Geoforum 40 (2009) 217–227

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Academics among farmers: Linking intervention to research

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 7 March 2008
Received in revised form 27 June 2008

Keywords:
Developing country farmers
Interventions
Research among farmers
Researchers' obligations
United Nations University
Land management
On-farm biodiversity
Ghana

ABSTRACT

Geographers and other academics whose reputations and advancement depend on their work among developing country farmers have an obligation to assist the farmers in tangible ways. A project of the United Nations University which did this in 1993-2002 (PLEC)is described, with particular reference to Ghana, together with a follow-up project in the same country. Best methods of resource management were sought among the farmers themselves, and expert farmers were encouraged to instruct others in their methods. Moreover, in a project concerned with the conservation of biodiversity on farm, the farmers were also assisted in enterprises creating added value from biodiversity. Getting behind the farmers in their own enterprises can enrich academic research.

1. Introduction

Geoforum has never been a journal to avoid controversy, and we touch on one in offering this paper. Academic researchers among the farmers of developing countries are in a privileged position. We are able to understand what farmers are doing, and to observe the often poor results of official intervention. Through our writing we are able to reach wide audiences, including some government officials and decision-makers. There is now a host of research reports which describe and analyse the mistakes that have been made through top-down intervention, many of which offer recommendations to the authorities on what might be done better in the future. Many academics write at length on matters of policy which they somehow feel they have the power to influence (e.g. Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987; Brookfield, 1993). Unless these recommendations are specifically sought, which is rare, they prompt little action.

This paper discusses attempts to offer more direct support to developing country farmers within what was originally conceived as a comparative research project. We also show how doing this can enlarge and benefit the research project. We begin by locating such efforts in a growing movement among behavioural scientists to write, teach and act beyond the academic frame. With exceptions mainly in the universities of developing countries, geographers are johnnies-come-lately in this business. In anthropology it goes back more than half-a-century. Modern anthropology began in the colonial world, providing information on social organization, production, land tenure and trade that was of direct value to colonial administrators. Pioneers among them, including the founder of modern social anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, were directly sponsored and even paid to do their research by the administering governments (Young, 2004). Some colonial governments hired anthropologists and continued to do so into the 1950s. In an anti-colonial late 20th century world, this sponsored research was much criticized as providing support for colonial exploitation, or at best of 'indirect rule' and, in spite of the enduring quality of much of the research, a later generation of anthropologists has looked askance at this part of their history (e.g. Hoben, 1982; Lewis, 2005; Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006).

More relevant to present-day issues is the fairly long history of advocacy on behalf of the people studied among anthropologists and also some geographers (Wright, 1988; Brosius, 1999; Lamphere, 2004). Today, work of this type would be termed 'activist', involving the author in action of some form with or on behalf of the people involved (Pain, 2003; Ward, 2007). Within geography, there has been quite a bit of it concerned with social or environmental issues, mostly at local or regional level within the developed countries, work which we do not discuss in this paper. We look for examples of activist involvement by researchers in the rural scene of developing countries. In some notable cases such advocacy has been very unpopular. Anthropologist Wilson' (1942) report on the consequences of labour migration in what is now Zambia led to

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doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2008.09.006

the forcible termination of his research. Geographer Nietschmann (1989) went very public in defence of the Miskito people against a Sandinista regime in Nicaragua that was at the time the darling of the American left (and was under direct attack by the Reagan administration) and endured savage criticism from among his peers. Ethnobotanist Posey was threatened with criminal prosecution by the Brazilian government (after the period of military rule), because he had taken two Kayapó leaders to the World Bank in Washington to protest a dam which would have flooded much of their territory (A friend of Brazil, 1988).[1] Nietschmann's and Posey's interventions were dramatic forms of advocacy. Wilson's was dramatic only in the context of its place and time, and within a few decades what he wrote in the 1940s would become received wisdom in a wider southern African debate. Writing of anthropology as a whole, Rylko-Bauer et al. (2006, p. 186) argue that applied anthropology, which necessarily involves advocacy in some form and in favour of some interests, should 'serve as a framework for pragmatic engagement', as a goal for the whole discipline which its findings enrich in theoretical as well as empirical terms.

Writing for another discipline, and using a variant language from those of anthropology and geography, Burawoy (2005) drew a distinction between professional and policy sociology as dominant subfields, and critical and public sociology as 'subaltern' divisions of a larger sociology. Making a case for a much stronger commitment to public sociology, addressing a wider civil society, he treats critical sociology as the internal conscience of the discipline, its criticisms directed toward a professional sociology which tends to become too set in its ways. To geographers, the term 'critical geography' is more strictly confined to the academic left, and to writing on issues of public moral outrage. While there is the same concern over the irrelevance of much work that is done, the difference seems to be that critical geographers feel their work to be irrelevant if it fails to reach the public domain, as it often does (Martin, 2001; Storper, 2001). Castree (2002) argues that this concern is misplaced, and that the teaching of students and the enhancement of knowledge are themselves sufficient justification. The involvement of students in community-based projects and other activities is advocated as one means of reaching beyond the confines of academia by Jarosz (2004) and – from anthropology – by Austin (2004).

