

NINE YEARS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC RESEARCH AT ARTI

The Agrarian Research and Training Institute was founded in 1972 to promote an understanding of conditions in rural areas of Sri Lanka and thereby participate in the modernisation of this country's predominantly agricultural economy. Nine years later it was felt at ARTI that the time had come for a preliminary assessment of the Institute's contribution in this connection. Since the majority of the activities carried out by the research and training staff ultimately form the subject of published reports, it was decided to examine all the papers released to date with a view to analysing trends and evaluating the relevance of findings to the needs of government policy makers. The results of this review will be published shortly, *in extenso*. The present text constitutes a resume of the deliberations of the small team responsible for the appraisal.

By February 1981 ARTI had issued a total of 69 research papers and specifically commissioned reports. On cursory examination of these publications the appraisal team was struck by the dichotomy that clearly emerged between one series, which seemed to be quite without policy orientations, and another, in which the needs of long term planning were usually taken into account. In order to reach an adequate understanding of the reasons for this divergence it was decided to construct a typology of the Institute's research efforts.

Four main categories were hypothesised and each publication was carefully assessed with a view to determining its position in this overall framework. It was found that only very little attention had been given to reviewing past literature on the agrarian situation and pursuing purely methodological issues. A total of only six studies qualified for consideration under these two headings. The bulk of published materials (91 %) could be classified as the result of either data-generating or problem-oriented research.

It was observed that reports entering into the first of these two major categories comprised very little of current relevance to the formulation of future government policies. Several of the studies undertaken in this general area of activity were carried out during ARTI's first years of existence, when priorities dictated that a large body of primary data be collected to, serve as a basis in the choice of future orientations. Some may thus be characterised as statistically descriptive. The more specific the subject matter or the geographical area covered, the less was the tendency to analyse data with a view to identifying policy implications. There is, notwithstanding, evidence to suggest that work done on agricultural production costs did exercise a certain influence upon pricing at both the wholesale and the retail level. It would appear, for instance, that the fixing of a guaranteed price for paddy did take ARTI conclusions into account. Information circulated by the Institute on vegetable farming did possibly have a bearing upon the decision to commence the regular announcement by radio of Colombo prices. This seems to have strengthened the position of outstation growers in their efforts to secure more equitable rates for the sale of their produce in urban areas.

The largest number of studies in the first category do not date however, from the beginning of the Institute. They were commissioned, for the most part, after the mid-70s by agencies involved in major infrastructural development projects anxious to monitor socio-economic progress as a result of massive investment. The brief usually required the carrying out of a pre-project baseline study, to be followed after some years by a mid-project review and an evaluation performed *ex post facto*. In most of these cases, researchers felt that the baseline investigation should constitute a mere description of socio-economic conditions in the project areas. Analysis of findings with the object of influencing policy decisions was deemed to exceed the terms of reference. If only one study did those responsible regard the identification of issues requiring policy-oriented solutions as fruitful at that stage in the project's evolution. It is perhaps significant that the paper in question is the most recent to be published by ARTI in the nine year period under consideration. It may herald a new trend in the approach adopted by the Institute to this kind of commission.

But it is perhaps hardly appropriate to judge ARTI's past capacity to produce policy oriented research on the basis of work undertaken in the context of particular investment projects. For such commissions constitute a fairly recent event in the Institute's history and sufficient time has not yet elapsed for researchers to prove their mettle in ongoing monitoring activities or post-project evaluation. Besides, two major baseline surveys are still being prepared for publication (the Kirindi Oya and Kurunegala Integrated Rural Development Projects). Even so, it has been noted that project planning and implementation staff in the field have not always obtained satisfaction when they have pressed for feedback in the context of ongoing survey work: ARTI researchers do tend to operate independently with little regard for the specific requirements of management.

This has led to much of the baseline study data being less relevant to policy formulation and to the on-going readjustment of project objectives than might have been possible and indeed opportune. The responsibility for inadequate communication flow between researchers and project management

must however be shared. In defence of research officers it may on the other hand be mentioned that project planners and field directors are inclined to see outside evaluation teams with some little apprehension: unable to control their activities, they fear that negative conclusions accruing from a study may damage their own position.

The appraisal team found that 46 (or 67%) of all reports published up to the end of February 1981 could be described as 'problem-oriented'. Members were agreeably surprised that of the total number of such studies 32 had come up with conclusions that had a definite bearing upon policy, although nine of these were no longer relevant to the present situation. The findings of 14 other reports were judged to be without significance for the formulation of policies either past or present. It was further interesting to note that 32 (or 70%) of the publications included in this category of problem-oriented research were concerned with institutional issues. This nicely demonstrate that ARTI has by and large remained true to the mandate originally conferred upon it, which emphasizes the agrarian context of rural change and not merely agricultural development. It is to the credit of officers involved in institutionally oriented research efforts that a strong majority of these remain of current relevance and provide clear guidelines for future policy.

There has thus over the years been a general tendency for work done at the institute to become increasingly problem oriented. This evolution is of course very positive insofar as it constitutes a response to the needs of planners and policy makers. It should be emphasised, however, that ARTI must continue to fulfil a vital function in the area of fundamental research, the policy implications of which are not necessarily always evident in the short term.