

## **RESEARCH PRIORITIES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

G. GUNATILLEKE

### **Introduction**

In January this year the Steering Committee on Social Sciences, of NARESA invited research institutions engaged in social science research to indicate the priorities they had identified for their work. After the institutions had sent their responses, the Steering Committee organised a half-day meeting which was attended by the representatives of most of the institutions.

The research institutions which had responded to the questionnaire had prepared a list of research priorities in their different fields, based on their ongoing programmes and current interests. These lists reflected their perceptions of the important researchable issues which came within the purview of the research activities normally undertaken by them and for which they possessed the research capability. The institutions therefore tended to select priorities for a manageable agenda of research and did not attempt to be exhaustive. They focused on the areas of research which they were proposing to undertake. On the other hand, some of the respondents who were associations of researchers such as the Association of Economists surveyed the entire range of research needs in their field and prepared a comprehensive list of priorities.

The responses indicated the wide variety of approaches that could be taken when selecting and listing the research priorities in the social sciences. The list can be prepared at several levels of specificity as well as coverage. At one level, such a list would comprise the general headings of subjects which are widely recognised as important. Any institution or individual researcher asked to prepare a list of priorities of this type would do this without much effort. At another level the list of priorities can be more definitive and detailed and would identify the major research projects. This would require the definition of the problems to be studied in any given field. Before a listing of priorities of either type described above can be undertaken in any meaningful manner, it has to be preceded by a more strategic exercise. Such an exercise must attempt to identify and define the critical research needs in the field of social science in terms of the major socio-economic, political and demographic changes that are taking place in Sri Lanka at the present time. There was consensus among the participants at the meeting that the task that was relevant for defining the priorities in the social sciences was an exercise of this type. The meeting was of the view that the more specific tasks of identifying and formulating research projects and programmes should be left to the various institutes and individual researchers.

### **Some Distinctive Characteristics of Social Science Research**

The task of setting the priorities in the social sciences at any given time follows a process which is significantly different from that of most of the exact sciences. In the

exact or natural sciences, the structure of knowledge deals with physical phenomena which are quantifiable and measurable. The accumulation of knowledge in that structure takes place after careful verification and validation. Therefore gaps in that structure, in its various parts, emerge more readily and clearly; consequently, the research priorities are more easily identifiable. Social science research which is engaged in the study of human behaviour deals with phenomena which are not often quantifiable and which do not lend themselves to the methodology of experimental verification as in the case of the exact sciences. The field of variables with which they deal, most often cannot be held constant as in the case of the exact sciences and the boundaries for the selection of variables cannot easily be contained within manageable limits. The product and the uses of social science research are therefore very different from that of the natural sciences. This difference is fundamental to the definition of problems, the identification of priorities and the analytical methods of the social sciences.

The primary objective of the social sciences is the advancement of knowledge and understanding of ongoing economic, social and political processes. In doing so they must contribute to policies and actions which can result in the better management of society as a whole. Unlike in the exact sciences where the phenomena are studied in and for conditions which have a high degree of constancy and universal replicability, the social sciences study phenomena which are in constant processes of change which are not replicable in identical form and content. Many of these phenomena are not readily amenable to statistical quantification and quantitative relationships. But they are not less important for that reason. In fact the areas which require qualitative analysis in the social sciences is most often the part more relevant for the understanding and the management of many critical social problems. The social sciences therefore do not have the type of predictive capability of the natural sciences; they deal with alternative possibilities under varying assumptions and conditions.

The task of identifying strategically important areas of research in the social sciences becomes a more complex task than for the exact sciences for another reason as well. There are no universally accepted paradigms of man and society within the disciplines themselves. Different schools of thought contend with each other and the theoretical frameworks and analytical methods used for study are often extensively disputed. This can be copiously illustrated in every discipline in the social sciences. It is evident for example in the discipline of economics when it deals with monetary management or the liberalisation of the economy. Therefore social science research by its very nature needs to allow room for plurality and diversity. It requires an orderly and rational discourse between alternative modes of explaining and understanding phenomena. In this process, it has to generate the capacity for informed valuation, judgement and choice of alternative options that emerge as a result of the studies. All this has important implications for the institutional framework that is needed for promoting and organising social science research.

### **Identifying the Critical Issues and Research Needs**

There was general agreement among the participants at the meeting that social science research in Sri Lanka would need to identify and focus on the critical issues arising out of the far-reaching social, economic and political changes that are taking place. The economic changes have led to a decisive break with the past, moving the economy from a state controlled protected system to an internationally competitive, market-driven one. The political system and its institutions have been under unprecedented strain, having to find viable solutions to the problems of a multi-ethnic society on the one hand and to cope with efforts at violent systemic change on the other. More effective democratic processes and participatory institutions are needed. Meanwhile, the social and demographic changes which had been at work over a long period are producing new social problems - problems of long life expectancy and an aging population alongside the wide prevalence of high levels of malnutrition and a low quality of life. At the same time many of the past strategies are reaching their limits; social welfare in its traditional form of government handouts are proving inadequate; the policies and programmes for poverty alleviation are attempting to enhance the income-earning capacity of the poor and bring them into the mainstream of development. Policies relating to domestic agriculture including its expansion through new agricultural settlements are also exhausting their potential and Sri Lanka is moving into a period of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. The major social issues which in the past were for the most part in the rural sector will now emerge in different form in the urban sector. Rural to urban migration could escalate rapidly bringing with it problems of urban poverty and all manner of social stresses. These few comments by no means intend to provide an overview of the major changes that are taking place. They merely indicate the context which social science research must take into account when it sets about the task of identifying research priorities. They are, as it were the signposts, pointing to the directions which social science research should take. They help to develop the broad strategy for social science research.

