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A new approach to social research in Africa: the exchange process

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In recent years, research workers in developing countries have had to deal with issues and problems about which their predecessors cared little and did nothing. Prominent among such issues is that of relevance. There are two aspects to this issue: the relevance of the research methodology to be employed and the relevance of research objectives and results to local community needs. For the former, the question is whether research methodologies developed in one socio-cultural context, say, Euro-American culture, can validly be applied to developing countries (O'Barr *et al.*, 1973, p. 15). Research methodologies are culture-bound in the sense that they bear the imprint of the society in which they were originally fashioned and whose needs they are meant to serve (Obikeze and Mere, 1978, p. 54). For the latter, the issue concerns the extent to which the research is geared to the needs, and its findings applicable to the solution of, problems of local communities.

Nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century anthropologists and ethnographers working in colonial empires did not much bother about these and related issues, probably for two main reasons. First, relevance at that time was conceived purely in relation to the needs of the colonial administration which subsumed those of the subject people. Secondly, the profundity and authenticity of any field-work in the colonies were judged by the number of strange customs and esoteric cults reported. This quest for sensationalism beclouded professional concerns about the methodology employed.

Much has changed since. With political independence, considerable improvements in education, and a near-universal quest for rapid socio-economic advancement, the inhabitants of the developing world are now demanding 'a great deal more than they have been getting from social

scientists' (La Ruffa, 1971, p. 209). Irritated by 'the invidiousness of some of the findings' of earlier research (Cromwell *et al.*, 1975, p. 141), community-based groups and well-meaning individuals are 'increasingly questioning the relevance of the research and the values of the researcher(s)' (Hessler and New, 1972, p. 13). O'Barr *et al.* (1973), for instance, have given a detailed account of how the International Meeting on African Studies held in Montreal in 1969 (and Boston in 1970) was disrupted by militants who charged the African Studies Association of the United States with bias and discrimination. According to them, 'plenary sessions and panels were transformed from the sombre business-like meetings of earlier years into heated public debates running far into the night. . . . One of the most highly contested issues', they continued, 'concerned the objectives of Western scholars working in Africa. It was repeatedly charged that a great many American researchers are singularly unconcerned with African problems'.

Faced with these challenges, social scientists, as O'Barr *et al.* have put it, 'need to develop imaginative and innovative techniques and to assess the local applicability of those techniques carefully and rigorously' (O'Barr *et al.*, 1973, p. 15). Such techniques must be flexible enough to meet the aspirations of developing nations while preserving the fundamental properties of scientific inquiry. The primary objective of this article is to call attention to a method which, in our opinion, holds great promise for more authentic research, with greater likelihood of local utilization of

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findings in the developing countries (Hessler and New, 1972). We will outline the basic features and principles underlying this method—the ‘exchange process’, a variant of what is also known as participatory research—as well as demonstrate its practical utility by describing a project designed to test its applicability in Nigeria.

Problems of social research in Africa

For a fuller assessment of the merits of the exchange process, a brief overview of the various types of problems besetting social research in Africa seems necessary. Besides the issue of relevance, there is a multiplicity of other equally serious problems. Within the last two decades, a sizeable volume of literature has been devoted to their discussion (Voss, 1966; Moore, 1967; Spiegel, 1969; Josephson, 1970; Guttentag, 1971; Ijomah, 1973; Galliher, 1973; Hopkins and Mitchell, 1974) and for present purposes of analysis, they may be grouped under five broad headings.

Language and concept definition

Most research operations in Africa are designed and carried out in languages other than the mother tongues of the subject population or even the researcher himself. This raises the grave problem of rendering into the native language concepts, words and variables which are either non-existent in that language or convey completely different connotations (Tessler, 1973; Barkow, 1973). The problem is further complicated when, as it is often the case, the researcher does not even understand the local language and has to depend on interpreters.

Closely related is the problem of operationalization and measurement of variables and concepts. For instance, how does one meaningfully operationalize and so measure ‘poverty’ in a society where beggary is extolled as a virtuous occupation? (Aminu, 1979, p. 12).

Research climate

The place of the research worker in society and in the scheme of things presents a different type of problem. Research is a relatively new activity in Africa and the social status and role of those engaged in it are by no means clear. Consequently,

the subject population has no idea of the proper attitude or mode of behaviour expected in dealing with such persons. At best the research worker is classified as a government official and responded to accordingly; at worst, he is seen as a spy and an unwelcome intruder. In either case, the response elicited is anything but natural and to that extent the validity of the research findings is impaired.

