

## A Personal Reflection on Utilization of Social Science Research Results in Ethiopia

Solomon Belay\*

The question of utilizing social science research results in Ethiopia has always puzzled me and I have always tried to explore practical solutions that are worthy of sharing to all in the field of social science and anyone who has concern on the topic. This essay is in a way thinking loud about the issue.

Sad enough the many researches made on variety of subjects are shelved as if they have no relevance to daily life situation except to serve as a reference for another round research, which will have the same fate as previous researches. The academic circle seems to have accepted implicitly or explicitly that it has no responsibility of utilizing research results. It is left to the government or some 'concerned body' to find about the research results and utilize them. The generations of students educated in this context consider researches only a business of college work. Colleges and universities are taken as monasteries which house people who don't have interest in facing and changing reality.

With this in mind, I will be examining few aspects of why results of social science researches are not utilized in Ethiopia, and at the same time I will try to forward some insights that lead into the solutions.

- The first and foremost problem permeating this issue and others, I feel, is that there is, as the Chinese famous proverb goes, 'great river between word and action.' There is a dichotomy between theory and practice/implementation. The word 'research' itself seems to be given for someone who is licensed to do research

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and totally engaged in it. There is a research object 'out-there' to be 'researched' by a researcher. There is no automatic implication whether the research would be utilized or not. The researcher is by no means obliged to utilize her/his findings. Such fragmentary thoughts in theory and practice have not only permeated many aspects of our lives but also have become a cult that to question and challenge it appears to be impossible. Therefore researches should be seen as part of daily life activities relevant to our daily situations. There should be an attitudinal change on the part of individuals and institutions as to the motive of research and its findings.

In this case the age-old motto of the sages the concept of 'the philosopher king' must take root and bear fruit. Either researchers should have the political and economic power or the powerful must know the dynamics of research. Or action research must necessarily become the trend.

With respect to that 'the generation and application of knowledge' must replace the current dominance of economic activities in all domains of human society. Economy, important as it is, should not be given so central a position in the society assuming that men are selfish by nature and always try to maximize their benefits and resource is too limited to cater for everyone's need. The conceptual framework upon which economics is based can be reversed by assuming that resource is unlimited and human need can be limited. By way of verifying this hypotheses generation and application of knowledge becomes central to societal activities.

In this respect the mechanisms of study, consultation, action and reflection must be known and practiced virtually by all. The current trend in many development organizations shows that a divorce among these four mechanisms results in failure to achieve a desired objective in any one of the mechanism.

- Study is so much related with the meaning and role assigned to research. A continuous study of the nature of problems affecting society and their possible solutions must be an integral part of our daily lives.
- As reality is too complex to be grasped by a single mind, the coming together of a group of people who study and act for consultation is imperative. Consultation is a dynamic process where different insights of a reality boil together to reach a consensus and a decision that will be abided by all.
- Action is the object of all activities that we undertake as conscious human beings. Whatever we study and consult must manifest itself in the realm of action. Otherwise a sense of emptiness pervades our souls which yearn for adventure and action.
- Reflection is a kind of 'look back and step ahead'. Through reflection we critically examine our past action and see what we can and should learn from it for future action. In a learning process, evaluating our past action in light of the desired goal and incorporating the knowledge and wisdom acquired from it is the central theme.
- However all the four mechanisms are interwoven that must go hand in hand without a clear demarcation among them.
- Another issue worth investigating in utilization of research results in Ethiopia is the type of knowledge generated through the research. It is unfortunate that the knowledge generated doesn't seem to lead into volition and action/practice. I think volition is the soft link that connects knowledge and action. It is more of a mystical metaphysical process that works on the individual conviction to want to act on what he/she knows. Or in another word, we can say that the knowledge generated doesn't affect much of attitude. This could be related with the overall instruction that we get in our schools. Our schools don't have moral or ethics

education program that might have resulted in the researchers personality the need to work with perseverance until his/her research results are utilized. It needs inspiration or pure motive to 'walk the talk.' Inspiration and purity of motive result only from a moral integrity inculcated to the child through proper education.

- In this regard the elements of encouragement with the two pillars of justice i.e. reward and punishment must animate people's lives. The justice system in the society should be so perfected that we are rewarded for every good thing that we do and be appropriately punished for any misdeed.
- Another problem in utilization of research results in Ethiopian context is our poverty itself. Because of scarcity of research resource the research itself may lack depth and scope. With all the limitations of the instruments of research in social science it becomes even harder to reach at a valid conclusion with the scarce resource we have. Ironically it is said that 'the source of poverty is poverty itself.' It describes the vicious circle that the already existing poverty itself aggravates our inefficiency in utilizing research results. It demonstrates the fact that the approach in the utilization of research results must be one of holistic. Unless there are efforts in improving the country's situation in all fields of endeavor we cannot hope to excel only in the particular area under discussion.

It is also important to highlight that even then some researchers don't fulfill all necessary experimental /research conditions. With a wrong tool we find wrong results. And some reach a conclusion irrespective of what their data shows.

