VIEWPOINT/STANDPUNT
PLANNING RESEARCH AND THE PLANNER'S NEEDS

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Research, or Research and Development (R&D), as commonly reported, is often considered to be insufficient, in both quantity and relevance (to South African requirements). Attempts at measurement of the overall research quantum in this country show a difference of alarming proportions between research efforts here and those of other countries that address this issue.*) There are clearly problems involved in drawing comparisons. The R&D effort is notoriously difficult to measure. (Phillips, 1967) For example, much of the technology or research in use is "silently" imported through local subsidiaries. The validity of comparison between this country and the "developed nation bloc" may also be queried, particularly in view of the growing concern with appropriate, or intermediate technology. (Schumaker, 1973).

Nonetheless, it is patently obvious that the generation and application of R&D is a critical and fragile resource that needs fostering and care, if the urgent development priorities of this country are to be confronted. The concept, R&D, is broad but in the main, focuses on the "hard sciences", namely research and application in the natural sciences and in engineering. Clearly, measurement and comparison of the social sciences is a far more intricate task. This paper does not purport to address itself to this embracive task.

Instead, an area of research in this latter category is singled out for attention and its relevance examined, in view of the demands made upon it. The field is that of PLANNING RESEARCH, and the interest stems from over 10 years of association with the field of Urban and Regional Studies in South Africa. Briefly, the intention is to consider the nature and function of planning research, and to question its relevance to its intended audience – by definition, the planning profession.

* The Techno-economic Group, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research regularly surveys the extent of South Africa's R&D activities. These point to a difference of over 10 times the amount of research effort compared to the developed Western world (as component of National Product).

A definitional perspective is provided by Wilson: (1968) "Research is seeking new knowledge and seeking new ways of looking at things; above all, it is understanding and explaining phenomena, patterns and processes, previously only partly understood. Planning is a process which alters the development of another process, or alters a situation, in order to achieve the goals of the planner or those who the planner represents." As such, the concern is with SPATIAL planning, or "physical planning".

Wilson continues: "research for planning must therefore consist of research which is *relevant to planning"* (my emphasis).

Broadly then, research is the seeking of new knowledge and the seeking of new ways of looking at things. That is, it includes both the gathering of new data and the manipulation of existing, and new data. Planning research can be taken to mean research on planning processes or procedures themselves or, wider still, as all research relevant to planning. It is this question of *relevance* that interests both planner and researcher alike, and is obviously of major concern to policy at all levels. In simple terms, the following needs resolution: what do planners need to know in order to plan more effectively, and how can research help to furnish this knowledge? It is commonly felt that a gap exists between researchers and planners in addressing this question, and any attempt at closing this gap is undoubtedly most welcome.

In essence, what planners need to have, if not at their fingertips, then at least readily available, or accessible, is a wide range of tools or techniques for analysing and understanding the structure and dynamics of zones, cities or regions. In addition, and indeed possibly of greater importance are the continuous and current information flows that underlie the successful application of these tools, or techniques. Herein lies the essence of "relevance" and, if we are to accept the notion of synergy, the forging of a more effective spatial planning framework at national level.

It is possible to identify two fundamental issues in the question of relevance. The one concerns the nature of research, the other the institutional setting for that research. Research that is both appropriate, and *usable*, including accessibility, by and in planning should then warrant the nomenclature, "planning research".

At the sub-national level, town and regional planning clearly requires a mass of data, encompassing a really distributed information in the main disciplines of the social science area, for example in economics, sociology, social anthropology, etc. The role of urban and regional studies, is to "increase our understanding of social and economic forces in order that policies can be developed to secure an improvement in economic functioning and in the quality of the social and physical environment." (Cullingworth, 1973)

Within South Africa, as a developing society, many of the information inputs required by planners at urban and regional level do not exist, whilst much of what does exist is not readily available. Clearly, the problem of disaggregating national statistics is a critical factor here. There are two implications of this. Firstly, who is to be the agency for collection purposes? Secondly, what is going to be collected?

The obvious answer frequently given to the first question is to provide more planning agencies, particularly those with relevant research, or information "arms" or, alternatively, more research bodies – at University level, in the main, or in quasi-public institutions. It is debatable, however, if "more" as such is the solution. It is quite valid in many respects, to question the efficacy of academic research, certainly in the social sciences, insofar as its irrelevance in *use* is concerned. The indefinite "shelf-life" of much academic research is wasteful in the extreme.

