turn, is partly a function of the salaries of maths and science teachers relative to what they can earn in the private sector. Understandably, differentiating the salaries of teachers along subject lines teachers has met with opposition from a number of quarters. Yet it may have to be part of a co-ordinated approach to stop the downward spiral. Here's a key policy and strategy problem for government and civil society to solve – good social science research could contribute significantly to finding the solution.

Insight 2: The human and social sciences have a particularly important role to play in improving the design and implementation of public policies to raise the incomes and quality of life of the poor

Poverty has many dimensions – unemployment, low income, food insecurity, inequitable distribution of assets, inadequate access to public goods and services - clean water, affordable, sustainable energy and so on…. These are largely a product of our human capital and social institutions, as relatively high income, resource-poor countries, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, remind us. So the human and social sciences have a disproportionately important role to play in generating solutions. Democracy, good governance, sound macroeconomic policies, high average levels of health and education, decentralization and real capacity to deliver by provincial and local government, well-oiled financial infrastructure, … all components of our own government's and NEPAD's strategies for poverty reduction and all eminently amenable to improvement through policy-focused human and social scientific research.

Challenge: to conduct science that makes a difference to poverty eradication

On a visit to the HSRC late last year, the DACST Parliamentary Portfolio Committee emphasized that, while they were indeed interested in our publications, they were still more interested in the on-the-ground impact and outreach of our research and on the extent to which it was meeting national priorities. I'm pretty sure we'd all agree that this emphasis is absolutely right, especially for publicly funded institutions. If we

cannot show Parliament that we are delivering on these criteria, we do not deserve the public resources that are invested in us. We are not simply in the business of polishing our own apple through the length of our publications list and the glossiness of our reports. Our emphasis needs to change from outputs – the reports detailed under 'deliverables' – to outcomes.

I wonder if I would be generalizing unreasonably if I suggested that most research in the human and social sciences – whether conducted in technikons, universities or science councils – is initiated by researchers, primarily on the basis of personal or institutional interests? Of course, there is nothing wrong with this, but what I am suggesting is that poverty eradication may best be served if research effort is consciously focused on national priority issues, such as those just mentioned. This approach seems particularly apposite for publicly-funded institutions.

To maximize impact, like education, research projects and programmes need to be 'outcomes-based'. That is, they need to start from and be working consciously towards improving current policy, strategy and implementation, whether in the public sector or elsewhere. They also need to be user-driven. That means, if at all possible, sitting down with the policy-maker, strategist or implementing agent, talking through the problem, identifying the desired outcomes and then planning the research to help achieve them.

Beyond this, maximizing impact may, on occasions, require pushing the envelope of research activities to include what one might call 'after sales consultancy', in other words, helping the user to implement the findings of one's research. This is not a traditional role for researchers, but there's no doubt that it affirms our role and increases the impact of our work. Blurring the research-consultancy borderline can only be in the interests of science.

Insight 3: Our research findings generate far fewer benefits for society than they ought to, because we focus too much on content and too little on process

As researchers, our role has traditionally been to produce content or substance in the form of a report or a publication. Usually, that's where it ends. One of the frustrations one then suffers is not knowing whether the effort has been of value to anyone else – in particular to the relevant policy-makers and practitioners. Indeed, to minimize this frustration, it's easier simply to cease to worry about this, if one can.

But we should be worried about this, at least if we're to be measured by our impact and outreach. Here's a second way in which we need to push the envelope of research activities: we should be concerned not only with content but also with process. What should we be doing to increase the mileage that society gets out our research – and out of our total stock of knowledge?

Challenge: how to increase the social mileage of our research

Hard copy publications are how we have traditionally gone about this, in the hope that others will have the interest and time to read. Websites now add an important electronic dimension to this. But we have to go further, because the people who most

need to make use of our findings – the policy-makers, strategists and implementing agents – generally don't have the time to read at length and are usually most comfortable staying in their institutional silos. What interventions do we need to undertake to overcome these obstacles?

At the HSRC, we're experimenting with networks to do the job. The first of these, the Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPN), has been running for about 15 months now and others, such as the Social Aspects of Health and AIDS Research Alliance (SAHARA), are on the launching pad. SARPN is a real and virtual platform to facilitate and stimulate debate on policy, strategy and practice to reduce poverty in the region. Its activities have so far included:

- face-to-face events in a number of venues throughout the region – workshops, briefings and public debates on issues impacting directly on poverty, such as land and migration policy – to which top-level policy makers, often Ministers, are invited
- a website (***www.sarpn.org.za***) which has been exceptionally active in soliciting and marketing a wide range of relevant documents – with acknowledgement and reference, often to other websites – after only 3 months of operation the site was already recording more than 40 000 hits per month
- and a data base of interested parties, individuals and organizations currently numbering more than 6 000, to whom material is beamed – inclusion is open to anyone and there is no charge.

Other forms of intervention, such as the formation of reference panels for key policy-makers, are being investigated.

All of this adds up to saying that research organizations can validly – and arguably should - take on an advocacy role, not 'hard advocacy' activism that is more the realm of political organizations and NGOs, but 'soft advocacy' of a kind that enhances the value of research but does not compromise the objectivity that professional research requires.

Insight 4: Research on poverty eradication almost always calls for a range of disciplinary inputs

Most social research issues – research on poverty is no exception – are inherently multi-disciplinary. How does one most effectively integrate the disciplines?

Challenge: how best to conduct multi-disciplinary research

In days gone by, the approach was to try to house entire ranges of skills under one roof. This was costly and often led to square pegs being put into round research holes. Smaller organizations embodying a core of high-level researchers, with the capacity to attract, architect, network and project-manage research as well as a body of up-and-coming, generally younger, researchers are almost certainly a more flexible, cost effective way to go.

What this means is research organizations asking themselves routinely, when a research job is being planned, what can we best bring to the party? And who else should we be looking to partner? This, I believe, sets up win-win-win potential that it is hard to match – win for the driver of the research, win for the partner(s) and win for the client.

And, indeed, one could add, win for the research community and win for society at large.