The research priorities that are briefly outlined are based on the discussions at the meeting and the issues that were highlighted by participants. They are organised in a sequence which attempts to indicate what should be the main strategic thrust of social science research in the social, economic political context which has already been discussed. Although these have been given under broad categories such as economic, political, social, and ecological, the research will most often move across disciplinary boundaries and require multi-disciplinary research within the social sciences as a whole, as well as collaboration with disciplines outside the social science field.

The nature of the research will cover a variety of activities - policy analysis, short term studies of specific problems of implementation, information gathering and surveys, and in depth research into processes and institutions which may include model-building and longitudinal studies. The body of social science research needed in Sri Lanka will need a mix of all these types of research in each priority area. The choice of the mix and the weight given to each type will depend on a variety of factors, and therefore the priorities in regard to the mix itself will have to be determined after careful study. Some

of the basic questions regarding the nature and mix of the research to be carried out in the social sciences in Sri Lanka such as the relative priority for fundamental as against applied research are those which are common to all sciences. There are, however, certain aspects of social science research which distinguish it from most of the natural sciences. In the natural sciences the explanations and solutions have already been developed. Research has to take the form of transfer, adaptation and application to specific conditions and constraints in Sri Lanka. In the social sciences the solutions and explanations that the disciplines develop are not applicable with the same degree of universality across countries and societies as in the natural sciences. The problems are much more specific to the national and social structures within which they occur and the variability of these structures is much greater. Therefore the task of adaptation and application of available theory in any given national or social context becomes a much more complex and creative task.

### **An Indicative Framework of Research Priorities**

The list presented below is by no means an exhaustive list. The list contains only the main research themes and refers to the nature of the researchable issues. The researchable issues themselves have to be more clearly defined by the researchers undertaking the work. Ranking these priorities would not be a meaningful exercise as each of the variables - social, economic, political and ecological - could have a critical impact on society and development. The social sciences need to produce a substantial body of analytical work and research in each of these areas. Within this framework of priorities the guiding criteria for funding should be the intrinsic merit of the research proposal and the competence of the research institution and the researcher. Social science research like all other research will contribute new knowledge which goes to form an organic whole. This means that even what appears to be a minor research project might produce an essential missing link. The listing of priorities in research should not therefore constrain researchers and confine them to a rigid framework. There should be sufficient space for the individual creativity of researchers. As has often happened, a creative piece of research, outside the beaten track can be path breaking and open new vistas of knowledge.

The issues have not been grouped specifically under each social science discipline, partly for the reason that there are close inter-disciplinary links in each group. Broadly the priorities listed under economic, social and political would come under economics, sociology, and political science, respectively. Disciplines of history and geography would be involved in several of the research areas listed, - for example, the historical component in the political studies and studies of cultural issues and the geographical component in the studies of regional disparities, typology of poverty, ecological studies.

## **1. Economic**

- **Macro-economic management to achieve development goals of high growth and rapid export-led industrialisation.** All the issues needing research and study cannot

be listed here. An illustrative sample will suffice : macro-economic policy instruments and strategies for balancing stabilisation objectives such as control of inflation with those of high growth; increasing productivity and reducing the ICOR (incremental capital output ratio) ; increasing the proportion of national savings in GDP; fiscal policy and restructuring of the government budget; balance of payments policy; econometric modelling of the economy for better forecasting and policy management.

- **Adjusting to the international economic environment.** The changing external economic environment and its impact on Sri Lanka - regionalisation of the world economy, the Uruguay round, the phasing out of the multifibre agreement; determinants of international competitiveness; lessons from the comparative experience of other fast developing countries (this cuts across all areas); optimising the use of external resources including foreign investment and the management of foreign aid ; studies at the micro and firm level for absorption of technology, "competitive advantages" etc.; the role of small enterprise in export-led development; the prospects for regional economic co-operation in South Asia; the emerging linkages with East Asia and South East Asia.
- **Institutional issues in the liberalised economy.** The role of the state and state intervention in the market economy including the methodology of planning and mechanisms for state guidance; the institutional arrangements and processes for state-private sector collaboration; the regulatory systems needed for fair competition and consumer protection; the institutional and policy framework for industrial relations, collective bargaining and wage determination in the new policy regime.
- **Liberalisation and the domestic economy.** The role of the sectors producing for the domestic market in the present strategy; impact of liberalisation on import substitution; the role of small enterprises; the prospect for domestic import substituting agriculture and its capacity for export orientation.