Instead, what is needed in this country is a searching look at both the institutional setting for planning research and, within

that setting, at the nature and purpose of different kinds of research. In other words, what is the appropriate distribution of research relevant to planning? In particular, a need exists to assess the balance that should be struck between (sponsored) research at Universities, and that undertaken within the planning agency itself. Unfortunately, this is a difficult task and some of the problems involved require airing.

The academic environment for planning research is open to criticism on the grounds of its relative isolation, the "ivory tower" label, and its political insensitivity. In other words, in order to preserve its "objective" academic base, the exercise removes itself from any responsibility for policy implementation and its results. More important perhaps, this category of planning research is often taken to task for its preoccupation with the smaller, part picture. The researcher approaches the topic from the (narrow) confines of his discipline, or interest, which frequently fails to take account of the multi-faceted pressures placed upon the planner. Again, objectives differ, often remarkably – academics focussing on the niceties of reputable, theoretical rigour that leads to publication, ("publish or perish", as the academic promotional ladder requires), with planners looking for "hard-nosed" facts of tangible and immediate relevance. This question of immediacy also requires comment. Time-scales are often very different – the "ivory tower" versus "panic planning" – and planning often needs to proceed before research results can be tidily presented, particularly in their published form.

The concentration of research within the planning agency is, however, not without its detractors. In particular the hazard of research becoming the "handmaiden of policy", (Cullingworth 1973). There is a clear need for the planner to continuously face the consequences of his actions in a meaningful, and responsible way. This is essential if we regard planning as a process in which the planner must continually carry out the neccessary adaptations to the planning apparatus at his command, clearly impossible if the research process is completely internalized. Yet, as the Fulton Report (on the British Civil Service) clearly pointed out, it is imperative that, if planning is to be fully operational, research must not become too detached from the main-stream of the (planning) agency's work. Almost instantly, the rejoinder: yes, but how far can meaningful research be undertaken, if it is not sufficiently detached? The legacy from the British planning experience of the Seventies was a call from all sides for greater participation on the part of the general public in the planning process. It is quite legitimate to ask whether this increased participation is indeed possible if research remains in large measure the prerogative of the planner. In particular, changes in goals, or functions, both fundamental issues in urban and regional analysis, are most difficult to bring about without external, informed criticism. The latter necessitates participation in both the research and planning process. In fact, where public participation has been at all meaningful, and the record of participation has generally been dismal, it has very often been due, in no small measure, to the promptings of an independent research "watchdog".

Reference must also be made to the fact that urban and regional studies are characterized by increasing complexity and require the input of several disciplines, often well beyond the resources of many planning agencies. To this end, considerations of supply are most important, namely a relatively slow – growing of researchers with a mix of skills that may be less than ideal for the job at hand. As Wilson (1968) has commented . . . "This probably means that, at the present point in time, many demands of planners cannot be met, either because of the limitations of present resources and skills, or because it is in any case impossible to accelerate the pace of research beyond a certain speed". Current conditions in this country would hardly seem different.

The above would seem to pose a terminal statement to supporters on both sides of the "planning fence" as it were. This is, however, no solution. A balance needs to be struck and it would appear appropriate to conclude with some tentative proposals for improvement within the South African planning research context.

Initially, it may be useful to broadly categorize the research process. For example, it is common to find the following grouping:

i) Planning studies, or situation-specified research, namely, the collection and analysis, by standard means, of data relating to a specific planning problem.
ii) Applied, or problem-specific research, where a particular problem is investigated in general form, such as a forecasting technique that shows promise of forming a model of general applicability.
iii) Pure, or basic (abstract) research.

It would seem that a disproportionate share of what are obviously extremely scarce resources in this country are being devoted to the collection of routine data under the first category above, largely in the academic setting. Clearly, existing data deficiencies do not permit extensive effort in the other areas, where perhaps much of the European and North American programmes centre. The time-consuming nature of this search for data, that is usable at a disaggregated spatial level has led to much of the criticism levelled at academic research by the planning practitioner. The claim that much of this research represents "sectional interests" in terms of both objectives set and spatial context, clearly stems from this consideration.