Further, some research methodologies require certain levels of literacy or public enlightenment which cannot be guaranteed at present in many African societies. The reliability of information collected with such methodologies is at best doubtful.

Epistemology and orientation

Researchers harbour orientations and philosophies acquired in the course of their training and professional practice. Differences in these orientations have created sharp divisions among individuals and groups of social scientists. In fact, many professional associations have been bitterly divided in recent years by those with differing epistemological perspectives (O’Barr *et al.*, 1973, p. 14). Lines along which these divisions have developed include ‘value-free’ versus ‘committed’ research; quantitative versus qualitative research; pure versus applied (action) research; global (grand) versus *ad hoc* approaches; functionalism versus conflict models, etc.

Like ideologies, these epistemological perspectives provide the motif as well as the direction to the research enterprise. They weigh heavily in determining the choice of the research topic, the selection of subjects, the method of data collection and analysis, and the interpretation of results. The consequences, particularly in the developing countries, cannot be overstressed. Some adhere so closely to one epistemological perspective that they would not even contemplate the adoption of another, even if circumstances clearly demand it (Ijomah, 1973). Further, rigid adherence to varying orientations impairs the comparability of research techniques and their results.

Funds and facilities

Research requires money and other facilities like skilled manpower, means of communication and computers. In the developed countries a number



of foundations, organizations and institutions have been created specifically to provide funds for research. In addition, the governments of these countries also allocate some support to research. In the developing countries, on the other hand, research funding institutions, where they exist at all, are as yet in an embryonic stage, and the governments are so poor that, even with the best of intentions, their outlay on research can amount to no more than a token gesture.

The consequences for African research and development are more serious than readily meets the eye. The ironic situation arises where most of the major social research projects in Africa are funded or heavily supported with grants from sources outside the continent. The social, economic and security implications of this are clear. Foreign interests which fund African research are in a position to determine areas of priority, methodological perspective and the utilization of research results.

Dissemination and utilization of research findings

There are two aspects to this problem—the shortage or complete absence of professional journals and other media for publicizing research findings and the great communication gap between the researcher or academic, on the one hand, and the local population and government functionaries who could consume or implement findings, on the other.

Researchers in Africa work in great isolation from one another, so that they do not benefit from experiences gained, and the findings of related research carried out in other parts of the continent or even within the same country. This is largely because there are very few forums for meeting and discussion and very few journals for research publications. In fact virtually all the professional journals in various social science disciplines in which African researches are published are based in Europe and North America. And since these journals cater to the interests of readers in their countries of publication, only very few researches on Africa which can fill in gaps in overseas scholarship eventually get published.

Even more serious perhaps is that there is no communication channel linking the researchers to the general public or governmental agencies. As a

result even such research as bears directly on local issues and problems goes unnoticed by those for whom it is intended and who need it most.

The exchange process

In reality, there is not, and may never be, an error-proof research methodology able to resolve all the problems listed above. All that can be done is to develop techniques capable of resolving some of the issues while minimizing the rest. As already indicated, we consider the exchange process a bold step in that direction.

As a methodological technique, the exchange model conceives social research as a process of social exchange involving the professional researcher, the subject community and affected institutions and organizations.

The term 'exchange', it needs to be pointed out, is used here in a strictly sociological sense to mean 'social interaction'. Thus George Simmel (1950, p. 388) defines 'exchange' as 'the objectification of human interaction'. Similarly, George Homans (1961, p. 35) defines the elementary social behaviour (interaction) in terms of the exchange of rewarding and/or punishing acts. In his words,

when an activity (or sentiment) emitted by one man is rewarded (or punished) by an activity emitted by another man, regardless of the kinds of activity each emits, we say that they have interacted.

This conception of research as a process of exchange has come about partly as a natural reaction to the orthodox model which sees the researcher-academic as an ivory-tower dweller out of touch with social realities and whose relationship to his subjects is non-interactive. On the other hand, it may be seen as an attempt to meet some of the demands by groups and individuals for more meaningful involvement of the subjects in research enterprise. As Hessler and New (1972, p. 13) have put it,

research subjects, hitherto passive, now insist that the researcher engage in a dialogue with them, and they make it clear that unless the researcher does his best to accommodate them by opening his research to their scrutiny and gearing it to community needs, he will not collect valid data.