## 2. Social

- **The social impact of structural adjustment and liberalisation.** The impact of current macro-economic policies on the social sectors, on the poor, on women and children and other vulnerable groups; aligning growth strategies to goals of equity and distribution; policies and strategies for the alleviation of poverty, including methodologies for the better identification of the poor, the typology of poverty in Sri Lanka, and systems for monitoring poverty; reduction of regional disparities; methodologies for development planning at the regional and micro levels.
- **The impact of demographic change.** The changing age structure and the societal implications of the increase in the proportion of the aged population in the total population - restructuring the social welfare system and developing social security

systems; the impact on traditional family institutions, health care and other services; population policy, reproductive behaviour and fertility control.

- **Social impact of rapid urbanisation and industrial growth.** Problems of internal migration, urban poverty, and disadvantaged groups in the urban sector.
- **Issues relating to family, gender, and critical age groups.** The changing nature of the family and its effect on child care, role of women, adolescents and the aged; institutions and social processes for managing intergenerational relations with particular reference to the transition from adolescence to adulthood; the socialisation of the pre-school child in a rapidly changing environment; the impact of current development policies on women, - their participation in employment, the role in the family, their socio-political participation as equal citizens.
- **The cultural issues arising from the current development strategies.** The impact of consumerism and the competitive open economy on social and religio-cultural values; the social ethos work disciplines and ethics of professional elites needed for the present development strategy.
- **The growth of violence and its socio-political and human impact.** The types of violence, the causative factors and their effect on political and social institutions; victims of violence and problems of rehabilitation.
- **Re-orienting the Education system to development objectives and new social goals.** Linking education with employment; value education for citizenship in a democratic, multi-ethnic and equitable society.

### 3. Political

- **Strengthening the democratic system and processes of democratisation.** Institutions and processes for devolution and sharing of power; the decentralisation of administration; mechanisms for more active participation of citizens in the processes of policy making and decision making at national and subnational levels; constitutional problems related to the roles of the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary; the role of civic institutions or NGOs in a participatory democracy; the legal system, problems of litigation, access, cost and delay.
- **The problems of the multi-ethnic multi-cultural society.** Strategies and policies which reconcile national unity with cultural identity; problems of the Tamil community in the plantation sector and its integration with the rest of the economy and society; mechanisms and processes for resolution of conflict at all levels.
- **Human Rights.** The legislative and institutional foundation for human rights; managing extra-ordinary situations such as civil war, insurgent activity and wide-

spread anti-state violence with minimum infringement of human rights; people's education for human rights.

#### 4. Ecological

- **Strategies and policies for sustainable development.** This would be essentially multi-disciplinary in nature involving the sciences outside the social sciences. The contribution of the social sciences would include the environmental impact of economic policies and development projects; incentives and disincentives which can lead to social and individual behaviour which will be more protective of the environment; methodology for environmental impact analysis and costing for environmental effects including the improvement of the national accounting system to account for environmental damage and depletion; the legal and institutional framework for environmental protection; community participation in environmental protection; the impact of socio-economic factors and development processes on health.

#### 5. Management sciences

In the field of management sciences apart from the acquisition and transfer of known skills, there are many critical areas of research in the management sciences which are linked to the themes outlined above. They all relate to the **development and adaptation of management styles and the new skills that are needed to respond to the new demands** : culture-specific management styles for maximising productivity; managerial needs for enhancing international competitiveness and market-oriented development; re-orientation of the bureaucracy from the role of regulator to that of facilitator and change agent; appropriate management systems for the small scale and informal enterprises.

In the **information sciences** apart, again, from developing the required skills, the installation of appropriate information systems for the economy, access to it, adapting modern information systems to Sri Lankan needs in a variety of other programmes in different fields are areas of study and implementation-oriented research and have high priority.

#### 6. Information systems and Methodologies

- **The information systems and methodologies for data gathering in the social sciences** require considerable strengthening. This would apply to existing socio-economic data including the national accounts. As the basic data supplied and systematised in the national sample surveys and national accounting form the basis for research analysis and policy formulation, the improvement of these components of social science research have very high priority.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has confined itself to the identification of a research strategy and priorities for research in the main fields in which the social sciences work. It is not possible to examine the institutional pre-conditions for a productive and effective process of social science research within the limits of this paper. The nature of social science research, the need for plurality and diversity require institutional arrangements which facilitate the exchange, regular communication and discourse among research institutions and scholars in a manner which meets at least three objectives. It should lead to the type of co-ordination which avoids needless duplication of effort and builds on complementarities of research efforts; it should promote networking for both research collaboration and support services such as information services; it should lead to collective perceptions of research priorities and generate a constructive interchange on the areas of research controversy. Such a framework is at present not available. Without it, it will be difficult to develop a body of social science research which can make a significant impact on policy and on society as a whole.