Here, a new perspective suggests itself. For example, is it possible to replicate the urban and regional information systems that have been developed, and effectively applied in Britain and the United States? The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development loosely defines such a working concept in terms of "a collection of people, procedures, a data base, and a data processing system organized to develop the information required to support the mission of a planning agency." (Browett, 1975)

Obviously, an important ingredient in the above is the development and application of a standardized yet flexible data bank system which can be erected from local area detail upwards and can be applied at all levels of planning. This is essential if the trend toward more rigorous spatial analysis is to be used to full advantage: For example, the design and calibration of urban modelling programmes.

A national research body, as distinct from planning agency, would clearly be invaluable in the planning research context. It would be charged with the responsibility for coordinating individual research projects, for channelling specific planning problems and research funds to their appropriate research domains and the like. A planning research register of both institutions and skills or interests would be an integral part of such a system.

Advantageous though the above may seem, there are obvious restraints, none the least being that of supply constraints

in terms of relevant manpower resources. In the short term it is thus neccessary to explore other perhaps more readily applicable directions. One area of likely advantage would seem to involve the process of communication, or even confrontation between researcher and planner. What is at issue here is a better integration of spatial studies or research into the appropriate decision-making process. This would contribute significantly in allaying much of the criticism indicated above concerning the institutional setting for planning research, particularly in the University setting.

Sponsored research appears to be a fruitful direction, in that it should bring researchers into closer contact with an operating system, as distinct from an abstracted problem, or study field. Too rigid a sponsorship, however, is likely to be self-defeating. In other words, who poses the questions? Is it the researcher, or the sponsor? Without the freedom to "question the questions" academic and governmental, or institutional research may as well be cast in the same boat.

Perhaps there is merit in considering sponsorship that includes a mandatory staff-exchange programme. The interchange of staff – between research units at different institutions, and between research units and planning agencies – appears a fruitful field to pursue in an attempt to enhance the relevance of planning research. This inter-change could take a variety of forms. For example, the researcher could be seconded to the planning team, at least in the early phases of investigation. This enables the planning team to take advantage of his specialist training, or skills, for example, in defining the feasibility of the intended research base. Equally important, the exercise exposes the researcher to the practical planning issues involved. The counterpart should also be explored, namely, co-opting periods, scholarships and general release systems are some of the administrative means that could be explored to this end.

Within this context, it would seem most desirable that, where sponsorship is significant, the Research Director, and/or Senior Researcher spend time at the sponsoring agency. This would represent an orientation programme of sorts, during which all facets of planning activities in that organization would be conveyed to the researchers. The benefits to the subsequent framing of a relevant research programme are obvious.

It is perhaps appropriate here to raise a word of caution concerning one of the most frequently used liaison systems namely the committee, (coordinating, advisory, steering and the like). Too often, these committees are formally constituted, using people who are sometimes connected only remotely with the actual planning or research process. More often than not, the committee comprises purely administrative expertise. Care must be taken that any such committee, if it be used at all, be drawn from those closely connected with either the planning problem or the research programme. The need is for an operational, or technical committee which can meet on and *ad hoc* and informal basis when the occasion demands.

There are two further aspects that require consideration. The first concerns the multi-disciplinary approach to research in the social sciences. On a note of semantic differentiation, it is advisable to distinguish inter-disciplinary research, for example, as research undertaken by individuals drawn from different study backgrounds, (economist, sociologist, etc.), but who participate largely on that individual basis. Multi-disciplinary research, however, represents, or should represent teamwork. All researchers work more or less simultaneously on a particular investigation. It is this latter approach to planning research which should enjoy the greatest emphasis, particularly where major research, or planning proposals are being undertaken. The advantages are manifold in view of the multi-faceted nature of planning, and its research base.

For example, the multi-disciplinary approach brings the neccessary expertise to bear on diverse problems, (especially if the planner himself is drawn into the team), and allows the exercise to be conducted within a time span relevant to the problem at hand. The opportunities for effective cross-fertilization of ideas are also self-evident. Clearly, however, the supply constraints indicated earlier are to be borne in mind when this approach to planning research is pursued.

Secondly, and as a final comment, serious consideration needs to be given to the adequacy of the efforts of the planning agency itself in the field of planning research. Of particular concern here is the apparent neglect of the information needs of the research spectrum. Quite legitimately, local authorities in this country can be roundly criticised for not doing sufficient to cater for the information needs of local area analysis. These agencies are generally better equipped to meet these needs than the academic, or consultant sector where the problem of continuity precludes the maintenance of current data banks.

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