

THE INDO-DUTCH PROGRAM FOR ALTERNATIVES IN DEVELOPMENT

Reflections on a personal experience

The Indo-Dutch Program for Alternatives in Development (IDPAD) is a twenty years old program of systematic collaboration in social science research between Indian and Dutch scholars. The idea for it was conceived in 1975 and laid down in a Memorandum of Understanding between the Dutch and Indian Governments, undersigned by the Dutch Minister of Development Cooperation, Jan Pronk, and the Member Secretary of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, dr J.P. Naik. It was an effort from both Indian and Dutch sides to mobilize social science for “alternatives in development”. I will come to this idea of “alternatives in development” presently, after presenting a bird’s view of the program’s operation.

The program- due to some political and bureaucratic problems - started only in 1981. Till now there have been four phases of the program and the fifth is under preparation. In each phase a set of new themes is announced on which collaborative research proposals can be made by Indian and Dutch scholars. Broad participation is promoted through a formally open process of competition. The themes are announced through advertisements in journals, to which any researcher can apply. The basic idea of IDPAD support is that the affiliating institutes make a contract with IDPAD implying that the research time of directors/ initiators of the research project are paid by the institutes, while IDPAD covers all other costs of the collaboration, including travel costs, field work, assistants etc.

The total number of research projects sanctioned over the years is 91, of which about 56 are by now completed. In addition to research projects grants have been disbursed for organizing seminars and encouraging so-called exchange of scholars between the two countries, that is short professional visits, for example a lecturing tour. An impressive list of publications has resulted from the collaboration facilitated through IDPAD: 35 books and 42 Occasional Papers. The average number of copies sold of the books is about 500. In recent years an IDPAD Newsletter was brought out, of which nine issues have come out. About 100 scholars have visited India or the Netherlands on the exchange program.

Finance for the program came for about 90 % from the budget of the Dutch Ministry for Development Cooperation. For the four phases together the total Dutch contribution amounted to about Dfl 20 million, while from Indian side the matching contribution was about Rs 7 million.

In the rest of my presentation I will mainly focus upon one aspect of IDPAD, namely its ambition to be a program for “alternatives in development”. I will try to answer two questions. First, whether the idea of ‘alternatives in development’ has proven to be a meaningful, operational concept. Secondly, to what extent international collaboration has helped to be more creative with respect to ‘alternatives in development’. My personal experience as participant in the program will be the basis for my assessment. This participation has been extensive, but at the background of the long duration, the size and the diversity of IDPAD my assessment cannot be more than a personal and non-representative point of view, which does not reflect the official position of IDPAD if there is any.

The original vision on “alternatives in development” was laid down in the Memorandum of Understanding of 1975. This document was the result of the personal involvement of J.P. Naik and Sukhamoy Chakravarty, respectively Member Secretary of the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) and member of the

Planning Commission, on the Indian side, and Jan Pronk, Minister for Development Cooperation, at the Dutch side. The late prof. S. Chakravarty had been a doctoral student with prof. Jan Tinbergen at Rotterdam University, and also Jan Pronk belonged to the group of Tinbergen students and collaborators. Tinbergen who shared in 1969 with Ragnar Frisch the first Nobel Prize in Economics, visited India in the middle of the fifties and this visit had a decisive impact on his personal career, and his subsequent work at Rotterdam University. Tinbergen's emerging interest in development planning was strengthened by the confrontation with India's poverty and its attempts to plan its economy into a kind of alternative middle road between capitalism and socialism. Tinbergen defined planning pragmatically. Complicated processes such as involved in development policy, require prior preparation in order to avoid some of the foreseeable inconsistencies that may arise. Planning is just that. Because of the complexities scientific methods are advisable in planning. However by the mid seventies India's attempts to plan its economic development faced already widespread disillusion. Enormous poverty was still there, and large scale social oppression and growing income inequalities accompanied the chosen modernization path. How to prevent the socially explosive situation to grow even worse, had become a priority political issue. In this context even the whole development model, derived as it appeared to be from the foreign experiences either in the East or the West, was called into question. Some people amongst which J.P. Naik argued that the fact that India's social science language was a colonial heritage borrowed from the West constituted a core problem. Indian ways to look towards social reality were needed. So the first Memorandum of Understanding reflected all these concerns in the following description of 'alternative':

