



Approaches to Building Food Security Policy Analysis Capacity in Developing Countries: IFPRI and MSU

Q & A Sessions Transcript

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[Session 1]

Audience: [Off mic] ...long-term versus short-term training and capacity building. I generally think of capacity building as fundamentally a long-term initiative. How is MSU and how do you think generally about that balance and how have you arrived at the decisions you've made in the past?

Duncan Boughton: If I understand your question, you're talking about the capacity building as a long-term process, but what was I referring to in this balance between short-term and long run.

What I was referring to and I was speaking rather quickly there, is the balance between short-term advisory work for decision makers who have a burning issue, a burning question versus longer term research to understand the structure of the agricultural economy and how it's evolving and what can be done to improve productivity in the food system. That kind of research is a much longer term process.

There's two pitfalls that you can fall into. One is all the attention goes on the firefighting and there's not enough attention going to the underlying research that can feed options to decision makers to get longer term structural change in the economy that leads to productivity gains, reduction in costs, improvements of access to food and so on.

So you're trading off longer term payoffs from good policy advice in order to deal with short-term _____.

The other is to say no, we're here to do research so we're going to close our eyes to all those short-term burning issues. We're going to switch off our phones. We're not going to look at our e-mail in the mornings and we're just going to try to get that research done.

Then the problem is that decision makers begin to wonder well what on earth is the relevance of all this. It doesn't give me what I need today. I needed that help today. They then may make a decision which is very unfortunate.

So how do you find the balance for that. So that's also one of the reasons that we're moving to this university-based policy analysis unit is that that will help create some space between the short-term firefighting and the research. So the research that can continue to be done, but at the same time there's a source of ongoing technical assistance and training for the firefighters at the ministry

level. They can come from the ministry. They can spend a few months in that unit to do some research and upgrade their skills.

But of course, capacity building is a long-term process because it's not sufficient only to do short-term in-service training. There is a need for MS level training. There is a need for Ph.D. level training and there is an absolute drastic shortage of really highly qualified national analysts at the Ph.D. level. There's no shortcuts to filling that deficit.

Zachary Baquet: We have time for one more.

Audience: Good morning and thank you for your presentation. I'm Amanda Pearson from the George Washington University School of Public Health. I had a very specific question about you had mentioned how the stagnant agricultural productivity had impact on both hunger and poverty. What are the indicators that you're using to measure the hunger and the poverty specifically?

Duncan Boughton: That's a very good question. There's probably a difference between the way say we try to measure that through a national agricultural survey and the way that other partners who can do frequent visits on the ground can measure that.

So the way in which we try to get at this would not necessarily give you a satisfactory answer from your perspective from where you're coming from. Those kind of perspectives that you're looking for might come much for from people who are doing regular visits in clinics and regularly weighing children and looking at the percentage of underweight, looking at the percentage of stunted, to what extent there's recovery, looking at learning impairment.

Relative to those kind of very fine grade measurements, ours are rather gross. We would be tracking, for example, for different types of household over time. How many months of food supply are they able to retain before they become net buyers. When they do become net buyers, do they have the financial resources to go to the market to buy that. Do they have other sources of income. Can they afford to buy food. Are they able to buy that food. That's a rather kind of maybe macro perspective relative to the fine grain measurements that you're talking to, but those are some of the kinds of indicators that we seek to track over time.

They're very much trying to look at different types of household and what enables them to be successful or not in providing for their food needs or obtaining it from the market.

Zachary Baquet: Well technology is great, but it also has its issues. So, we'll be continuing to take questions.

Audience: Hi. I'm Sara Derso from NCBA. In the same vein I wanted to ask you if you have any difficulty collecting data on household revenue. If you've come across issues regarding proprietary sense of that data by the households, heads of households.

Duncan Boughton: Well that's a very good question indeed and there are enormous problems in measuring income. Not so much because of the sensitivity of the issue. Mostly we're working with smallholder households and these are very private, confidential, one-on-one interviews. They're not being interviewed in a public space.

