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Teaching Economics in the Southern African Periphery:

Review of a SADCC-Inspired Workshop

On December 9-11 1982 the Department of Economics and the National Institute of Research (NIR) at University of Botswana hosted a workshop on teaching and research in Economics, organised in conjunction with the Department of Economics, University of Zimbabwe and funded by Swedish International Development Aid and the Ford Foundation. Taking part were representatives of the Economics departments of the universities of Botswana, Dar es Salaam, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique (Eduardo Mondlane), Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe plus delegates from NIR and the Botswana Agricultural College. The University of Angola was unable to send a representative but conveyed its greetings.

Only the second meeting of its kind on the continent (the first was at Dar es Salaam in 1969) the workshop was inspired by the spirit of SADCC: to develop a new level of cooperation among the countries in the Southern African periphery; "SADCC offers a challenge to the academic community" as one speaker put it.

At its own level the workshop reflected both the hopes and the problems facing SADCC.

The overriding concern was the "infrastructural" one of the lack of adequate locally-based teaching material and of the poor transfer of economic information among SADCC member countries other than through the occasional textbook written and published abroad. Much of the energy of the workshop was devoted to ways and means of integrating local and regional research into teaching, both to enhance the relevance of the teaching, and to provide material for local and regional textbooks. A teaching materials exchange network was agreed upon to facilitate transfer of government statistical material, private research reports and SADCC reports regionally; it was further agreed that each department would as a priority prepare proposals for building student field research into the teaching curriculum.

Numerous proposals for cooperative research were put forward, many of them flowing from the full session devoted to the present state of SADCC. They included: construction of a SADCC-wide input-output table to provide a basis for planning manufacturing industry; investigation of alternative means of international payments among SADCC countries, given the prevailing severe foreign exchange shortages of several member countries; a SADCC-wide study of the banking sector; an examination of strategies in dealing with the IMF and of whether a regional approach is feasible.

Along with these common concerns emerged differences in the orientation, political environment and work of the departments - a diversity which enriched discussion and contains the possibility of making future cooperation more fruitful. For example, in the case of degree structure most departments were offering general, non-specialised first degrees; but in Tanzania economics students are streamed into either economic planning, agriculture and rural development or industrial development from an early stage. In

Mozambique the department's work is heavily geared towards training managerial workers to relieve the critical shortage. In both Mozambique and Tanzania much departmental effort is put into placing students with suitable firms during vacations (and one day per week during term in Mozambique) which provides the basis for the students' applied research projects - a practice which several other departments are now keen to emulate.

The content and method of teaching economic theory was inevitably a major focus. The body of Neo classical theory, so long the staple of Western economics courses, came under heavy fire for its irrelevance to problems of poverty, for its narcissistic preoccupation with its own elegance rather than the real world and for the reactionary nature of its central welfare principle, Pareto optimality, too often used as a pseudo-scientific excuse for evading the question of equitable distribution. Besides the well-known inapplicability of so much of received macro-theory to small peripheral countries, the Neo-classical theory of the firm as presented in western texts was also criticised for having divorced itself from reality in its preoccupation with marginal optimization; rather than being an instruction in how firms are actually managed and perform in different industries it was becoming a branch of Utopian economic philosophy.

From Malawi came the proposal for an "indigenous economic theory" for Africa. In general there was a feeling that students know far too little about alternative paradigms, particularly Marxian theory. Several curricula have already been amended to correct this by introducing political economy courses.

In the discussion on methods of teaching theories a fruitful debate arose between those wishing to see students test alternative theories rigorously against the facts and those arguing that while this may be applicable to specific hypotheses it cannot test Neo-classical and Marxian theory satisfactorily since these consist in large part of political philosophy: Marxian theory can be taught from a Neo-classical view and Neo-classical theory from a Marxist standpoint. In a real sense this is a debate over the limits of economic science. At a more down-to-earth level, all were agreed that since the primary goal of our teaching is to enable students to understand the present and potential workings of their economy the teaching method must be grounded in local and regional research material on each aspect of economic theory.

A valuable departure from the agendas of previous workshops on Economics teaching was the inclusion of a session on teaching of economics-related subjects in schools. Attention focussed on the Development Studies courses which had emerged with the growth of the Brigades movement in Botswana (providing education plus training in manual skills in production units, for primary school leavers unable to get places in secondary schools) and were subsequently incorporated in the secondary school curriculum. Concern was expressed that despite policy pronouncements on the subject too little was actually being done in most countries of the region to provide relevant education and training for unemployed primary school leavers.

In the closing session the delegates were reminded that the carrying out of the agreed plans for exchange of teaching materials, for staff and student exchange, for coordination of post-graduate programmes and for cooperative research efforts will depend on each department allocating resources specifically for these purposes. At another level, the same condition will apply for the success of SADCC itself. A follow-up meeting will

be held on 9 September 1983 at the Southern African Social Science Conference at which departments will report on their progress.

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