A shift of perspective in the concept of development from connotations restricted to planning towards generating a holistic social research

A shift from defining development as an economic category restricted to individual towards a conception of it in terms of social well-being for all

Building a critique of the existing theories, practices, and methodologies of development in this context

Developing research methodologies to do multi- and interdisciplinary research in order to understand issues of equity with growth and participation

Research to be policy relevant

This is an ambitious agenda indeed. For participants in the new research program it would imply overcoming too narrow scientific interests, breaking through disciplinary boundaries, and discarding ethnocentric onesidedness. IDPAD's original vision on 'alternatives in development' goes back to the high humanistic ideals of a liberating social science. International collaboration implicitly is supposed to function as a platform to reach that height.

But to begin with it took nearly six years before IDPAD could start at all. That it took off finally was due to the personal involvement of three other persons who brought the program from a bureaucratic standstill into operation, Rajni Kothari, Chairman of ICSSR, T.N.Madan, ICSSR's Member Secretary and Jan Breman, a leading Dutch sociologist, who had been educated by the late prof W. Wertheim of the University of Amsterdam in critical theories of social change in non-Western societies. Jan Breman had an extensive research experience in doing field work amongst marginal groups, particularly in Gujarat. These three men apart from triggering

the program into a take-off did impress upon the selection of research themes, at least from the second phase onwards. 'Alternative' was mainly referring to an new paradigm of social and progressive change taking place over centuries, over continents and over different systems. Therefore comparative critical research along this paradigm was to be encouraged between other Asian countries and India, and between India and Europe. So, while during the first phase the themes still focussed firmly on clear and well established development issues (like small scale industry, multinationals, dairy development, women's studies), the second phase stepped side from such a conventional agenda and introduced umbrella-type research themes like 'comparative perspectives on Asian rural transformation', 'recent trends in European society' and 'the new international order'.

The third and fourth phase did, however, not continue in that somewhat ambitious direction. The agenda of research was allowed to reflect more or less the ongoing development debate, including the new theme of 'ecology and development'.

In the preparatory document of the fifth phase IDPAD formulates its mission statement by focussing again on the last aspect of its original vision, namely research to be policy relevant:

To promote social science research that is of relevance to development in India, and to stimulate interaction between researchers and users of research, including policy makers, with a view to increasing its relevance and utilisation

Accordingly the themes chosen for the fifth phase explicitly deal with some key developmental problems of India. Under the overall umbrella "The quality of life in a globalizing world" the following six themes are proposed: employment and social security, the contested environment, population and health, education, information and communication technologies, mega cities.

My own involvement in IDPAD was mainly in the first and second phases. Being a development economist I feel myself well at home in the Tinbergen school of planned socio-economic change. My perception about what is 'alternative in development' is certainly coloured by such background, as are the specific research projects in which I participated.

During the first phase I participated in a longlasting study on a large scale foreign funded project of dairy development in India. This dairy project acquired a certain fame in and outside India as being a successful model for equitable rural development. But it faced also sharp critique particularly within India. It was known under the suggestive name of 'Operation Flood'. In a way it was itself proclaimed as an 'alternative in development'. First because it offered the European Community an important outlet for large amounts of surplus milk powder and butter oil, which in the context of Operation Flood were donated to India without the infamous negative impact on indigenous dairy producers, which are so well known in the case of other food aid operations. On the contrary Operation Flood implied an enormous developmental effort towards the modernization of Indian dairying itself along the lines of the successful Gujarati milk cooperatives, the so-called Anand pattern, named after the town Anand in Gujarat, where these cooperatives were first established. The initiator of Operation Flood, dr Verghese Kurien, had been able to convince the Government of India that the Anand Pattern was to be used in an all India effort to organize small dairy producers in order to enable them to

earn additional income by marketing their milk in nearby towns and metropolitan cities, to enhance production through scientific feeding and crossbreeding. His organization succeeded in acquiring the status of direct beneficiary of the European dairy donations, which were to be recombined in India in order to generate the funds needed for implementing these ambitious plans. This seemed to be a prime example of planning alternative development for a whole sector of India's economy.

