

Sophie Laws, with Caroline Harper and Rachel Marcus. *Research for Development: A Practical Guide*. New Delhi: Vistaar Publications. 2003. xiii+475 pages. Paperback. Indian Rupees 450.00.

To implement any successful policy, research about the subject-matter is essential. Lack of knowledge would result in failure and, from an economic point of view, it would lead to a waste of scarce resources. The book under review is essentially a manual which highlights the use of research for development.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One informs the reader about concepts and some theory, and Part Two deals with the issue of undertaking research for development. Both parts have 11 chapters each.

Chapter 1 asks the basic question: Is research important in development work? The answer is that it is. Research has many dimensions: from the basic asking of questions to the more sophisticated broad-based analysis of policy issues. The chapter, in short, stresses the usefulness of research which development workers ignore at their own peril.

Chapter 2 is more theoretical. It identifies two major research approaches. One is positivist (based on objective truths), the other is social constructionist or people-centred. In reality, however, both these approaches do, to some extent, interact with each other. Then there is the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research. The former is statistical and narrow in its approach, while the latter is more broad-based and people-friendly. Hardline social scientists prefer the former, i.e., quantitative research, as the answer to their questions. However, it is becoming apparent with the passage of time that such narrow approaches to research may be self-defeating as these do not relate to reality; and that the second, qualitative approach, also needs to be taken into account if meaningful development research is to be carried out.

Chapter 3 examines the influence of participatory research in the field of development activities. Here the “subject” of research becomes the centre of research activities. The “subject” discusses his/her own feelings about the problems confronting him/her and suggests possible measures to overcome them. In short, it is the common man or woman who are aware of their own local problems and conditions and who then articulate them to researchers to suggest measures to remove them. The whole concept of participatory research is important as it directly interacts with the people for whom the research is being carried out. This chapter is one of the more important ones in the volume.

Chapter 4 reviews the question of quality in research. Any good research depends on the statistics collected and subsequently analysed. The chapter provides useful quality standards to follow. These relate to (i) planning for research; (ii) research processes; (iii) data analysis; and (iv) the dissemination of research findings.

Chapters 5 through 8 discuss the various steps involved from the conception to the presentation of research. The whole process should be manageable and concise. How this is to be achieved is spelt out in these four chapters. The suggestions are very practical, especially if checklists are developed for the various activities to be undertaken. Everything, from conceiving an idea to the writing of the final report, is outlined step by step. Budget-making and timetables are also discussed.

Chapter 9 focuses on how people can make use of the research undertaken. Experiences are exchanged through seminars and workshops. Chapters 10 and 11, the final chapters of Part One, examine the important issues of the impact of one's research and its evaluation in a broader context. Again, steps are outlined as to how to go about this. The steps are all very practical and simple to follow.

The eleven chapters of Part Two serve as a guide to how research may be carried out. One of the important chapters in this part of the book is Chapter 13, which examines the concept of ethics in research for development. This basically deals with the confidentiality of data. Much information is collected through surveys and hence the privacy of the respondents is the primary responsibility of the data collector. Anonymity should be practised.

Chapters 14 and 15 discuss the issues related to how people communicate and record information. The ability to communicate can elicit better responses from respondents as well as from team-members. Culture, language, and experience all play a role in developing good communication behaviour. When recording information, it is necessary that it is as accurate as possible. Notes need to be made either at the time of the interviews or just afterwards. Tape-recorders can also be used, but this depends on the situation. Whatever the means, it is important for any subsequent analysis that all the relevant information has been faithfully collected.

Chapters 16 and 17 discuss which methods are the best in carrying out research. But before employing any method, it is necessary to be clear about the objectives of the study. Some of the techniques used in research include interviews, focus groups, observations, questionnaires, etc. These chapters highlight these methods while acknowledging the fact that whole books have also been written on these. Chapter 18 focuses on such issues as needs assessment, stakeholder analysis, baseline studies, etc. Chapter 19 deals with the practical issues involved in sample design. Chapters 20 and 21 focus on the analysis of the data collected, and on how to write a report. The length of the report, and the clarity of language in its writing, is important if it is to have widespread acceptance. Reports filled with jargon and technical terms usually fail to inspire the audience at which they are aimed.

The book, in the end, is a manual. It is well-written and, at every stage, is well-documented with practical examples. The simplicity with which it is written adds to its value in that non-professional persons get well-acquainted with the research process. Every chapter in the book ends with highlighting of the main points

made in that chapter. Checklists are provided at regular intervals, making it easier for the reader to follow the concepts being outlined. A further strength of the book is the inclusion of an appendix with a list of websites that deal with issues in the area of development research. An impressive bibliography reveals the hard work that has been put in by the authors. Although basic in nature, the simplicity of its organisation and message should appeal to people/researchers across disciplines.

Mir Annice Mahmood

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics,
Islamabad.