

**Diversifying Social Research at the  
International Food Policy Research Institute**

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### **Introduction**

As a policy research institute, IFPRI's research staff has always been predominantly composed of social scientists. However, until recently economics was the predominant discipline, and within that, neoclassical economics predominated. Over the years there have been one or two sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists or geographers at any one time, but they often needed to adapt their methods and approaches to economics, or their contributions seemed to be marginalized. Growing recognition of the importance of institutional aspects in much of IFPRI's work has created greater appreciation for the contributions of other disciplines. Some divisions have also responded to the increasing salience within the international development field and literature of politics, power and empowerment, social difference such as gender and ethnicity, cultural factors, social relationships/capital, and other issues that are harder to measure using economic methods and perspectives. Furthermore, a 1996 internally-commissioned external review (ICER) of IFPRI methods recommended more interdisciplinarity in IFPRI's research in order to achieve greater policy impact.

This paper begins with a review of discussions on the disciplinary mix at IFPRI over time. It then highlights some of the areas of research in which non-economic social sciences have made a major contribution at IFPRI, either through in-house staff or external collaborators, and at directions for the future, including the following:

- institutional analysis of property rights and collective action, which brings together institutional economics, sociology, and land resources disciplines and has developed innovative community and institutional survey methods;
- gender and intrahousehold research, involving economics, anthropology, and sociology, with iterative qualitative and quantitative research;
- research on poverty, including analyses of a variety of safety nets and other programs to help the poor, studies of the dynamics of poverty and inequality, and convening an inter-center research program on the impact of agricultural research on poverty, using the sustainable livelihoods framework
- greater involvement of political science and political sociology in analyzing governance, linkages between peace and food security, processes involving getting poverty issues on the agenda, policymaking and implementation, as well as helping IFPRI identify how information is used by policymakers, in order to have the greatest impact with our research.

The paper also considers challenges to interdisciplinary research, including understanding of and regard for the different perspectives and concerns of other disciplines, technical language, research methods and methodology, and standards of evidence. It also discusses the differences between bringing capacity in-house or through collaborators.

## **A Historical Perspective**

The first CGIAR external program review of IFPRI, conducted in 1984, nine years after the founding of the Institute, devoted three and a half densely written pages to the consideration of staff composition by disciplines (TAC 1985, 65-68). The review panel was headed by a distinguished plant scientist, supported by three economists and an ecologist. They identified an “IFPRI approach” implemented by staff economists representing a narrow band within the profession, who emphasized “incentives and inputs rather than power, interest-groups, structures, or institutions.” IFPRI’s economists were, however, open minded, and sought to make up for their lack of breadth through various palliative measures, which the review team rejected as insufficient.

The review panel considered IFPRI research to be of high quality, but found areas where it was harmed by the narrow approach. There was lack of attention to structural variables that would concern structuralist anthropologists, political scientists, and economists. They also feared damage to specific research projects, particularly those that compared issues across countries without considering sufficiently how the social, political, and biological circumstances of those countries might differ. The criticisms extended to the six questions that provided the outline of the Institute’s first long term research strategy. One of these, for example, assumed that a combination of farm producer incentives was the aspect of food policy most likely to affect the chances of achieving growth and equity simultaneously. The question as formulated failed to direct attention to agro-climatic, family-structural, or economic-power-based causes of growth, stagnation, equity or poverty, which would seem more important to an agricultural scientist, a social anthropologist, or a structural economist. A further argument for broadening the role of the social sciences at IFPRI was to give support to political science, anthropology and the full scope of economics in the CGIAR System as a whole.

On the basis of this analysis, the review panel recommended that over the coming five years, IFPRI make a determined effort to broaden the approach to economics among its staff, and over the coming two years, appoint a senior anthropologist and a senior political scientist. The panel also felt that natural sciences should also inform IFPRI’s research, but recognizing that it would be difficult to establish a suitable research environment for natural scientists, a small advisory group was suggested. In its response, the IFPRI Board lumped this, and several other suggestions for expansion or improvement of the Institute’s program, as steps that could only be considered if additional funding were forthcoming, particularly unrestricted grant funding.

Achieving a suitable involvement of disciplines other than economics remained an issue in 1990’s, at the time of the Second External Program Review. This panel noted

that the Institute had failed to broaden the cadre of social scientists on its senior staff, but did not press the matter. The panel warned against multidisciplinary dilettantism, and concentrated on working relationships with the physical and natural sciences—nutrition and the environment were strongly represented on the panel. The members were concerned that isolated scientists could not maintain disciplinary quality. To achieve diversity in the social sciences, IFPRI was urged to search for researchers with double majors in economics and another discipline, but not at the cost of second rate knowledge of economics—the review panel chairman and two team members were economists (TAC 1991, 32).

In 1996, in preparation for its third CGIAR external evaluation, IFPRI commissioned its own review, the ICER. It was conducted by nine external scholars and professionals focused on the methodology of research and outreach. In a major move toward disciplinary diversity, the team included three economists, two political scientists, one anthropologist, one sociologist, and two specialists in public affairs. Much of the output consisted of detailed commentaries on each element of the IFPRI program. There were only two broad recommendations, one of which was entitled “Movement Toward Methods Diversity.” This was an extended and encouraging analysis of the process, detected in IFPRI, of movement away from relying principally on conventional analysis of markets and households to a broad sensitivity for the importance of institutions of all kinds, both public and private. The ICER team pointed out that this was a direction increasingly favored within the economics discipline itself, but cautioned against the difficulties of learning to use multiple methodologies effectively together.