But the main problem is that most of these households don't conceptually think in income terms. So we have to ask very long, complex, boring series of questions that really try to get at that income in a broad sense. We're considering all their own production as income because if they didn't have that overproduction they'd have to have income to buy it and we're looking at different sources of revenue.

Generally we're not able to drill down into household specific with these national surveys. Although with smaller surveys we do try to get into how much income is controlled by different members of the household and that we would understand the impacts of that on food security.

But I think the main problem is the accuracy of measurement rather than the willingness to share the information. On the other hand, we feel that it's worth living with some measurement error because it helps us understand the underlying structure of how that income is generated and what enables households to be able to overcome hunger or overcome poverty. Then we can give policy makers advice on how they can promote that among other types of household.

[Session 2]

Zachary Baquet: With that we'll take a few questions before moving onto the panels. So again, if you have a question, please state your name and organization.

Audience: Hi. My name is _____ with Bread for the World. Thanks, Paul, for your wonderful presentation. Based on your vast experience in these countries in working with both government and private sector, do you see an interest

particularly from government in wanting to share this cross-country experiences? I know they're talking about setting up regional centers of excellence in research and analysis. Do you see that governments are heading that way in terms of sharing experiences with each other cross borders?

Paul Dorosh:

Well, I think as you know, governments vary tremendously in their openness and their willingness to have open debate and discussion, but I think there is a lot of support for cross country learning, especially among the research community and especially among the analysts. There's a lot of opportunity for – as part of that learning is capacity strengthening.

I think it's often the case that it's very useful in talking with governments to be able to discuss the example from another country. It's not quite as threatening as saying it's just this country. Of course, the other response one could get is well, that's them and it's not really our country, but still to be able to say that this has been tried somewhere else, it worked. Here's some reasons why it may be useful here and here's some analysis to suggest that this kind of option could be considered.

Zachary Baquet:

We have a question from online.

Female:

Question from Tesvi Workenay who is from Catholic Relief Services, Ethiopia program who asks, "What were the factors for the reduction in proportion of destitute people in rural areas of Ethiopia where the price of food increased dramatically, which affects the net food buyers?"

Paul Dorosh:

Well, first of all, to my friend in Ethiopia, it was very interesting in that survey that although there had been a lot of inflation in Ethiopia the year prior to the survey, when we looked at actually how households self-assessed their situation, in this sample that we had you had a lot of progress.

I think it's important to remember that this comparison, the previous period of comparison was five years earlier. We had data from several surveys, but we weren't actually looking in the year of very high food prices and food price inflation, but basically we were looking at rural households.

There is substantial evidence from the survey that these households had achieved at least some gains in production over time and that their situation had improved over time and, again, many of the rural households, even if they were somewhat net purchasers, their vulnerability to food price shocks would be far less than say the urban poor who would be consuming 100 percent of –

well, 100 percent of their consumption would be coming from market purchases.

Audience:

I'm Channing Lawrence and I'm with the University of Copenhagen and I actually worked with Duncan in Mozambique for a while. I have a question for both in terms of your experience looking across countries. How does this information make its way into sort of generalized governance and governance issues?

In your experience also, we can talk often about how information comes and makes a specific decision, but also often this information that's generated forms a basis for a lot of decisions with respect to what's going on inside the country in terms of what is the basic situation. I just wanted you to comment on that.

Paul Dorosh:

Well, that's a tough one, Channing. I was expecting an easy question from you. I think we've seen that there is a huge difference in the way this information feeds into the policy debate. I could contrast especially Ghana and Ethiopia.

In Ghana there's this opportunity to have a seminar and to have these things debated. That's fine and everybody's happy to have an open debate. That provides a real opportunity to bring these issues into the open and to discuss the trade offs in that kind of way.

In Ethiopia the situation is a bit different. That kind of open seminar is a little bit difficult to have. We still tried to pull it off several years ago in Addis. We had a debate between John Mellor, who many of you know, and Stefan Dirkahn of Oxford in terms of what should agricultural policy and ag development policy look like.

