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## **Degrees of Freedom: Applied Development Research in Ethiopia through a South-North Partnership Programme**

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### **Introduction**

This paper describes the development of a unique joint postgraduate degree programme in rural development between University College Cork and Mekelle University in Ethiopia. The paper discusses the origins, aims, structure and outputs of the programme, and makes some general suggestions on the future development of such partnership programmes.

### **Programme Description**

The MSc in Rural Development is a unique partnership programme between the National University of Ireland, Cork (UCC), and Mekelle University, Ethiopia. It is the first joint degree programme between an NUI University and any other degree-awarding third-level institution in any other country. The principal aim of the programme is to develop advanced and practical skills amongst practitioners in rural development in Ethiopia.

The learning objectives of the programme are:

- (i) to enhance the skill levels of rural development practitioners in Ethiopia
- (ii) to support the expansion of supply of trained practitioners in rural development in Ethiopia
- (iii) to support skill development in rural development in the context of a globalising market economy
- (iv) to support the building of institutional capacity and skills transfer between the partner Universities.

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The implementing partners are National University of Ireland, Cork, Ireland, and Mekelle University, Ethiopia. The commissioning agency for the MSc programme in its first cycle was the Tigray Food Security Co-ordination Office (TFSCO), as part of its programme to upgrade capacity in Tigray Region, Ethiopia, in the areas of food security and broader rural development. Irish Aid (formerly Development Co-operation Ireland) has been providing capacity-building support to the Tigray Food Security Co-ordination Office through its Ethiopia development co-operation programme, and therefore indirectly contributes to funding this programme.

### **Background: Policy and Institutional Dimensions**

This programme has arisen to meet specific capacity-building needs in the context of Tigray Region and of Ethiopia as a whole. Table 1 shows some key human development indicators for Ethiopia. In addition to the low levels of human development generally, there are specific differences between rural and urban areas, with poverty rates and food insecurity being higher in rural compared with urban areas (according to Ethiopia's PRSP 45% of the rural population lives below the poverty line compared with 37% in urban areas). Given that around 85% of the population still live in rural areas, there is an obvious urgent need to promote broad-based rural development to reduce poverty and food insecurity.

**Table 1. Human Development Indicators for Ethiopia**

	<b>Ethiopia</b>
Population <i>1975</i>	33.1 million
<i>2002</i>	69.0 million
Human Development Rank	170
Life expectancy at birth	45.5
GNI per capita	\$90
Adult literacy	41.5%
Per capita health expenditure	\$14
Infant mortality per 1,000 live births	114
Under five mortality rate per 1,000	171
Gov spending on education - %GDP	13.8%
Net Primary enrolment rate	46%
% of population using sanitation facilities	6
% of population with access to potable water	22
Internet users per 1,000 people	0.7

*Source: Human Development Report 2004 and The State of the World's Children 2005 (UNICEF)*

In recent years, the Ethiopian Government has adopted a broader rural development policy as a key means of poverty alleviation and broad-based development; within this policy the focus is switching from a “narrow” focus on boosting agricultural production as the sole means of rural livelihood improvement, to a broader emphasis on identifying livelihood opportunities, whether agricultural or non-agricultural. Similarly, there is a partial shift in focus from emphasising increased household food production as the primary means to household food security, towards a greater orientation towards the market as a potential means of attaining food security. In addition, in the past couple of years an ambitious, multi-donor-supported, Productive Safety Nets Programme (PSNP) has been introduced, targeted at chronically food-insecure areas and households. Table 2 shows the areas and populations targeted by this programme.

**Table 2: Population and Agricultural Production of PSNP Regions**

Region	PSNP Woredas	Chronically Food-Insecure Population	Area Planted <sup>2</sup>		Agricultural Production <sup>3</sup>	
	No.	'000	'000 Ha	%	'000 quintals	Yield (Q/Ha)
Oromiya	51	964,945	3,613	44%	43,720	12.1
Amhara	52	1,572,442	3,074	37%	28,807	9.4
SNNPR	50	760,450	696	9%	7,388	10.6
Tigray	30	850,304	561	7%	6,227	11.1
Somali	48	682,945	48	1%	225	4.7
Afar	29	250,087	19	<1%	246	13.0
Harar (rural)	1	13,579	7	<1%	58	8.9
Dire Dawa (rural)	1	41,546	6	<1%	61	10.0
Other Regions	0	0	194	2%	2,178	11.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>262</b>	<b>5,136,298</b>	<b>8,217</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>88,910</b>	<b>10.8</b>

Source: Government of Ethiopia (2004), Productive Safety Net Programme.

The PSNP is targeted to 262 woredas<sup>4</sup> identified as being chronically food insecure. For the purposes of the PSNP, a woreda is considered chronically food insecure if it (a) is in one of 8 regions (Tigray, Amhara, Oromiya, SNNPR, Afar, Somali, rural Harari and Dire Dawa), and (b) has been a recipient of food aid for a significant period, generally for at least each of the last 3 years.

<sup>2</sup> Area Planted by Region in 2000, *Food Security Strategy*, March, 2002, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Production by Region in 2000, *Food Security Strategy*, March, 2002, p. 33. Includes cereals, pulses and others.