ICER stressed the importance of IFPRI conducting research on the institutions of the state itself, particularly the processes by which research results played a role in governmental policy decisions. There were sensitivities and risks involved, but they were not as great as the risks of IFPRI failing to examine and test generalizations about state behavior. One suggestion was that more research about successful cases of policy implementation might have greater influence with political leaders than inferences drawn from statistical correlations.

The ICER team noted with approval the gradual inclusion of other social science disciplines on IFPRI research staff, but thought that a major shift in this direction would be unwise, partly because of critical mass problems. They suggested instead a systematic process of involving short term visitors from other disciplines, and engaging in collaboration with research institutions where the dominant disciplines were not economics. In contrast with the universities and their rigid disciplinary departments, and the World Bank with its growing multidisciplinary structure but declining technical staff related to agriculture and rural development, IFPRI was very well placed to pioneer and set standards in a multidisciplinary approach to food and agricultural policy.

At the time of the third external review by the CGIAR, six of 52 senior research staff were not primarily economists: two geographers (both since departed), and one each in nutrition, epidemiology, rural sociology, and political science. The external review of IFPRI’s work discussed the recommendations of ICER in relation to the work of the Food

Consumption and Nutrition Division, the location of most of the still limited numbers of non-economists on the research staff. The review did not recommend specific actions to increase effective multidisciplinary research at IFPRI, but foresaw a need for the Institute to experiment with different approaches before it found the right combination (TAC 1998, 15-16, 45-47).

These external reviews, along with the work by non-economists within IFPRI, and support from senior management, and changes within the economics profession itself, have expanded the scope for social research within IFPRI. The following sections present some of the notable areas in which non-economic social research has found a niche within IFPRI, particularly in the Multi-country Programs (MPs) and Global and Regional Programs (GRPs) that form the building blocks of IFPRI's research agenda.

### **Property Rights and Collective Action: Institutional Studies for Bridging to Social Research**

When IFPRI reorganized its research around Multicountry Research Programs (MPs), one of the first to get underway in 1993 was on Property Rights and Collective Action. Although the research was designed around two inter-related institutions that cut across a number of resources, it proceeded largely along separate tracks, with an economist leading research on the role of property rights in forest management, and a sociologist conducting research on collective action in water management. However, both employed largely econometric analysis, with an emphasis on how these institutions affected productivity and sustainability of resource systems.

As this work progressed, IFPRI began collaborating with a number of other CGIAR centers (notably ICARDA, ILRI, and ICRAF) on these topics. Rather than just engage in bilateral projects, IFPRI then proposed a System-wide Program on Property Rights and Collective Action, which got underway in 1995. By 1996 all 16 CGIAR centers had signed on to the program, which led to greater diversity in the topics and approaches taken to research on these institutions. Joint appointments between IFPRI and ICARDA, on one side, and IFPRI and ILRI, on the other, brought in a land policy specialist and an institutional economist to the MP team.

Growing awareness and popularity of institutional economics provided a means for improved communication between economics, sociology, and other disciplines involved in this research. For example, where once "culture" was viewed with suspicion by economists, institutional economics' emphasis on "norms" elevated many aspects of culture to key factors to be investigated. Notions of path dependence from institutional economics similarly challenged narrow econometric assumptions of predictability and extrapolation of how institutions would develop based on regressions, and gave greater credence to more qualitative research on processes of change.

Further mixing of the different disciplines came about as the sociologist's research on water drew her into more work on property rights over water, while the economists within IFPRI and in the system-wide program began to devote more attention

to collective action for managing rangelands and other natural resources—to the point where the system-wide program was renamed from Property Rights and Collective Action (PRCA) to Collective Action and Property Rights (CAPRI). The work on water rights drew heavily on anthropological work on legal pluralism, and many of these ideas were picked up by those of other disciplines working on other resources, especially rangelands.

The mixing of disciplines led to methodological innovations, particularly in cross-site comparison of institutions. Much of the literature on the role of property rights or factors affecting collective action in natural resource management has been based on case studies. Theoretical work has drawn upon a wide range of case studies to develop a range of (sometimes inconsistent) hypotheses regarding “determinants” of collective action (see Baland and Platteau 1996; Berkes and Folke 1998; Ostrom 1990). Early work on property rights under the MP went significantly beyond case studies, by using what was termed a “community survey,” or modified rapid rural assessment, to collect information on both property rights systems and production and environmental outcomes from a large enough sample of communities and households within communities so that econometric analysis could be used to test the strength of relationships at the community and household levels (Otsuka and Place 2001). A similar quantitative approach was taken to studying collective action in canal irrigation in India and pastoral management in Burkina Faso, with the addition of more qualitative analysis of the collective action institutions themselves (Meinzen-Dick, Raju, and Gulati 2002; McCarthy, Dutilly-Diane and Drabo 2001). Other research on management of pastoral resources in west Asia and north Africa has been done in strong collaboration with ICARDA and natural scientists from NARS, as well as policymakers in the countries. The resulting collaboration has resulted in much stronger policy impact and capacity building than if the research had been conducted exclusively by social scientists.

Networking with other CGIAR centers, NARS partners, and other professional groups, especially the International Association for the Study of Common Property, has provided impetus for further interdisciplinary cooperation, and for the integration of social sciences—both economic and non-economic, in this MP team. The coordination is still not perfect, in part because the members of the team have separate projects and have not worked together on any single project. However, a recent retreat to identify research priorities for further work identified the need to continue on the studies of collective action for natural resource management, but to expand work on how property rights and collective action can contribute to poverty reduction. This research is likely to call for further interdisciplinary cooperation.