The first formal exposition of the exchange process is by Richard M. Hessler and Peter K. New

(1972) in 'Research as a Process of Exchange'. The kernel of this technique, as outlined by the authors was the establishment of a research organization 'wherein community residents are able to participate in the research process as decision makers' (1972, p. 13). This they called the 'research commune'. According to them, the term commune was not used to mean persons living together but rather 'a community where residents and researchers share equally in the research process' (1972, p. 13).

A basic ingredient of a research commune is to have community residents with the skills necessary to delineate and articulate accurately the social milieu of which they are a part. . . . It is also basic to the success of a research commune to give the commune residents who are to be studied, the same opportunities as the researchers have for making decisions about the project (1972, p. 13).

The authors then proceed to describe in detail the steps to establish a research commune in Boston's Chinatown, United States, to study health care. They show the utility of this approach in solving some methodological problems in social research and, concluding, they call for 'serious evaluation and testing' of this technique in other environments.

In response, Cromwell *et al.* (1975) tested the exchange technique in a variant research situation. However, while accepting the central idea of research as a process of social exchange, they considerably modified some of the key concepts employed by Hessler and New. They rejected the concept of research commune because:

we accepted the idea of research as an exchange process, but attempted to extend the process to institutional relationships in the community; in addition, we did not abandon our prerogatives in making the final decisions concerning the integrity of our research design and research process. We made every effort to incorporate suggestions and to delete objectional material, but we kept the final decisions within our research team. We also modified the idea of the research commune by frequently involving individuals as representatives of organizations in the community (p. 142).

Rather than detract from the original propositions, these modifications have, in our estimation, refined and rendered them more applicable in wider

social environments. For instance, Hessler's and New's concept of a research commune can only operate in a relatively small and homogeneous community with a certain level of social sophistication. Further, considering that 'commune' members are likely to differ widely in their educational and social backgrounds, it seems unrealistic to give everyone equal power in deciding technical issues in scientific research.

With these objections and modifications in view, a redefinition of the exchange technique to make it more applicable to the African scene appears necessary. We therefore define the exchange process of social research as an operational strategy whereby professional researchers collaborate with their study subjects, community representatives and other interested bodies, institutions and organizations, for their mutual benefit and facilitation, in the planning, execution and utilization of results of a research project. From this definition, it follows that the type, form and content of input contributed by each collaborating member are not the same but differ according to talents, training and experience.

Application of the model

To test the applicability of the exchange process in an African situation, we chose a research project that, in June 1976, was being discussed, namely, a Follow-up Study of the Rehabilitation Programme for War-Displaced Children in Nigeria.

During the Nigerian civil war (1967-70), thousands of children were evacuated from the war zones to other African countries for safety and medico-nutritional treatment. As soon as the war ended, the Nigerian Federal Government negotiated for the return of these children. Altogether 4,454 children were repatriated from Gabon, Ivory Coast and Europe. Added to these were thousands of other abandoned children who were being cared for at orphanages, sick-bays and refugee camps throughout the war-affected areas. With assistance from the International Union for Child Welfare (IUCW), Geneva, the Nigerian federal and state governments set up a two-phased rehabilitation programme for these displaced children. At the end of the programme in 1973, 4,415 children were reunited with their families. Of those whose families could not be traced, 73 were fostered out while 22 were placed in residential