But how 'alternative' it really was? Did it provide on an adequate scale small farmers and landless labourers opportunities to collect jointly their tiny amounts of milk produced individually in order to get a profitable income from the growing milk demand backed up by urban purchasing power? Was it to be called a 'White Revolution'? That were critical and disputed questions, which the research project tried to answer.

Although the core team of project researchers comprised three Dutch and only one Indian researcher, Indians played a key role in getting the project started. The only Indian scholar, who participated in the core team, skillfully convinced Dr Kurien to allow the project to be sanctioned at the Indian side, although there was much suspicion already then about the harm which the research might do to the good name of Operation Flood. Sociologists of Delhi University provided substantial intellectual input. In particular one of them had already published a book on Operation Flood arguing that the project imposed a flawed modernization process on the Indian dairy sector, characterized by heavy capital investment and elitist production and consumption patterns, alien to the living conditions of the Indian poor. The IDPAD research did not on face value accept that critical position, even while individual researchers were quite sympathetic to it. The IDPAD research confined itself to thorough and detailed attempt to de-mythologize Operation Flood, to investigate whether or not its claims about successes might be exaggerated, its ambitions might be too high and its performance in many cases less than satisfactory.

Tense animosity developed between the research team and the project authorities of Operation Flood, in particular Dr Kurien, because the research team was considered to take a biased negative viewpoint on Operation Flood. And compared with the propaganda emanating from the implementing agency, this was certainly the case. The stakes were high as substantial World Bank finance and enormous amounts of European donated products were involved. The fact that the research team was supported by IDPAD and funds for that came mainly from the Netherlands, had two important effects. First of all it helped to sustain a fairly substantial platform and network for an independent critical analysis. If the research would have been mainly financed from within India, it might never have reached the critical mass needed. This combined with the prevailing Indian ethos of social research and non-partisan academic enquiry supported ICSSR/IDPAD against attempts by the powerful Indian lobby of Dr Kurien to prevent publication of the results. On the other hand the external support from the Netherlands for this research and the composition of the core research team allowed Dr Kurien to play the card of 'foreign intervention'. This 'foreign critique' was, according to him, a prime example of an attempt to undermine Indian self-reliance.

Unfortunately this polarization between the research team and the Operation Flood management prevented a real search for alternatives. For that a more lively contact and cooperation would have been needed with Indian technical experts, most of whom were part of the Operation Flood spearhead teams. In fact the IDPAD team, not ready to be another puppet in Dr Kurien's propaganda play, opted for, and was doomed to, the somewhat sterile role of a critical outsider. On the other hand the research project did provide a substantive basis of sobering

facts. The subsequent evaluation mission of the European Commission on Operation Flood was strongly influenced by this.

The second IDPAD project in which I participated was part of the second phase, and focussed upon rural public works. It was a comparative study of (mainly) secondary data on the performance of employment oriented rural public works in four Indian states (Gujarat, Maharashtra, West-Bengal, Karnataka), China, former East Pakistan, and the Netherlands. In one of the Indian states (Gujarat) a detailed primary field study was made, in particular by a team led by a Gujarati economist. The aspect of 'alternatives in development' was then brought in by embedding this study in a broader interstate and international comparative effort to understand the developmental potential, both at the theoretical and the practical level, of employment oriented rural public works, a kind of "best practices" approach. The Employment Guarantee Scheme of Maharashtra was one of the state sponsored programs which we studied. Although this program in its practical operations would not qualify as 'alternative' in the eyes of many students of Indian development, we took the position that the 'guarantee of work', which is formally embedded in its legal framework, is at least a step forward in the direction of strengthening the bargaining power of rural landless labourers. Moreover the international experiences showed the investment potential of such programmes, and their usefulness as a structural development instrument for building up social and economic infrastructure, and environmental protection. Therefore we took the courage to suggest at the end of our study that an improved employment guarantee scheme should be introduced in all states of India. This proposal certainly could qualify as 'alternative' to the present Indian policy with respect to rural unemployment which shies away from extending any 'right to work' to rural labour. In the wake of our research project we succeeded in convincing the Indian and Dutch Governements to file an exploratory mission to Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh in order to investigate the possibility for employment guarantee schemes in these two states.