### **Looking Outside the Box in Gender and Intrahousehold Research**

The objective of IFPRI’s gender and intrahousehold research program, established in 1993, is to test whether or not intrahousehold allocation affects the outcomes and consequences of policies, and to generate information that will assist in the development of high-performing policies, programs, and projects. Central to the objective of this MP is understanding better how households work—whether households make decisions as one,

or whether individuals in the household have different preferences, rights, resources and responsibilities. At the outset, it was very clear that the processes of household decisionmaking varied enormously across cultures, and were affected by processes which were outside the domain of the traditional focus of economics. Indeed, a conference on intrahousehold analysis that preceded the formal establishment of the MP included papers from sociologists and anthropologists, which were eventually published in an edited volume by Haddad, Hoddinott, and Alderman (1997). MP17's methodology document clearly acknowledged the lead that other social science disciplines had, but acknowledged that economic research on household decisionmaking processes had grown tremendously in recent years, stimulated by advances in economic models, econometric techniques, and the quantity and quality of household and individual-level data (Strauss and Thomas 1995).

The MP proposal made convincing arguments regarding the inability to anticipate individual responses to economic incentives if intrahousehold allocation processes are neglected. MP documents have also argued that research on the link between intrahousehold allocation and policy depends on (1) the development of household models that can accommodate individual preferences; (2) the development of innovative methods of data collection; (3) the establishment of a good dialogue with policymakers in developing countries; and (4) the opportunity to test the relevance of intrahousehold issues for policy in a number of countries, for a number of policy instruments, using common data and modeling methodologies. Qualitative methods were initially regarded in the context of developing innovative (for economists!) methods of data collection, but eventually became appreciated as an important methodological area in its own right.<sup>1</sup>

Qualitative methods were especially important in coming up with culturally-relevant definitions of variables that could proxy for bargaining power within marriage. Economic models of the household that allowed for different preferences of individuals within the household predicted that one's share of resources depends on bargaining power. But since bargaining power is an elusive concept, it became clear that indicators would need to be developed for specific cultural settings. At this time the team was composed primarily of economists. The team considered hiring a staff anthropologist or sociologist, but thought that given the country-specificity of many of the indicators of bargaining power, that in-country collaborators would serve the purpose better.

A large grant from USAID's Office of Women in Development eventually gave IFPRI the opportunity to include inputs from other social science disciplines. Under this grant, the MP undertook four high-concentration country studies (in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Guatemala, and South Africa) and 8 supplementary studies. The four high-concentration countries and the supplementary studies countries were chosen so that the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the MP proposal discusses the need for multidisciplinary approaches to data collection, the use of new variables (in quantitative analyses) that clarify the nature of the intrahousehold allocation process, and the emergence of participatory rural appraisal methods. Although subsequent MP documents such as the methodology paper expounded on qualitative methods in greater detail, it was clear that quantitative methods were still the main focus of the MP. It was only after the hiring of a sociologist in house that more attention was given to the specific methodologies used in qualitative research, and qualitative and quantitative research outputs given equal significance.

research team would be able to (1) generalize about the relevance of intrahousehold issues to a wide range of policy outcomes in a broad range of countries; and (2) make specific policy recommendations in each country, with more depth and emphasis in the four high-concentration countries. Each high-concentration country study had both a quantitative household survey and a qualitative study. The qualitative studies in Bangladesh, Guatemala, and South Africa were designed jointly by in-country social scientist collaborators and IFPRI researchers, and were extremely valuable in informing the design of the quantitative survey modules, especially on assets at marriage (the indicator chosen to measure bargaining power in all the countries), social capital, and measures of women's empowerment. For Ethiopia, qualitative village studies conducted by sociology and anthropology graduate students had already been undertaken and were available to the IFPRI researchers. One of our in-country collaborators expressed a desire to have the qualitative study circulated in its own right, for she had a previous unfortunate experience with another IFPRI researcher who used the results of the study in her own study, and granted authorship to the collaborator only after a long struggle. Because of this, we decided that all the qualitative studies should be considered research outputs in their own right.

One valuable source of inputs from non-economists was the External Advisory Committee of the AID-funded project. The committee was composed of 11 external members including 3 anthropologists and 1 nutritionist, from universities, international organizations, research institutions, and NGOs, and were among the most senior members of their respective professions. The remainder of the group consisted of economists. In addition, USAID staff and associated program staff (most of whom were sociologists and anthropologists) attended the EAC meetings regularly. This group met yearly to review research plans and progress. Most of the suggestions made during the EAC meetings were followed by IFPRI researchers. In addition, the IFPRI research team made an effort to include non-economist grantees in its supplemental studies program. The grantees included two sociologists, three anthropologists, and four economists.

Because of the valuable lessons learned from working with social scientists, IFPRI included both a qualitative and quantitative component in its proposal to evaluate the effect of Mexico's PROGRESA (Programa Nacional de Educacion, Salud, y Nutricion) on women's status and intrahousehold relations (see Adato and Mindek 2000; de la Briere and Quisumbing 2000). Follow-up work to the Bangladesh study conducted under a project for the CGIAR's Standing Panel for Impact Assessment (SPIA) built on the work undertaken under the MP17 program and included qualitative studies in the community. In both cases, having a rural sociologist on staff was valuable to the design and analysis of both studies. In the case of PROGRESA, relying on the quantitative study results alone would have led to a lack of appreciation of the effects of the program on women's empowerment, because the quantitative survey questionnaire did not lend itself to capturing many of the subtle attitudinal changes that occurred because of the program. It also exposed some of the subtleties of how decisions are actually made between men and women in the household, and raised the problem of potential differences between formally recognized (and thus reported) decision-makers and actual decision makers. In this study IFPRI researchers determined that neither survey nor focus

group work was sufficient to understand this fully, and that some ethnographic research would be needed in this case. Our positive experience with PROGRESA made team members appreciate the value of having a non-economist social scientist on staff rather than pulled in when the research project had already been designed (and usually by economists). One of the lessons learned through this study regarding the challenges to interdisciplinary work is the extra time needed to do careful integration of the research. Because of the tight time frame of this study, as well as IFPRI's limited experience with mixing disciplines and methods, the economic and sociological components were carried out in a parallel, rather than an iterative, manner. Neither part of the study had the benefit of learning from the other before being designed, something that could have considerably improved both parts. Instead, the value of the mixed method work was reaped at the data analysis stage, by each team considering the results of the other. However, write-ups were also done as two separate reports rather than an integrated report, again emphasizing the need for adequate time and planning to integrate findings and allow each approach to really benefit from the other.