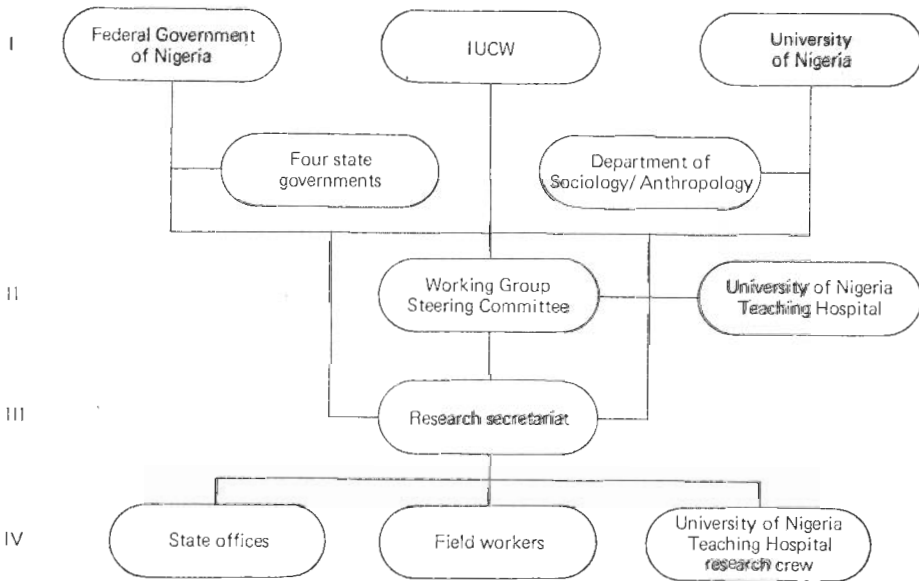


FIG. 1. Organizational chart of the follow-up study project.

institutions. Adoption was ruled out as a matter of government policy.

The follow-up study was intended to provide an objective evaluation of the entire rehabilitation programme from a child welfare perspective. In applying the exchange technique to this study, the first step was to initiate contacts with, and sell the purpose of the study to affected and relevant organizations, institutions, groups and individuals. Following such contacts, the Federal Government of Nigeria, the IUCW, Geneva¹ and the University of Nigeria agreed to co-sponsor the project. Governments of the four affected states, a teaching hospital, two relief/welfare organizations and all the relevant local authorities also agreed to participate in varying degrees in the study.

The next step was to set up the organizational machinery. Structurally this comprised four distinct levels, namely, policy ratification, policy formulation, policy execution, and field operations levels.

Level I: policy ratification. This is the highest level of the research organization. It consisted of the

three sponsoring (funding) organizations—the Federal Government of Nigeria, IUCW, Geneva, and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. There was no common forum bringing these bodies together at this level; instead, each organization took independent action to ratify, modify or reject decisions reached at, or recommendations coming from the lower level (i.e. level II). Some of the functions of this level of the organization may be described as: (a) providing the necessary approval, legitimacy and sanction for policies formulated by the steering committee. For instance, the acceptance of the Federal Government—and *ipso facto* the four state governments—that no restrictions should be imposed on what aspects of the programme were to be covered in the study provided the necessary support for field interviewers in broaching highly sensitive issues. Further, by agreeing to house the research secretariat, the University of Nigeria provided the authorization to make use of university facilities; (b) another function of this level is to provide research funds. Once the recommendations of the Steering Committee on Budgetary Allocations were approved, each organization took

the necessary steps to make its share of funds and equipment available to the research secretariat on schedule.

Technical issues of research design and execution, of course, did not reach this level.

Level II: policy formulation. It is at this level that research policies were initiated, discussed and hammered out. It consisted of accredited representatives of the federal and state ministries of health and social development; IUCW; social welfare officers in the four affected states; the head, Department of Sociology/Anthropology, University of Nigeria; the project director; the child welfare consultant; a consultant paediatrician; the Chief Psychiatrist of Enugu Psychiatric Hospital; child welfare officers of the Christian Council of Nigeria and the Nigerian Red Cross Society.

This committee met three times in full sessions and twice in sub-committees for the duration of the project. At its first meeting the committee considered the study objectives; the scope, content and methods of the study as proposed by the research secretariat; resources needed for the study; level of participation by both the sponsoring and affiliated organizations; the study budget; and a tentative study timetable.

Level III: policy/research execution. The actual design and execution of the research project in line with decisions reached at the steering committee took place at this level.

The research secretariat comprised of the project director, a child welfare consultant, two research assistants, a clerk, a typist and a messenger. Added to this was a number of student assistants engaged from time to time according to need.

The research secretariat handled all the technical and administrative aspects of the project. It also co-ordinated the activities of the state offices, the field workers and liaised among the sponsoring organizations.

Level IV: field operations. Activities at this level were geared towards the actual collection of the research data.

Structurally, it consisted of: (a) four state research offices, one in each state capital. Located within the office of the state chief social welfare officer and manned by the state representative in the steering committee, these offices were more or

less field extensions of the research secretariat. They dealt directly with the study subjects and community representatives, relaying discussions at the steering committee to them and reporting back their reactions to the committee. Further, some state offices were allowed to take over certain of the clerical functions of the secretariat with respect to their own states; (b) the second unit at this level comprised field workers, mainly interviewers and their supervisors. They dealt directly with the subjects to obtain information; (c) the third unit at this level was another sub-office of the secretariat located at the University Teaching Hospital. Headed by the consultant paediatrician member of the steering committee, this specialized unit was concerned with the execution of a nutritional survey on a sub-sample of the total study sample.

