

The World Employment Programme at ILO*

I was invited by the International Labour Office to head the research wing of its World Employment Programme (WEP). Although I had spent nearly a year in 1969/70 as Senior Economist with the Pearson Commission on International Development in Washington, D.C, the ILO assignment was effectively my first experience of working at the international level. To me the post offered the excitement of working at the global level doing the same sort of work that I had done at the national level over the past 13 years.

The WEP was initiated in 1969 as ILO's response to the forthcoming United Nations Development Decade. It developed a wide-ranging and impressive research programme focusing on employment-oriented strategies. Given the intimate relationship of employment with all aspects of economic and social policy, the programme in effect sponsored research on poverty eradication, employment promotion and economic growth. In addition to research, the WEP organized inter-agency employment missions to selected countries. It also gave technical assistance to countries on formulating and implementing employment intensive strategies and policies.

The WEP was supported by an array of international agencies and bilateral donors. It mobilized eminent scholars and specialists to participate in its research, advisory and operational work. At its peak, the WEP gave global intellectual leadership on broad-based development strategies to the academic community and aid agencies. It generated a series of innovative ideas that were taken up in different forms by the international development community.

The WEP Approach

There were many remarkable things about the WEP as an international programme. From the outset, it was committed to poverty eradication and equitable sharing of benefits of economic growth. Indeed it was inspired by the realization that economic growth in and of itself did not necessarily lead to an improvement in the living standards of the great majority of the population. Productive and adequately remunerated employment and income-earning opportunities had a central role to

play in ensuring broad-based patterns of growth. Appropriate public strategies and policies were needed to ensure efficiency and equity in growth. All this sounds quite trite now but it was a relatively new message in the late 1960s and early 1970s

A distinctive feature of the WEP approach was that it did not rely just on ILO alone for its activities but sought in a systematic manner to mobilize resources on a global level to advance its objectives. Although at the height of its work, the WEP counted on an impressive number of talented officials, it could never have realized its full potential without evoking the active and enthusiastic participation of eminent scholars and development specialists from all over the world.

The WEP also benefited from the expertise available in the UN system, the Bretton Woods institutions and regional organizations. The scale of its operations went well beyond what the ILO could finance. Over the years, the WEP succeeded in obtaining financial support from a wide array of multilateral agencies and bilateral donors.

The WEP was innovative in its means of action. It used a large scale research programme to carry out in-depth investigation of key employment and development problems. This is not the way most multilateral agencies go about advising governments. The conventional method is for them to rely on their officials and consultants to respond to the requests for assistance made by governments. Given the complexity and diversity of the employment problem in developing countries and the limited knowledge available at that period, it was a courageous and imaginative decision to opt for a worldwide research programme to explore its nature and magnitude as also the policies and programmes to address it.

The WEP also attempted to integrate research and technical cooperation in a mutually reinforcing manner. The famous country employment missions were led by eminent development specialists and comprised an impressive assembly of researchers and officials from UN agencies. They were as much exercises in research as in delivery of technical assistance. Drawing upon all available research, the mission reports in turn generated new research issues that were taken up by the research programme. Similarly the knowledge base accumulated by the WEP research fed into policy advice through missions undertaken from headquarters and the regions.

WEP achievements

The WEP research and the reports of the country employment missions had a profound and lasting impact on development thinking and policies. They reinforced the message that the central objective of development is improvement in the well-being of the people. Thus development policies should focus on poverty eradication, meeting of the basic needs of the people and creation of remunerative employment and work opportunities. The WEP approach thus foreshadowed the global consensus on poverty eradication and human development.

Its work showed that the key employment problem in less developed countries was not open unemployment, despite its visibility in large cities, but the lack of remunerative work opportunities. It focused attention on the urban working poor and the overworked women in rural areas.

It demonstrated that employment issues are intimately linked with the overall economic and social policies and cannot thus be discussed in isolation of macro-economic policies in such areas as government budget, trade regimes and exchange rates. Nor can employment generation be divorced from policies on industry, agriculture and services, and on credit, education, training, health, wages and labour institutions. In short, an employment strategy is tantamount to an integrated development strategy.

The WEP research and advisory work made many conceptual and technical contributions to development theory and practice. The informal sector was made famous by the ILO Employment Mission Report on Kenya published in 1972. The WEP research developed long-term quantitative models to integrate growth, population, income distribution, employment, and other social variables in a comprehensive framework with a view to assessing the impact of different policy scenarios.

It promoted work on hunger and famine, which resulted in the path-breaking study by Amartya Sen on the subject. It carried out innovative work on technologies, employment and incomes. It sponsored large-scale research on the linkages between income distribution, employment levels and economic growth. It developed new tools such as the social accounting matrix to present national income accounts in a socially more meaningful way and to assess the social impact of alternative policy packages.

The WEP research also produced highly acclaimed work on dynamics of rural poverty and evaluation of agrarian reform programmes. It was among the first to initiate major work on women workers in the early 1970s. Likewise, a good deal of the subsequent work on participation was foreshadowed in its research programme on participatory organizations of the rural poor.