The MP also made an effort to reach nontraditional (non-economist, non-academic) audiences in its outreach efforts. The MP sponsored an email listserve to discuss gender issues in development research. One of the explicit objectives of the listserve was to draw social scientists and other policy analysts into the sphere of gender and intrahousehold analysis. Using the listserve as a springboard, the research team organized an electronic conference moderated by two economists, one sociologist, and one anthropologist. After the completion of the research, the team wrote a technical guide to including gender in development projects which was field tested in Nepal, Kenya, and Guatemala, with a multi-disciplinary audience of practitioners.

Some, but not all, of the proposals written to fund gender and intrahousehold research included explicit reference to qualitative methods. Qualitative methods were very important in the PROGRESA evaluation and the follow-up work in South Africa funded by MacArthur, and will be even more important in future research programs.

### **Research on Safety Net Programs and Poverty Dynamics**

Over the six years, IFPRI's Food Consumption and Nutrition Division (FCND) has carried out five major projects that integrated sociology in its study of safety net programs and poverty dynamics. These include studies of urban food security in Ghana in 1996; public works programmes in South Africa; the PROGRESA program in Mexico; factors explaining movements in and out of poverty in South Africa; and the impact of agricultural research on poverty (the latter in collaboration with the Environment and Production Technology Division).

The integration of sociology into the public works study in South Africa (see Adato et al. 1999) was initially enabled by a Rockefeller Foundation Social Science Research Fellowship in Agriculture placing post-doctoral social scientists (including economists) for a two-year period at a CGIAR center. The project was one of the few IFPRI experiences where the non-economics studies was not an add-on, but rather drove

the project. The term “add-on” should not be taken necessarily as negative (although sometimes the impact of this is problematic). Very good and influential work has consisted of non-economics ‘add-ons.’ Given IFPRI’s primary function as an economics policy research institute, most interdisciplinary IFPRI projects are driven primarily by economic questions and methods. Non-economic disciplines are often seen as complements, but not the center of the studies, nor given equal weight or funding. In the case of the public works study, the project leader was a sociologist based in South Africa, and thus had freedom to design the study around sociological as well as economic concerns. This did not mean a neglect of economics, which had an equal status in the data collection given the importance of quantifying factors such as job creation, training and costs.

This study represented a turning point in the division’s work, because it introduced a focus on issues of interest to economists but less their domain: local institutions, community participation and empowerment, the importance of power relationships outside the household, and institutional dynamics at local, regional, and national levels involving politics and culture, helping to explain successes and failures in development programs. These are now ongoing interests in the division, designed into a range of new projects. The public works study was one in which time was taken to collect qualitative and quantitative data iteratively, and a genuine appreciation of the respective contributions of each approach led to careful consideration of the findings of the other in data analysis and write up of reports and journal articles.

The PROGRESA study followed the public works study. In this case, the qualitative work was a relatively small component of the study, given that the study’s primary objective was to measure changes in consumption, health, and education as a result of participation in the program. The value of interdisciplinary work came through in contributions to the understanding of facilitating and constraining factors and processes in program operations (Adato, Coady and Ruel 2000), intrahousehold dynamics and perceptions of girls’ education (Adato et al. 2000), and the impact of the program on intra-community social relationships (Adato 2000). These studies revealed impacts of the program that would not have been revealed through the surveys alone.

Challenges to interdisciplinary work included: 1) Although Mexican government officials originally requested qualitative work, it later took convincing to maintain support for actually carrying out the fieldwork once the surveys were underway and dominated their daily concerns; 2) A qualitative component was described in the project proposal, but actual funds were not set aside for this in the project budget – an oversight reflecting the division’s limited experience with mixed methods - and later had to be realigned for this purpose. This brought to people’s attention that qualitative data collection and particularly analysis are time-consuming and not inexpensive undertakings; 3) Because of time-famine on the part of study researchers and the tight timeline of the studies, qualitative and quantitative work was not done iteratively, but rather carried out separately. In the case of the operations study, the findings were integrated in the write up of the final report. 4) No papers integrating the quantitative and qualitative data have been written, reflecting the problem that professional rewards

come from publishing in journals specific to one discipline or the other; 5) Despite the recognized value of integrating methods demonstrated in the PROGRESA study, two evaluations that followed of similar programs (in Honduras and Brazil) did not budget any funds for qualitative work. However, an evaluation of a similar program in Nicaragua did allocate some funds for the pilot study and are currently planning a qualitative component in the larger study, and a proposal for a similar study in Jamaica included this as well. The choice of inclusion or exclusion was dependent on two factors that provide useful insight for future efforts at integration: the first is the position of donors – whether or not the funder requires or requests mixed methods; the second is the perspective of the principal researchers on the project, i.e. the extent to which they recognize the potential value of an interdisciplinary approach, reflected by how it is prioritized in the budget. In the case of Brazil, for example, the funder and government did not request non-economics social science, and although project leaders expressed interest early on, it was decided that given a limited budget, it was not a priority.