The desire to overcome one's economic problem as a side line activity of research also definitely influences research and utilization of results. The corruption now affecting all corners of society could possibly affect social science researchers and unnecessarily wastes the little resource available for the purpose.

• With this we can also raise the issue of whether the 'Ethiopian culture' itself creates a conducive atmosphere for utilizing research results. In a traditional society such as ours new findings and changes are not welcome. Lack of sufficient opportunities to interact with other cultures and civilizations has deprived us from the lesson and inspiration that we can get for research and utilization of findings. Few steps have to be taken in welcoming ideas and people wherever they are from.

In relation to this we need to revise the views we have on 'Authorities.' Researchers seem to consider acclaimed leaders in their field as authorities to set the framework for the design and interpretation of their investigations regardless of their shortcomings. People, particularly students, are afraid to dispute authorities and professors in their field or forward a totally new and innovative idea. We must be able to create an atmosphere of learning or research where fear of any kind is eliminated.

• At this point we can also mention the issue of curriculum. One can ask a very relevant question of how we are organizing and practicing curriculum in our educational system. A number of researches have been done and recommendations have been forwarded in the area of curriculum. Unfortunately the traditional ways of doing things have continued in our schools. In fact problems have become worse as the number of student population grows and a new policy in curriculum is being implemented. (Right now, as I write this essay, students who have completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade are not even assigned to their particular schools.) We must utilize time and resources efficiently and judiciously to put in place a curriculum that is geared towards critical thinking, dialogue and action.

• Participation has been found a key factor in all areas of implementing a plan of action, and research results. In this respect the rate of participation now seen in both researching and utilization of results should be augmented. There is still a highly

top-down approach in designing research or setting research questions, in collecting and analyzing data, and in drawing conclusion and verification. As a result the so-called 'beneficiaries' from the research and its findings view the process with suspicion and even could possibly develop aversion that will impede ultimate practice.

Research is not an exclusive right of a few scholars. Participation, regardless of educational background and positions in society, in research process must be the right and privilege of everybody. All must learn research methodologies and how to utilize research findings.

- In social sciences we deal with the study of man (the humanities), so the following points could be raised in relation to their implication in research:
  - Human beings are rational creatures who are responsible for their own ideas and actions. In the research process, human beings as a group (or even as an individual) do not remain as passive subjects of inquiry. They understand the debate that occurs during the formulation of ideas in a research study, and they not only assimilate these ideas but they also accommodate them and are changed. (As one of my teacher put it 'the child observes you as you observe her/him.) Moreover, the social world is unknowable without using the views and perceptions that are held by human beings. With regard to this the very foundations of behavioral and social science knowledge lack certainty and usually what happens is conclusions are reached from research, but their nature has been influenced or biased by the theories held by the research workers.
  - Be that as it may, I am not also sure whether social scientists have agreement and also doing research on the three fundamental questions of man; namely, the nature of

man, the nature of society and the purpose of life. I strongly feel that unless there are definite answers to these fundamental questions, researches in the field of humanities will continue to suffer from impracticality.

How can we do researches on peripheral issues while we don't have a consensus about the central issue of the nature of man: for example, whether man is a purely physical entity or a combination of some metaphysical entity called the soul or spirit that puts mankind distinctly apart from other animals. Is society simply an aggregate of selfish individuals who try to maximize their benefit or is it a unified system that embraces individuals as a trust to the whole? What is the purpose of life? Is it 'to carry forward an ever advancing civilization', or is it to 'know and worship' the supreme creator? In a situation where there are equally contending views on these fundamental issues it is possible that utilization of social science research results in Ethiopia is at least retarded.

- Based on the above argument we can say that many researches are shortsighted. The researchers could be influenced by the philosophical assumptions and social problems of their time, both in selecting problems, and more particularly, in drawing conclusions and making recommendations. The research themes themselves seem to be value laden and ideologically driven. They lack broad and sharp vision of the distant future. So researchers must not only engage themselves in the immediate problems but also focus on basic researches. This concerns the prioritizing of research issues which must not be overlooked.
- Because of the fast explosion and flow of information – situations change fast before research results are submitted, assessed and utilized. New discoveries in the natural sciences precisely affect social science so information flow between and among the sciences should be unhampered. The vast sea of information should be accessible to anyone in the field of research but still

having in mind the continuum in study/research, action and reflection.

A model of global learning should be examined and forwarded so that research findings in other countries are made available to us, so that the unnecessary resource spent in repeated research is saved and redirected to utilization. This implies the importance of establishing viable institutions that facilitate this global learning.

- Appropriate strategies and budget should also be indicated for implementing research results whenever research proposals are written and researches are made. We have to take it for granted that a research is not completed unless its results are utilized.
- I also personally feel that researches that do not contribute to the promotion of unity, social justice and equity in society don't bear fruit. Unity and justice are 'the best beloved of all things' in the society and they should be at once the animating power and goal of all our activities. They work at a level beyond our grasp in facilitating the generation and application of knowledge. Further researches could be made to identify how unity and justice trigger action. Unity and justice among the different sex, race, age, social and economic groups must be taken into account while exploring ways for utilizing social science research results in Ethiopia.

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