As I said the two research projects described above are not representative for IDPAD. They reflect an exceptionally strong involvement with questions of policy making, while a broad spectrum of research within IDPAD does not deal with policy making at all, and often for good reasons. According to some, not to bother about policy may even help to focus better upon the factual living conditions, perceptions and perspectives of the poor themselves. The work of Jan Breman and many others performed under IDPAD gives a revealing and often shocking view of the social landscape in which the Indian poor live without or with only implicit reference to policy alternatives. The educational and emancipatory impact of such work can be very important, also for preparing the ground for alternative policies.

Now, on the basis of my personal limited experience, I will have to try to answer the two questions posed at the beginning of my presentation. First, is the concept 'alternative in development' meaningful and operational? Here I come back to my personal bias as a development economist from the Tinbergen school. I tend to feel that 'alternative in development' can only be a meaningful and operational concept if one accepts the idea of 'planned social change' as its context. This implies that somehow futures courses which society -under the impact of human actions- can take are consciously compared with each other in view of good things potentially to be brought about and bad things to be prevented. Planning for alternatives, then, is not only economic or

public planning, and should be understood to mean, first of all, looking around for alternative actors, institutions or simply factors, which might broaden the agenda of change possibilities. It may be called a kind of meta-planning. I am here reminded of Johan Galtung's concept of 'invariance-breaking', the idea that social sciences have to search systematically for those potential exceptions to the 'laws' locking up social reality, which would allow an improvement over the present situation. Even leaving apart Galtung's methodological refinements his preference for a kind of social science that has a programmatic interest in amelioration, is shared by many. Therefore, and notwithstanding all its ambiguities I like the idea of 'alternative in development'. In my personal research experience with IDPAD it was a meaningful concept. And more generally spoken: due to globalization we are much easier a victim of the TINA virus, the idea that 'There Is No Alternative', than of the fantasma that anything can be made to happen.

.To the second question, whether international collaboration did help creativity in terms of alternatives my answer would be a hesitant 'yes'. I hope that the two examples of my own research participation support this affirmative answer, but also its hesitation. In both cases international connections had positive as well as negative aspects.

Having said all this I should immediately add that IDPAD's present official position, as reflected in the preparatory document of the fifth phase is that 'The concept of alternatives in development is a concept of the past, and its meaning is not entirely clear'. But still the whole sphere of the preparatory document, the specific choice of the six themes, the strong emphasis on policy relevance for India, the explicit reference on NGOs as potential users of research do point towards taking a fresh look into the opportunities for better choices in development. Why not calling these choices 'alternative' anymore ?

In conclusion, IDPAD has certainly evolved as a worthwhile and generally successful undertaking, as all of its several evaluation rounds have shown. Notwithstanding its good qualities let me finish with four sobering points concerning issues which could have made IDPAD an even better program.

1. Greater awareness among the participants of the different institutional and intellectual history of social science in both countries could have helped to avoid frictions, misunderstandings, confusion and delays. .
2. Greater self-consciousness of the academic interests involved, as apart from the professed ideals, might have led to greater openness in the IDPAD network leading to broader participation.
3. A bit more modesty could have helped sometimes researchers to listen more carefully to their counterparts, and to exploit more fully the opportunities offered by the program to escape from ethnocentric preoccupations.
4. Considerable more reverse research –i.e. Indians doing research on Europe or the Netherlands- might have benefitted the program.

All these four issues point into a certain direction: notwithstanding its good formal framework and its prevailing spirit of equal cooperation IDPAD could not surmount all of the obstacles structurally embedded in a very unequal global system. Can there be alternatives for that at all ?

Piet Terhal, august 2001

More information on IDPAD can be found on its website: www.idpad.org