This points to what may be one of the largest obstacles to increasing non-economics social science in IFPRI projects. When a group of economics researchers sit down to plan a project and staffing, it is economist positions that are designed into the project. Lack of experience working on a multi-disciplinary research team and related lack of recognition of the potential value of this contribution leads to the allocation of scarce funds among senior and junior economists, and the problem is perpetuated. A policy of multi-disciplinary project proposal planning so that the relative contributions are considered and debated could help to break this circularity.

At the other end of the spectrum is a study of poverty dynamics in South Africa. This was a purely qualitative follow-up study to complement and aid in analysis of findings from the large panel survey conducted as part of the intrahousehold work discussed in the previous section. Economists from the earlier study participated in designing the systematic village and household sampling process used in the qualitative study. The new study, however, was led by non-economist social scientists, and involved a series of household case studies, key informant interviews and some focus group work. In this case the non-economics research has been well-funded and the two teams have dedicated time to data integration and joint papers.

Finally, IFPRI has led an experiment in interdisciplinary project design and implementation that involves five projects in four countries and four CGIAR centers. This is a study of the impact of agricultural research on poverty, with each project team including several economists and several sociologists and/or anthropologists. In this project, the U.K.'s Department for International Development (DfID) required as a condition of funding that the original case study proposals, which had originally been proposed as purely economics studies, be redesigned to become integrated economic and social analysis, that international and national social analysis researchers be hired for each project, and that mixed methods be used. Although most of the case studies are led by economists and dedicate more funding to the economics data collection and analysis, the project budgets were substantially increased for the social analysis, and the status given to the social analysis mean that this work was taken seriously. The result was that

researchers from both disciplines experienced first hand the value of the others' contributions. Use of the Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) approach also provided a common framework for team members to see the contributions of the different disciplines and analytic approaches. This was an interesting case of a donor-driven heavy-handed approach to enabling institutional change, resisted at first but later recognized to have contributed to better studies and a valuable learning process. Lessons learned from this experience were that largely separate budgets for the economic and social analyses can also lead to separation rather than integration of the components, and that sufficient time is needed for the optimum iterative approach to mixed method research, and for integration at the data analysis and write-up stages. Also, while bringing in external capacity for non-economics social science made an immense contribution to the projects, ultimately capacity for undertaking interdisciplinary work would be significantly strengthened by having more disciplines represented on staff at the CGIAR centers (Adato and Meinzen-Dick 2002).

### **Food from Peace Project**

In 1994, IFPRI's 2020 Vision Initiative contracted with two external partners, the Brown University World Hunger Program (WHP) and Bread for the World-USA (BFW), to carry out research on the links between conflict and hunger. These partners were not chosen on the basis of the disciplinary backgrounds of the researchers at the two organizations (the principal investigators were, respectively, a nutritional anthropologist and a political scientist) but because of previous work they had undertaken on the topic. BFW's main researcher on this project later joined IFPRI as Special Assistant to the Director General (DG); this undoubtedly raised the project's profile somewhat at IFPRI, although the topic was also already of great interest to IFPRI's then DG.

During 1995, WHP and BFW assembled a joint team of two political scientists, two anthropologists, a geographer, and specialists on community development in the Horn of Africa. They organized three expert consultations of academic and relief and development specialists over the course of 1995. These consultations included IFPRI researchers from the Food Consumption and Nutrition Division, the Environment and Production Technology Division, and 2020 Vision Initiative.

The project team posed the following questions for the study: what difference would peace make for food security in countries affected by conflict? To what extent is food insecurity a cause of conflict? And finally, what sorts of policies could break the links between conflict and hunger, in preconflict, conflict, and postconflict situations? To explore the first question, one team member developed the "food from peace" methodology to calculate conflict-induced food production losses (using FAO data for African countries). The second two questions were addressed primarily through an extensive literature review and case studies, also drawn primarily from Africa. The literature review was extremely multidisciplinary.

Project outputs include a 2020 discussion paper (Messer, Cohen and D'Costa, 1998a), two briefs (Messer, Cohen, and D'Costa, 1998b; Messer and Cohen, 2001), a

newsletter article (Messer and Cohen 2002) and a policy seminar; an opinion article in a leading U.S. newspaper (Messer and Cohen, 1998); three journal articles (Messer, Cohen, and Marchione, 2001a and b; Cohen and Pinstруп-Andersen, 1999); two book chapters (Cohen, 1999; Cohen and Feldbrugge, 2000), with another forthcoming, and numerous conference and seminar presentations to scholarly and policy maker audiences around the world.

The project's results and policy recommendations are frequently cited by donor agencies, CGIAR centers, Future Harvest, the U.N. Standing Committee on Nutrition, relief and development NGOs, and the development research community. FAO has done additional analysis of "food from peace" using the methodology developed by the project (FAO 2000). In addition, the project has attracted attention in a non-traditional audience for IFPRI work, the peace studies community (the Environmental Change and Security Project at the Smithsonian Institution's Woodrow Wilson Center, Oslo Peace Research Institute, and Essex University's Armed Conflict Unit, Essex University).

In terms of "inreach," results from the project have been incorporated in varying degrees into Food Consumption And Nutrition Division's work on the causes of child malnutrition, Environment And Production Technology Division and 2020's global food outlook work, and the globalization synthesis led by the Trade and Macroeconomics Division (Smith and Haddad, 2000; Pinstруп-Andersen, Pandya-Lorch, and Rosegrant, 1997 and 1999; Messer and Cohen, 2001).