Involvement of students is one thing; involvement of academics, and especially untenured academics is something else. Separation of 'pure' from 'applied' research has for most of the 20th century been a distinctive feature of the behavioural sciences in the academic core regions of Europe and North America. Applied research, advocacy in publication, even publication in local outlets in developing countries have been luxuries which only the established academic could afford, since they were not seen as contributing to the advancement of disciplines struggling for respectability in a competitive academic environment. The generation of theory, through publication in major refereed journals or by university presses is the avenue to professional advancement. This limitation has never applied to academics working in developing country universities, whose sponsored research – if funded at all – has been expected to be on topics related to national development, albeit responsive to government policies. Our own backgrounds, Brookfield's in a research school set up initially to provide information about and for peoples of direct interest to Australia, and Gyasi's in a West African university – despite the neo-colonial origins of these institutions – ill-dispose us toward modern debates that seem to be largely concerned with the health of academic disciplines in the metropolitan countries. Robinson (2003) aptly remarks that what passes for general theory in at least in parts of human geography has its empirical foundation squarely in the North Atlantic countries. With her, we agree that for the rest of the world much of this cherished core of theory has little relevance to basic popular needs. What does attract us in this modern literature is the growing sense of responsibility toward the people among whom behavioural scientists work, and who provide a major part of the information on which their career advancement rests.

We find this sense of responsibility in some of the publications mentioned above, but it seems absent from others, though not necessarily from the wider consciousness of the authors. Lamphere (2004) recounts instances in anthropology where researchers have returned to their developing country communities to offer tangible repayment, or to work in community projects. Much earlier, Tax (1958) set up a whole 'action-anthropology' project designed to bring benefits to Amerindian participants. During the 1990s, some anthropologists and other social scientists made use of the then-new technology of global positioning systems (GPS) to assist indigenous people, mainly in central America, to make maps of the territories they claimed, as described in a whole issue of *Human Organization* introduced by Herlihy and Knapp (2003). In cases of dispute, these maps became important political documents. The same was done in Sarawak, and successfully used in a 1999 court case contesting government alienation to a development company of land under indigenous claim. Government responded in 2001 by legislation requiring the registration and licensing all land surveyors, effectively making such community mapping illegal (Cramb, 2007, pp. 243–244).

Of particular note for geographers should be a recent paper by Walker (2007) who lays stress on responsibilities to informants who have given up working time to supply information to researchers, often at real cost to themselves. Referring specifically to a proportion of political ecology writing, he finds that there is a risk of 'too often ignoring the *political* and therefore ethical dimensions of its own actions and inactions [so that the work has] few obvious links to tangible material or social progress for those who are the objects of study' (p. 368 emphasis in original). More widely, it may or may not be true that what is most important to the people studied is simply to get our accounts of them and of how they see the world right in their own eyes (Östberg, 1995), but most of them are poor and marginalized; devising ways in which to improve their lot should not be least among our duties. There is one whole large profession that has this latter aim at the core of its whole ethos. This is the multi-disciplinary development profession, and in the present context we are concerned with that part of it that is involved with agricultural development. Few will deny that the results of more than 40 years of such work have, on balance, been disappointing. There is a perceived need for new approaches, especially in the years since the book 'Farmer First' (Chambers et al., 1989) appeared and overcame a lot of initial scepticism. The field of rural development has become more multi-disciplinary, and a stronger place has emerged for behavioural scientists, including anthropologists and geographers prepared to give cognizance to farmers' abilities as experimenters and 'performers' (Richards 1985, 1986, 1989). They can collaborate with agricultural scientists in shifting the research focus away from the experimental station and onto the farm (Scoones and Thompson, 1994). While this shift has been accepted only in part by an agricultural-science profession still widely hostile to what are termed (even by friends) 'populist', 'neo-populist' or 'eco-populist' approaches (Kirkby et al., 2001) there has been a notable change of emphasis in many quarters and a new willingness to listen to behavioural scientists. It provides a new set of openings for academics wishing to involve themselves more closely with the people whom they study.

[1] In a very much more minor key, one of us was compelled by a sensitive UNESCO to withdraw, modify and reprint an early report on UNESCO-sponsored work in Fiji, because it contained a critical comment on inter-ethnic attitudes (Brookfield, 1978). It was only after the 1987 coup d'état that, when writing without UNESCO financial support, we were able openly to discuss this and other sensitive issues (Bayliss-Smith et al., 1988).