To appreciate the nature and volume of exchange that went on within the organizational structure outlined above, it is necessary to highlight the special interests of various groups of participants in this study.

Although IUCW had been involved in a number of relief and rehabilitation programmes in different parts of the world, the Nigerian programme was its first major involvement in Black Africa. It therefore offered the world organization an occasion to apply or test a number of social work and child welfare principles and policies developed in other cultural milieux—primarily Europe and Asia—in the African context. During the rehabilitation exercises, some of these principles were called into question while modifications were made in others to suit local situations. For IUCW, therefore, a follow-up study of the rehabilitation programme was a good opportunity to: (a) acquire proper documentation on any peculiar features of the Nigerian experience and the modifications made; (b) assess their overall effectiveness; (c) assess cultural compatibility and general acceptability of child welfare principles which guided their operations in Nigeria and elsewhere; (d) register opinions on some crucial issues in social welfare intervention, such as evacuation of children to foreign countries in time of crisis and the legal adoption of orphans.

The Department of Sociology/Anthropology of the University of Nigeria was just beginning a diploma programme in social work. It therefore saw in the study an opportunity to: (a) build up a



reservoir of empirical data for use in the diploma programme; (b) test empirically some of the basic principles of social work as they relate to the African environment.

The Federal Government of Nigeria had just established a Directorate of Social Development charged with the responsibility of coordinating, expanding and harmonizing social welfare programmes throughout the country. This directorate expected that the study would provide it with firm evidence on which to base national policies on such issues as legal adoption, institutional care, foster placement and payment of foster fees. These would form the basis of comprehensive national social legislation which the directorate was asked to draft.

For the children and their parents (study subjects) it was an indication that the government had not forgotten them and might continue some form of assistance—even though care was taken not to raise such hopes.

For the University Teaching Hospital, the study was an opportunity to follow up a nutrition study it had started on a group of children while they were in Gabon. It was also an opportunity for a field demonstration to the medical interns on how to use some new equipment.

The four state governments saw in the study a training opportunity for their social workers; hence they insisted that only serving social workers drawn from the four states should be trained and utilized as field interviewers. Further, they hoped that the study would provide the much-needed directive on the ultimate fate of children currently in institutions and foster homes.

These represent some of the articulated special interests which the study design had to accommodate and cater for through the exchange process.

In applying the principles of the exchange process, the steering committee is to be seen as the hub or pivot of the whole edifice. The bulk of the exchange occurred or was initiated at this level and from there it was transmitted to the lowest levels. At the steering committee meetings, inputs in the form of ideas, experiences, specific requests or demands, suggestions as to areas to be covered, particular procedures and protocols to be observed come from representatives of federal and state governments, international organizations, research methodologists, social work practitioners and

theoreticians, other academics in the fields of social and the medical sciences and community representatives. In the end, decisions and operational procedures that were believed to be theoretically sound, culturally acceptable, financially feasible and practically attainable were fashioned. An illustration will be helpful here.

One of the thorny problems that confronted us at the first meeting of the steering committee was how to locate the study subjects—the children and their parents—three to five years after their reunion. The problem was complicated by the fact that available addresses of the subjects were those of their home—villages where they lived during the civil war and rehabilitation exercises. Since then they had left the villages for urban locations throughout the country. It was decided eventually to address a 'request-for-contact-address' letter to them through the available home-village addresses asking them to supply their current residential addresses. The implementation of this decision entailed a lot more problems than appeared on the surface. The first question was who would sign the request letter since the parents had no idea who the research director was and what could be his interest in their children. To give research as the reason for requesting a residential address at a time when armed robbers used all sorts of tricks to deceive their victims was one way of ensuring non-response. Another factor peculiar to the Nigerian situation was that the ethnic origin of the writer (as revealed by his surname) was bound to influence the reaction of parents, particularly at a time when inter-ethnic relationships in the former Eastern Nigeria were anything but cordial.

On the other hand, the Social Welfare Department in each state had a special relationship with local citizens. The rehabilitation programme was carried out through the active participation of social workers in each state and they visited the children and their families a number of times with relief materials. The department was therefore known by the parents and its continuing interest in the affairs of the children would not only be understandable but also welcome. A letter from the social welfare offices of the states was therefore likely to elicit the maximum response. This was therefore the solution adopted, after discussion.