Then by having these two foreigners debate and we had Alamyu providing the reasoned view from the senior national researcher as well, but having the two foreigners debate I think enabled this discussion to happen without being too politically problematic whereas for an Ethiopian to be there and saying things that were perhaps a little too critical of current policies would have been a little bit too touchy.

So there are ways to get it into the debate and to have impact on policies and it really differs across country. Duncan, do you want to answer this as well?

Duncan Boughton:

Thanks very much. I think that's a really excellent question. Certainly the kind of sharing that goes on with analysts going to meetings in other countries and being able to exchange with their counterparts is very, very valuable.

I think there's a couple of other things which really help and I think, Channing, you can speak to this yourself from your own experience is that when you have qualified analysts in several different ministries, they come with complementary perspectives.

So I remember some of the discussions that we had in the early years with Channing's program where we have analysts from the Ministry of Finance come out and they kind of challenge in a constructive way analysts in the Ministry of Agriculture are saying, "Well what are you actually contributing to poverty reduction?" But in a constructive way. Not in a confrontational way. That leads to some kind of creative thinking on the part of the agri – well, yeah, what programs are most valuable. How is what we're doing contributing.

Then that in turn then I think encourages them to seek experiences from other countries in order to foster this debate. So this kind of having different ministries. Then you can broaden that out to include different private sector and different civil society groups.

The more analysts that you have in more different parts of society who are interacting about these issues and each of them are bringing to the table a wide range of experiences, then it becomes richer and it becomes more constructive and it becomes more problem focused and more solution focused.

I just wanted to address the question that you had. You were talking about how willing are countries to share. If I may answer also, just complement that question that you raised because that's a really important question.

Generally analysts are very comfortable about sharing their experience. When you get to the level of permanent secretaries, they can become very nervous about really sharing their experiences because if issues are politically charged, then their jobs are on the line particularly with very sensitive programs that have important implications for elections and so on.

So you need a very different kind of venue for senior civil servants to be able to exchange this. It has to be very confidential for them to be able to open up and share their experiences. Thank you.

[Session 3]

Julie Howard:

So Zachary, before you evict me as moderator now that I've allowed the session to run over ten minutes, do we have any time for any last questions from the audience?

Zachary Baquet: We'll take one from in person and then one from online and then we're going to have to wrap it up. Any discussion or continuing discussion can happen on Agrilinks at agrilinks.org where the events page is. There's a comment functionality as well. So with that.

Audience: My name is _____ Wonmali. I work for ICF International. I congratulate both the presenters and the panelists for an excellent discussion. However that discussion has raised so many questions that you cannot answer them or we cannot raise them in the time that we have at our disposal.

One question. This particular strengthening of capacities at the national level and regional level is a macro issue of policy planning and plan formulation. I'm putting it in the context of Feed the Future program that is now unrolling in Sub-Saharan Africa and where the capacities that you are required to build from day one are of all kinds of stakeholders which are enrolled in it.

So we are talking about ultimate beneficiaries to the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Health, for example. That is a really tall order for strengthening capacities in five years of time when in 20 years in Mozambique and other parts of the world _____ and IFPRI has been doing it for such a long period of time.

So you are now asking to compress 20 years of experience in 5 years, begin to work with strengthening of capacities from day one of different types of stakeholders and also start doing your impact evaluation from also day one. How does one do this since I have moved over from research in IFPRI and gone to the darker side, which is development consultancy? I very much would like to know how does one do this and compress all that in five years.

So would US AID be willing to extend the time limit imposed on implementers of these projects in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, from five to ten years? Would they provide a guarantee of the type that Duncan and Paul were talking about where the trust can be built of the ultimate beneficiaries and the permanent secretaries? Otherwise this is going to fall through the cracks actually.

Look at the _____ consultation of last summer on Feed the Future research agenda and you would read the same refrain. Let's do it for a long period of time. Let's build capacities at the US AID and other levels where it is necessary for implement this. Let us link research extension and advocacy and let us not

run away in three years from doing this job in that country. Otherwise it will not stay and establish itself. Thank you very much.