Beyond the original contract (\$15,000 for 1994-95), the only funding provided for this work is the time of one researcher in the Director General's Office at IFPRI, which has come out of core resources. An effort to obtain additional funding from the U.S. Institute of Peace was unsuccessful. There has been some discussion with the IFPRI team working on less favored areas about looking at conflict in resource poor areas, but that has not happened yet.

## **Governance**

Over the course of 1999-2001, IFPRI's 2020 Vision Initiative commissioned two pieces of research on governance issues: a study of governance mechanisms in selected developing countries with respect to transgenic crop technology; and a more general study of governance with respect to food security in the context of globalization. Both studies were carried out by Robert Paarlberg, a political scientist at Wellesley College and long-time IFPRI collaborator, who also served as chair of the ICER.

The work on governance of genetically modified crops looked at policies in key areas related to these crops in four developing countries: intellectual property rights, biosafety, trade, food safety, consumer choice, and public research investment. In each instance, the study explored the forces that shaped the particular policy outcome. For each policy area, the policies of each country were then classified along a spectrum consisting of promotional, permissive, precautionary, and prohibitive. The study was based on interviews of policy makers and the actors inside and outside the governments

who sought to influence policy. The tools employed are widely utilized by political scientists in qualitative comparative studies of politics and policy-making. The work is probably the first comprehensive effort to assess and compare the policies related to crop biotechnology in developing countries. It produced a 2020 discussion paper (Paarlberg, 2000) and brief, as well as a book-length version published by Johns Hopkins (Paarlberg 2001). It has attracted much attention in the international development community, and remains a standard reference on the relevant policies in developing countries. Paarlberg is presently collaborating with ISNAR's Biotechnology Service on follow-up work. The study does not appear to have influenced work at IFPRI much beyond the 2020 Initiative, despite the biotechnology policy research underway in three divisions. In addition to 2020 funding, the research received support from the Rockefeller Foundation and Winrock International.

The more general study of governance and food security conceptualized “governance” with respect to food security as the assurance that essential public goods are provided. That is to say, the study took a political economy approach, and employed a lens that economists would find familiar. Political scientists traditionally are concerned with “the authoritative allocation of values for society.” The notion of “good governance” as commonly employed in contemporary development discourse includes public goods provision but is rather broader, embracing participation, voice, transparency, human rights, and subsidiarity as well. The study lays out a case that food security-relevant public goods provision is primarily the purview of national governments (with some important exceptions), and challenges the conventional wisdom e.g., Mathews, 1997; Smith and Naím, 2000) that transnational and supranational forces (NGOs, multinational corporations, the WTO, international financial institutions) are the main ones affecting food security (Paarlberg, 2002).

The work has attracted considerable interest in the larger development research and practitioner community. It is one of the most popular downloads from the IFPRI website, and is rather controversial for challenging the conventional wisdom that the nation state is becoming obsolete. Spillover effects at IFPRI, though modest so far, appear somewhat more robust than in the case of the biotechnology governance study. A presentation by Paarlberg based on the paper was prominently featured at IFPRI's 2001 Conference on Sustainable Food Security for All, and the paper's perspective was influential vis-à-vis the subsequent action plan. The paper is also cited in a proposed new research program on the nutrition policy process.

### **A missed opportunity to undertake cutting edge political analysis of the options for food price subsidy reform in Egypt**

Much policy research rests on the assumption that an exclusive focus on measuring the rather narrowly defined costs and benefits of different intervention options is sufficient for the production of good policy analysis. An IFPRI research project in Egypt in the late 1990s that was determined not to fall prey to this assumption but did nevertheless--due in large part to the absence of a political scientist on staff.

The mid-1990s spike in the world price of wheat made the Egyptian bread price subsidy program much more expensive for the government of Egypt (GoE) to maintain. The GoE was receptive to an analysis of how to make the subsidy system more efficient. IFPRI and its Egyptian collaborators conducted a national household survey in 1996/7 that showed that the GoE transfer as represented by the bread subsidy was spread evenly across income groups. The poorest 20% of the population captured 20% of the subsidy, as did the richest 20% of the population. Some type of targeting mechanism of the bread price subsidy was an obvious way of improving efficiency. The GoE had successfully targeted the overall food price subsidy system toward the poor by restricting the application of universal subsidies to a smaller, lower income elasticity set of foods: sugar, oil wheat flour and bread. The GoE had done so in a quiet manner and over a 15 year period. This was partly because previous attempts to reduce the costs of the food and nonfood price subsidies had met with considerable unrest.

The research team therefore suspected that there would be considerable skepticism from the politicians about policy alternatives that included the targeting of bread price subsidies. It was clear that the policymakers thought the general public would have a very low tolerance for any targeting scheme. This made any recommendation to target the bread price subsidy very unlikely to get onto a government decision agenda. The subsequent technical analysis produced about 20 options to reduce the costs of the bread price subsidy while protecting the welfare of the poor. Seven of those options were further pursued in a technical and political science sense. We tried to conduct research that would (a) measure the reaction of the general public to the ideas of targeting bread price subsidies and (b) compare those reactions with the perceptions that policy makers had about the reaction of the general public.

At the time, we did not have a political scientist on staff. The funds for this component of the project were not large enough to justify hiring a political scientist. So we hired a political scientist at a local US university to join the team. Looking back, the political science work done under the project certainly had value, but on reflection, there is a sense of a missed opportunity to do some groundbreaking work that might have redefined the policy space within which the policy research on bread price subsidies was hitherto forced to work.