Without the collaboration and total involvement of government functionaries in the

project, the most fundamental problem of any research—that of reaching the subjects—might not have been resolved.

As a sort of summary, we would like to consider the extent to which the follow-up study attempted to deal with what was earlier identified as the major problems of social research in Africa.

Language and concept definition was a formidable problem considering that as many as ten languages are spoken within the area of study. The questionnaire, prepared in English, therefore had to be translated into all languages. To deal with this, interviewers were chosen from all the linguistic groups, and each worked in his mother-tongue area. During the training sessions, interviewers from the same ethno-linguistic area formed sub-committees to produce a standard translation of the questionnaires. These were pre-tested to confirm the accuracy of the translations. While this did not completely overcome dialectical differences, it did ensure that each interviewer had 'a basic understanding of the local culture and (was) linguistically competent enough to . . . translate and execute the questionnaire' (Hopkins *et al.*, 1974, p. 568).

The problem of research climate was effectively overcome by two complementary measures. First, the decision to utilize only practising social workers as interviewers and supervisors in their home states helped to eliminate status ambiguity. Secondly, the fact that each state government had taken steps to inform every local community of the study eliminated any suspicions the respondents might have on the objectives of the study. Although we did not obtain a 100 per cent response rate, the analysis showed that failure was attributable more to the interviewers than to the respondents.

With respect to the problem of epistemology and orientation, a conscious effort was made to associate and accommodate all shades of opinion. From the various special interests represented in the study it is clear that it was as much basic or pure research as applied or action research. We were appreciative of the merits of both the quantitative and qualitative methods. Two chapters of the study report were devoted to data analysis, one employing quantitative and the other qualitative methods. Though one cannot deny influences from graduate training, there was no conscious effort to tie the study to a particular research ideology or orientation, except the desire to

employ scientifically valid procedures to achieve practically relevant results.

Research of this magnitude requires a lot of funding and though it did not prove possible to obtain all that was needed, the problem would have been greater by far had there not been joint sponsorship, which also ensured that no single donor exercised undue influence on the methods or final outcome of the study.

The dissemination and possible utilization of research findings were given top consideration from the earliest stages of the study. At the first meeting of the steering committee it was agreed that a three-day international seminar should be organized to discuss the findings. The seminar budget was separated from the research budget and its organization left to a sub-committee of the steering committee. To give the exchange principle the widest scope and to bring the study to the knowledge of all concerned, the following (in addition to all those who participated in the research exercise, including all interviewers), were invited to the seminar: Faculties of Social Science in all Nigerian Universities; all polytechnics that offer courses in Social Welfare; social research institutions like the Nigerian Institute for Social and Economic Research; social welfare departments in all federal states; all persons and organizations who participated in the rehabilitation of the children; the International Red Cross Society; eminent psychiatrists, paediatricians and welfare workers attached to schools, hospitals and religious charitable organizations. IUCW contingent to the seminar included the West African regional representative of the organization. The federal and state government participation ensured coverage of the seminar by the press, radio and television. There was frank, unfettered discussion and exchange on all aspects of the research from the expressed objectives, through the methodology, the sample, the study instrument, the analysis, to the findings and recommendations. The seminar recommended that the report should be published in its entirety.

Conclusion

By describing one project in some detail, it is not implied that research has to be of this magnitude for the exchange principles to apply. On the



contrary, a major advantage of this technique is that it is flexible enough to be adapted to any research project no matter what its scale.

In whatever situation, a successful application of this technique requires first that the researcher appreciate the need for relevance of his study. Secondly he must accept that relevance in the African context, means potential benefits, either direct or indirect, to the subjects (Cromwell *et al.*, 1975, p. 149). To set the exchange machinery in motion it is advised to raise and find explicit answers to the following questions: What are the potential benefits of this study? What agencies,

groups, organizations and individuals are likely to be involved in the administration or utilization of these benefits? How are these bodies and persons to be associated in the planning and execution of the proposed research project? Experience has shown that professional field staff in the area of work make invaluable contributions to the exchange process. They help the researcher to adjust his designs to what is practically possible, and include agricultural extension staff, schoolteachers, community nurses, social workers, local government officials, etc.

Note

¹ Nigeria is a full member of the International Union for Child Welfare (IUCW), Geneva, a non-governmental organization with consultative

status to the United Nations and other international intergovernmental agencies.

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