Zachary Baquet: Speaking of compressed timelines, who wants to take a quick answer to that one?

Julie Howard: Jeff can _____.

Jeff Hill: Sorry. Really a pretty quick response to it is fundamentally that we're not going to succeed by simply continuing to do what we've done in the past. So I don't really look at making the case of what we've done in the past is what we need to do in the future.

I do think that Prabhu is actually right on identifying that there are some core constraints that need to be dealt with and the question is is that are we actually putting in place efforts, capacities to go to scale to solve some of those problems.

To do that will require some new models of the way that we work, the way that we work with countries other donors private sector and I think that that is actually a pretty important issue of trying to clarify so it is focused, it is really asking the question of scale to solve that problem, new models of being able to tackle some of those issues.

While there is outstanding work that has been done, we wouldn't be here today in many of the countries if it wasn't for outstanding work that's going on in the policy arena to help manage the efforts, but there is new models and new approaches that we need to put on the table for moving forward.

Zachary Baquet: With that we have a short question from online.

Female: This is a question from Elizabeth Lamb from World Food Program, who is curious as to whether you think that policy analysis capacity building could be used to further the 2015 millennium development goals, and whether it could lead to a way to measure results when trying to meet these new goals.

Jeff Hill: I'll take it real quick one at that. I think that in Africa what is actually emerging is a very clear and sharp recognition is that countries actually do have in place a number of the different investment plans and the strategies for being able to move forward, but what they are very clearly seeing and it is emerging as a strong consensus is that the policies and the institutions that need to change to accelerate implement to meet the types of goals will be critically important and

that that needs to be brought into focus so that I think there's a big yes that there are clear linkages with policy and being able to meet some of those goals. I would be reluctant to say within those timeframes.

Julie Howard:

Just to add onto that comment and also to your question. I think Jeff and Prabhu were right. We need to think about scale and we need to think about some of the new kinds of skills that need to be developed.

Paul, interested in your comment about what is the line between being a policy analyst and an advocate, but I do think that some of the tools that we now have at our disposal allow us to provide information in a way that new clients can use for advocacy and that's really what we need to focus on.

Also, and my last comment on this, I think it's incumbent on us as donors to provide better institutional incentives for our partners to work together. We see through the presentations of MSU and IFPRI that's already starting to happen, but we need to provide stronger signals that we really want to see that happening.

Part of it is not only working together in the present, but reaching back and making sure we're building on what went before because the truth is we're not starting from a blank slate in any of these countries or regions.

We're building on our efforts. We're building on other donors' efforts and the strongest skill set we need at this point in time is to tie those together into a cohesive whole with strong priorities and benchmarks that allow us to see are we making progress in this area, do we need to continue, do we need to stop doing something and focus on something else. I think that's the new vision that we have for these programs.

Zachary Baquet:

With that I'd like to thank moderator Julie and our panelists, Daniel, Jeff and Prabhu for joining us today, as well as Duncan and Paul for their presentations.
[Applause]

With that, a brief announcement for those inside of US AID to please join us for a brown bag lunch by the Partnership to Cut Hunger and Poverty in Africa and the Bureau for Food Security with Brian Kowitz, the CEO of Farm Builders. This is going to be taking place at noon. Very soon. In BFS conference room 20908. So please join us for that.

Then also, please fill out our evaluations. We appreciate those. We do take them seriously and those of you online, we'll send you a link.

All the materials for this event and the recorded of the event will go up on Agrilinks on the event page. So please look for it there.

With that, we also have two events coming up. March 20-22 we're having an online discussion forum on ag exchange around knowledge sharing in this sector of food security and agriculture. So please join us for that. You can find out more information on Agrilinks.

Then also for March 28th we'll have our next Ag Sector Council, which is going to be a follow-up talking about knowledge sharing around ag and food security issues.

With that, I thank you for your patience. I appreciate it. Sorry for the technical issues. I hope you have a good day. Thank you.

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