There were several reasons for failing to seize this opportunity, but not having a political scientist on staff was a major contributing factor. For this project, a political scientist on the staff would have: (a) made it easier to find a consultant in the first place. Having a political scientist on staff would have been valuable to this project even if she/he was fully booked with other projects and knew nothing about Egypt. They would have been connected to an external political science community and would have known the context within which the political science consultant would have to operate. This would have shortened the search for a consultant and would have helped them adjust more quickly to the IFPRI context, (b) been able to serve as an in-house sounding board for an outside consultant, (c) known about the Egypt project from the proposal stage and could have expertly built political analysis into the research plan and research budget,

instead of having economists try to do the same thing (for you economists, think what it would be like to have a nutritionist design your research and budget), (d) in the eyes of our field collaborators, had more credibility than a (nevertheless technically credible) consultant, (e) had the incentive structure to take a long term perspective on the research undertaken, and (f) provided opportunities for the other Egypt team members to learn about political analysis due to day to day interactions.

A major lesson for the particular research division at IFPRI was: do not wait for a large project on political science to come along. Without a political scientist in house, it won't. Rather, take a leap of faith and set up a search process that ensures the hire of a first rate political scientist and then give them the space to develop their own program of research within the institute's medium term priorities. This we plan to do in 2003.

### **Research on the Policy Process: Is it Worth it?**

Everyone who reads this document reveals themselves as participants in the policy process. The "policy process" describes how policymaking occurs. It has been described as "a social dynamic that determines how the good and bad in life are meted out" (Clark 2002: 5). By taking on problems (policy) and interacting with people with varying perspectives and interests in the problem and in the potential solutions (process) one becomes a participant (Clark 2002). And yet research on the policy process in conjunction with "conventional" policy research is rarely undertaken. "Conventional" policy research is conventional because it tends to take a technical and economic perspective towards the framing of a problem, the analysis of the causes of the problem and the generation and evaluation of policy alternatives to address the problem.

Does the relative absence of systematic inquiry into the policymaking process undermine the quality of policy research? Many would answer "yes". Clark (2002), for example, suggests that a limited view of the policy process generates an over-reliance on "lack of resources", "lack of political will" and "lack of conventional research" as explanations for lack of progress in reducing, say, malnutrition. And while the policy process cannot be described in tidy stages or steps (Sutton 1999), it is not immune to systematic research (Grindle and Thomas 1991; Kingdon 1995).

Why is there not more research on the policy process to test the hypothesis that such a focus will improve the quality of policy alternatives? Perhaps the most frequent explanation that is advanced is the inability of policy researchers to attain a multi-faceted perspective of a policy issue. The policy process involves people with different perspectives or "rationales" (see Table 1). These rationales can be technical, economic, political, social, legal or normative.

**Table 1: The different rationales underlying public policy formation**

Rationality	Examples of key focus
Technical	Cause and effect; efficacy; effectiveness
Economic	Efficiency; market failures; cost-effectiveness; social cost and benefit
Social/Normative	Fairness; ethics; rights; justice; participation; accountability
Political	Participation; alliances; interests; compromises
Administrative/Organizational	Rules; capacity; management
Legal	Laws; precedents; rights; enforcement

Source: From Pelletier (2001)

Good policy research, it is argued, involves an appreciation and integration of several of these perspectives (Pelletier 2001, Kanbur 2002). Yet, the training and subsequent careers of most policy researchers involves immersion in one rationale. The dominant rationale is often technical/economic (perhaps reflecting the dominance of Finance ministries in most governments). Professional incentives reward specialization and many organizations are not willing to cover the initial fixed costs of fostering interdisciplinarity because the potential benefits are not clear.

How can this circle be broken? Is it even worth attempting to do so? These questions can only be answered by undertaking research that integrates these multiple rationales. If successful, better policy research questions will be posed. Better analysis will be undertaken. Better alternatives will be generated. Ultimately, the policy research will have more impact on the lives of malnourished people.

IFPRI is in the process of developing a research program that will test the hypothesis that analysis of the nutrition policy process will lead to improved nutrition policy research (Nutrition Policy Documents 2002). The hypothesis will be tested via the setting up of an ex-ante evaluation of the new research program, with the laying down of baselines on the state of research in this area, current perceptions about the value added of this work and current thoughts about how it is best conducted. Only by explicitly articulating the benefits and costs of an integrative rationales approach to research on the policy process can we learn (skeptics and converts alike) about how best to conduct policy research.

### **Lessons: Challenges and Factors Affecting Success**

While IFPRI's need for non-economic social scientists to fulfill its mandate of policy research has been recognized throughout much of IFPRI's history, the strategy to acquire the necessary social research expertise has been more varied. In many cases this has been "outsourced" to collaborators from Northern universities, on the premise that these were the leading experts in the field. In many other cases it was outsourced to

NARS collaborators or professionals from Southern academic institutions, who were expected to have more understanding of local contextual factors. Both of these approaches have their validity, but do not provide an effective representation of social research within the institute. As a result, the social researchers are left to collect data to answer questions framed by others (often economists), and opportunities to identify where social research can make a major contribution are often missed. A third approach has been to hire social researchers on short-duration contracts, often as post-doctoral fellows. This provides somewhat more voice for social research within the institute, but because of their lower status and the fact that they are brought in on projects developed by others, they are still often unable to frame the questions. Appointments of some of these social researchers have been renewed, and they have risen through the system to more senior status, where they have been able to demonstrate the contribution of social research to methods and issues, and to create greater institutional ownership for the results of the research.