The WEP made numerous other conceptual and empirical contributions to our understanding of employment and development problems in different parts of the world. The results of its vast research programme are contained in the hundreds of books and thousands of Working and Discussion Papers and consultancy reports published in the 1970s and early 1980s. The reports of the employment missions to Colombia, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Philippines and Iran had a big impact on the thinking and policies of the international development community.

Perhaps the high point of the WEP was the World Employment Conference of 1976, which proposed the satisfaction of basic human needs as the overriding objective of national and international development policy. The basic needs approach to development was endorsed by governments and workers' and employers' organizations from all over the world. It influenced the programmes and policies of major multilateral and bilateral development agencies, and was the precursor to the human development approach.

Factors in the WEP success

The first element in the success of the WEP was the strategic decision by the ILO leadership to highlight employment promotion as its central contribution to the UN Development Decade. ILO has traditionally been associated with work relating to adoption and implementation of labour standards. Its origin in 1919 with a membership consisting exclusively of what are now called industrial countries dictated this emphasis. But it is a credit to its then Director General and his advisors that they recognized the need for the ILO to reorient its work to focus more on the serious problems of poverty and employment faced by the new members of the organization.

Creative and dynamic leadership was also crucial to the subsequent orientation of the WEP. The political leadership was provided by Abbas Amar, the then Deputy Director General of ILO, and the technical

leadership by Louis Emmerij who directed the Programme in its most important phase.

Another important factor in the success of the WEP was the courageous decision to go for an approach to technical assistance anchored in solid research and knowledge. The Programme built up a considerable knowledge base before launching into advisory work and operational activities. Even the technical cooperation work was given a new twist. It took the form of employment missions headed by distinguished scholars and composed of extremely talented members.

The strategic decision by the programme managers to tap into the global talent rather than rely on its own officials alone for WEP activities was brilliantly fruitful. Through this approach, the WEP was able to draw upon leading thinkers from all over the world. Indeed the hundreds of scholars associated with its work at various stages read like a Who is Who of development economists. They included Economics Nobel Prize Winners like Arthur Lewis, Jan Tinbergen, Wasily Leontief and Amartya Sen.

The employment missions to Colombia and Sri Lanka were led by the distinguished development economist Dudley Seers. The Kenya mission was headed jointly by Hans Singer and Richard Jolly, and the Philippines by Gus Ranis. Among the many well-known economists who worked for the WEP, one might mention Joan Robinson, Erik Thorbecke, Graham Pyatt, Charles Cooper, Frances Stewart, Gerry Helleiner, Reginald Green, Irma Adelman, Pranab Bardhan, Paul Streeten, Ester Boserup, Rone Dore, S Guhan, Michael Lipton, Rahman Sobhan and Paul Schultz.

Starting with a small secretariat, the WEP built up over the years an impressive collection of professionals to oversee and manage its huge research programme, seminars and workshops, advisory missions and operational projects. At its height, it comprised over 100 professionals based at headquarters and in the regional teams. Of these nearly four fifths had prior research background.

The rapid build up of technical capability had the fortunate side effect of a youthful profile of its staff. Scores of young PhDs were recruited in the expansionary phase of the Programme in the 1970s. At one time or another, the following formed part of the WEP team: Keith Griffin, K N Raj, Victor Torkman, A R Khan, Ajit Bhalla, Felix Paukert, Gus Edgren, Anisur Rahman and Godfrey Gunatilleke. Its work on gender issues benefited from the leadership of Lourdes Beneria,

Martha Loutfi, Rounaq Jahan, Shimaye Muntemba and Azita Berar. The then “younger” officials included Gerry Rodgers, Eddy Lee, Samir Radwan, Ajit Ghose, Guy Standing, Vali Jamal, Assefa Bequele, Frank Lisk, Rolf van der Hoeven, Wouter van Ginneken, Iftiquar Ahmed and Richard Anker.

WEP Decline and Demise

It is not easy to integrate a new type of programme with a very different orientation into the traditional activities of an old and well-established organization like the ILO. It is normal for it to run into political and bureaucratic resistance. Indeed the WEP had many internal enemies. But the sheer momentum of the Programme and its stunning success both among developing countries and the donor community enabled it to survive and flourish.

The strategy pursued by the programme managers to move rapidly in a self-contained manner was probably the right way to go but it had the unfortunate effect that the WEP approach and ideas failed to permeate the rest of the organization. The different and to some extent competing strands of thought in the organization continued to co-exist in their separate worlds.

Perhaps it was this failure at integration that led to a decline in the vitality and quality of work under the World Employment Programme in the latter part of the 1980s. The immediate factors were change of leadership at various levels, the departure of some key officials and the shift in priorities of the new leadership. But one cannot avoid thinking that it is very difficult for an institution to sustain extremely high levels of performance. These are made possible by a conjuncture of events that bring ideas and people together. But the effort involved is too great for sustainability of high levels of achievement.

*Excerpts from **Dharam Ghai, Building Knowledge Organizations: Achieving Excellence (1999, unpublished.** The author held a number of posts between 1973 and 1987, including Chief, Research Branch, WEP; head of the secretariat for the World Employment Conference of 1976; and Chief, Rural Employment Policies Branch.