

# Why reorienting research approaches is needed

BY SHUSHAY ADANE

Population, Health and Environment Ethiopia Consortium (PHEEC) is one of the local non-government organizations established in 2008 with the objective to integrate population and health issues with environment and development. The organization, by so doing, envisages to contribute a share in the national endeavours geared toward realizing Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It promotes the integration of population health and environment at various levels for ensuring sustainable development. In relation to its objectives, PHEE in collaboration with other stakeholders including higher educational institutions and line ministries (Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Water and Energy) and Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation organized in Jimma University a national workshop on Demand Driven Research for Sustainable Development from May 31 to June 2, 2012. During the workshop, twelve universities from all over the country and sector ministries presented and discussed the current trend of demand driven research for sustainable development and its challenges.

On the occasion, Kora Tushune, Jimma University Vice-President for administration and development affairs, presented a research that assessed the 'trends, opportunities and challenges of Ethiopian universities in their engagement in research'. Having pointed out that Africa has long way to go in scientific output compared with the other continents, Kora showed in his research that Ethiopia is not only one of the African countries that produce low scientific outputs in terms of publications but also it is not integrated into the major research collaboration networks in the continent even the eastern African.

As could be learnt from the field visit to the study site of Jimma University in Gilgel Gibe I upper catchment, the University is conducting researches on critical problems that need urgent action. It is conducting demand-driven researches on how siltation and gully erosion can affect the



(Photo: Shushay Adane)

dam in the long run but also on malaria related issues associated with the dam.

Negash Teklu, Executive Director of PHEEC, said the general intention of the meeting was to bring the main stakeholders such as line ministries, universities and NGOs together to focus on demand driven researches.

According to Negash, twelve big universities from all over the country were invited in the workshop to draw lessons from the demand driven research by Jimma University on the impacts of siltation on hydro electric dams. "If these 12 universities are engaged in such demand driven researches like what Jimma University is doing, it would be very strategic for meeting our Growth and Transformation Plan and the Millennium Development Goals."

At the end of the workshop, the participants were divided into two groups (university group on the one side and sector ministries on the other side) to discuss the key challenges of demand driven research and their own weaknesses in detail thereby to suggest possible solutions. The universities also discussed various challenges they considered to be the main obstacles in their efforts to conduct demand driven researches.

Lacks of central database, low level collaboration among the universities themselves, lack of fully equipped research laboratories and finance, lack of research knowledge and skill and loose linkage with the local communities are amongst the major ones that captured the attentions of most participants in the discussion.

In order to address the challenges related to laboratories, the representatives of the 12 universities suggested the government to at least establish four centres of research excellence in the four directions of the country to help researchers and university students have access to research resources relatively in close ranges.

Research redundancy was the other crucial issue the participants deliberated on thoroughly. According to him, different universities are conducting alike researches at a similar time thanks to the lack of central database. It is a very critical challenge not only because universities are wasting their resources but it is also killing the quality of researches, for the reason that, most university theses at present are more of copy and paste. Such problem is growing worse aggravated by the presence of gaps among the universities themselves.

Kora asked, "We have to have a central data

base to avoid research redundancies. How can we for example know if a student in Jimma University copies a given research conducted in Haramaya University?"

After a lengthy discussion the universities decided to apply two mechanisms to address research redundancy. While establishing a central database to enable universities exchange information among themselves is the first alternative, applying software that helps to avoid both plagiarism and research bureaucracies in universities is the second one. Moreover, the universities agreed to further strengthen their cooperation among themselves to make their studies multidisciplinary as opposed to the existing mono disciplinary ones. In the mean time, the partakers also underlined the importance of a quick start to hold annual thematic research conferences other than the general annual research conferences so as to harmonize the thematic research areas developed by each university. The other problem the universities considered it with due emphasis is that researchers should develop the culture of involving the community in their researches if to conduct real community oriented demand driven researches, because, uneducated people can have better information than anyone else about a given topic by having lived there for a lengthy time.

Concerning the challenge of finance, the participants pointed out that most researches in Ethiopia to date have been conducted with foreign funds. This had been in turn making the researches to be weak and donor driven rather than demand driven. The key reason behind these problems according to the participants is that the government was not allocating budget for research projects until the recent promising efforts being made. The participants called on the government to invest more on research and establish a systematic way of financing research projects and providing various incentives.

All in all, the universities concluded that most of the researches so far did not have other purposes

away from being used as requirements to hold university degrees. Their capacity to help policy makers and other stakeholders give informed decision has been therefore very minimal. In the meantime, the partakers also simultaneously demanded the government and other interested parties to stop looking for foreign researchers before exploring and exploiting domestic potential. According to the participants quality researches are not being put into practice by stakeholders for there is no such a culture of using domestic research outputs. Most of them are either shelved or end in the ministry of education.

"Yes, we have the capacity to conduct any research, but, this can be possible if and only if the government and other stakeholders can stand by us to solve the above problems. And we have to at the same time be united and conduct model works to show our capacity to make the government have confidence on us," Professor Zerihun Woldu, from the Addis Ababa University said.

After having discussed for a long period of time, the partakers of the discussion reached at consensus absence of a mandated organ to solve the shortcomings and coordinate all the research efforts being done by each university disjointedly is the mother of all problems.

In this regard, Dr. Berhanu from the Jimma University said, "to one's surprise, whenever someone asks university presidents about what the agenda of their meeting that they took part in was, I have never heard them answering it was about research. Most meetings are more on teaching and learning issues because, there is no any mandated organ for research like other fields."

Consequently, the discussion group finally decided to establish a research council at a national level to coordinate all the research efforts and thereby solve these challenges, and they elected a task force of six members from all the stakeholders to facilitate the course in collaboration with PHE Ethiopia consortium.

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