Having social researchers even on the staff is not sufficient. One or two social researchers can easily become isolated from their own disciplinary peers and “go native”, adopting language and methods of economics in order to gain acceptance. The alternative is to maintain one’s disciplinary identity, but to work alone with little interaction with colleagues and a dependence on external collaborations. Having a critical mass of non-economic social researchers would be ideal, but even the chance to interact with one other person within the institute in one’s field can make an enormous difference. Other resources, such as conferences and the chance to interact with others in one’s discipline are also critical to prevent atrophy of social research skills and perspectives. Most research assistants at IFPRI have been trained in economics, even when working for a non-economist. Research support from other social research disciplines can provide a sounding board and improve the quality of analysis for non-economist research staff. Also, having very few non-economists on staff means that those on staff can become overburdened when their expertise is requested, and that these researchers end up working in regions with which they are not sufficiently familiar, a tension given that contextual knowledge is particularly important for high quality sociology and anthropology. Even library resources that make available the major journals, books and bibliographic databases in the field can be critical, both for their substance and for the signal they provide that one’s discipline is valued.<sup>2</sup>

A more elusive, but perhaps ultimately more important, resource to make researchers (of any discipline) effective is receptivity of colleagues and respect within the institute. While some debates between disciplines create a creative tension that sharpens thinking on both sides, a feeling of rejection of one’s disciplinary contribution is demoralizing. Related to this is the more practical issue of how proposals are developed and the self-perpetuating effect of having proposals written by teams of economists that

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<sup>2</sup> With inter-library loan and the many libraries available in Washington, this may be less of a problem at IFPRI than at other CG Centers. New CGIAR efforts to pool library resources and use internet access to journals may reduce this problem for other centers, as well.

will write economics proposals that require the hiring of economics staff. This happens when staff economists often have little or no experience of working in such interdisciplinary teams, and thus do not make such inclusion a priority in their projects. Without the participation of non-economics social scientists in the proposal development stage, the isolation is likely to continue.

A particularly contentious issue concerns the rules of evidence in research. IFPRI economists tend to favor quantitative evidence (if not mathematical proofs), whereas other social researchers may favor qualitative data and analysis. This distinction should not be overdrawn; many non-economics social researchers also use quantitative methods. That intractable problem has been tackled at IFPRI with some success in recent years in research projects that manage to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, either in an integrated manner from the beginning (as in some of the work on property rights and collective action) or iteratively (as in the case of intrahousehold studies in Bangladesh).<sup>3</sup> But even with the best of intentions to combine methods and disciplinary perspectives, this will not happen unless two very scarce resources—time and field work expenses—are devoted to inclusion of both types of research, as well as to integration of the findings.

A related matter is the question of peer review. IFPRI's publications review policy calls for internal and external reviewers. Because of the overwhelming majority of economists within IFPRI, this means that virtually all internal publications by non-economists are reviewed by economists, but non-economists are rarely invited to review their economist colleagues. Even identifying suitable external reviewers is difficult if there are only economists on the review committees. In recent years the Publications Review Committee has become more sensitive to this issue, though the pool of non-economist reviewers is still not very large.

Finding a common framework or language across disciplines has been helpful. Two particularly useful examples are institutional economics and the sustainable livelihoods (SL) framework. These are important because they help each discipline recognize the need for contributions from the others. Working together on a project, where the problem to be addressed is more important than the need for disciplinary boundaries, is also valuable. At the same time, it is important to preserve disciplinary integrity and not seek the least common denominator, leading to useless generalities. Although it may be a struggle to learn each other's language and methods, this leads to a better appreciation of what each discipline can do. Even in cases where research designs are interdisciplinary, adequate time and funds must be allocated to 1) sequencing mixed methods in a way that enables the respective data collection and analysis exercises to benefit from each other, and 2) integrating data analysis and writing in a way that

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<sup>3</sup> These began with surveys, supplemented with qualitative research that identified, *inter alia*, dimensions of empowerment of women, which were then incorporated as indicators in a subsequent survey. This has again been supplemented with focus group work to examine aspects of the sustainable livelihoods framework that were not adequately covered by past work, to identify the impact of agricultural technologies on poverties.

maximizes interpretive power. Otherwise ‘interdisciplinary’ research can end up consisting of two separate parallel exercises. Though the overall impact may still be an improved study, each analysis is not improved and the main point of the collaboration is missed.

IFPRI’s experience has shown that it is not enough to have other disciplines on the research staff: it is also important to have social researchers in positions of authority: on review teams, Advisory Committees, the Board of Trustees, and donor organizations. The disciplinary biases on review panels may be as important as what they advise, and the reaction of Boards to the research of the institute and the findings of review panels is similarly conditioned by their disciplinary composition. Donors play a key role, not only in providing funds for social researchers, but insisting on their inclusion in projects and in the institute as a whole. Without involvement of other disciplines at all levels, the institution would not be as sensitive or receptive to the need for social research.

## **Conclusions**

It will be apparent from the relatively selective discussion above that IFPRI has made considerable progress over recent years in incorporating the contributions of the broader fields of economics, as well as anthropology, sociology, and political science into its research. It will also be apparent from what is said above, and from the constant hum of complaints in the corridors and over lunch, that there is a long way to go from the point of view of group psychology as well as research momentum. All of this has taken place in the context of a broader move toward multidisciplinary at IFPRI, involving nutrition, macro modeling, geographic information systems, and global food models inside the Institution, and plant breeding, livestock, and irrigation engineering outside, where the issues of multidisciplinary collaboration are similar in many respects, but have additional complexities of their own.

All of this also takes place in the context of the continued competition between maintaining the cutting edge quality of research, while striving for the greatest possible impact on the lives of poor people. IFPRI has demonstrated a strengthened commitment to including social research inside the institute, not only on an “outsourcing” basis, and is seeing results from this inclusion. However, it is not without costs in terms of financial resources and investment of effort.

It is hoped that this portrait of an ongoing process may have some relevance to the concerns of other CGIAR institutions, both as potential collaborators of IFPRI, and as research organizations struggling with comparable problems in their own right.

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