<sup>4</sup> Woredas are effectively Districts: modal population size per woreda approximately 100,000.

The targeted beneficiaries of the Programme are the food insecure population living in rural areas in these chronically food insecure woredas. This figure is currently estimated to be about 5-6 million people. The beneficiaries of the programme are resource-poor and vulnerable to shocks, and often fail to produce enough food even at times of normal rains in the country. However in recent years up to 14 million people in Ethiopia, comprising both chronically and transitory food-insecure, have received emergency food aid.

These developments in Government policy have been accompanied by substantial changes in institutional structures. These have included the establishment of a Super-Ministry of Rural Development, and, more recently, the merging of agriculture and rural development to form the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development; a considerable decentralisation of budgets and planning authority to the woreda level; the establishment of a Food Security Unit in the Prime Minister's Office, and of Regional Food Security Co-ordination Offices in the largest Regions. Irish Aid has provided significant capacity-building support to the Tigray Region Food Security Co-ordination Office in recent years, and is now also supporting the PSNP.

These institutional changes have been matched by a significant expansion of staff deployed by Government at different levels to address rural development issues. Most of these staff, however, hold specialised qualifications (e.g. in agricultural science), and have relatively little training in rural development, although they may have accumulated valuable practical experience through their employment to date.

Therefore, given the enhanced focus by the Ethiopian Government on rural development as a key strategy for poverty reduction and broad-based development, and given the rapid expansion in personnel in the rural development field, most of whom are not adequately trained in this area, the MSc in Rural Development programme was designed initially to address the skills deficit and to build capacity amongst rural development personnel.

In addition to meeting the demand for trained personnel with particular skills, from the perspective of Mekelle University this programme also contributes to its vastly

expanded mandate to increase training of graduate students, but in an innovative and relatively low-cost manner. Ethiopia is currently going through a huge expansion in third-level intake, particularly at undergraduate level: total enrolments to the public University system tripled between 1996/97 and 2002/03, and the aim of the current Education Sector Development Programme is to quadruple the numbers of graduate students enrolled. Mekelle University, as with the other Universities in Ethiopia, is undergoing enormous and rapid expansion, and this programme provides a learning experience and methodology which can be increasingly used particularly to meet demands in the graduate sub-sector.

### **Development of the MSc in Rural Development: An Example of North-South Collaboration**

As noted above, the MSc programme was initiated as a response to the identified need for capacity-building in the concepts, skills and techniques of rural development in Tigray Region. The specific proposal was identified as a component of the capacity-building programme of the Tigray Food Security Co-ordination Office (TFSCO), which has been supported by Irish Aid as well as other donors. The programme in its initial cycle primarily involved upgrading of woreda-level Government rural development workers (initially, those who hold primary University degrees) to MSc level, giving them more advanced understanding of rural development processes, policies and practice. Many of these workers have 10-15 years' practical field-based experience in addressing rural development issues, but most of this experience has been in the context of narrowly-focussed top-down delivery of pre-determined agricultural "packages", allied to delivery of food aid to address regular food deficits. With policy shifts and decentralisation these staff have an opportunity and a requirement to work in a broader context and, in principle, to forge new, more participatory relationships with their "clients". Such a group of field-based staff would rarely have the opportunity to upgrade their skills and qualifications in a structured and systematic way, as this programme enables them to do.

In the early stages of developing the proposal, Mekelle University approached UCC to collaborate with them in the development and delivery of the rural development degree. This was a reflection both of the background of UCC in rural development and the relative lack of such experience in MU, and of the strong institutional

relationship which had been built up between the two Universities through student exchanges and joint research in the previous 5-6 years, particularly in the areas of food security and sustainable natural resource management. The design of the programme was therefore an outcome of the collaboration of the two Universities, in co-operation with TFSCO. Although the need for this capacity-building was identified by TFSCO, Mekelle University also undertook extensive market research amongst Government agencies in Tigray and was able to demonstrate considerable demand for the programme. Subsequently two NGOs also sent staff members on the first cycle of the programme.

The programme was designed through a process of curriculum development meetings which involved the two Universities and, at times, TFSCO and Irish Aid in Ethiopia. The finalised curriculum went through the normal degree approval processes in both Universities, which was done in 2004, the programme being officially launched in March 2005 with 24 students on the first cycle. Out of 24 students, 20 were Government employees and four were employees of NGOs; five of the students were female, a figure which would have been lower if not for the insistence of key stakeholders that a minimum quota for female students be adhered to.

Table 3 shows the breakdown of the curriculum for the programme.

**Table 3. MSc in Rural Development Curriculum**

<b>Modules</b>	<b>Credits</b>	<b>Points</b>
<b>First Year</b>		
<b>Rural Development Policy, Institutions, and Governance</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>Natural Resource Economics and Marketing</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>Poverty, Food Security and Livelihoods</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>Regeneration and Conservation of Natural Resources</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>Project and Programme Planning and Management</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Micro-Finance and Entrepreneurship</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Statistical Methods</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>GIS for Rural Development</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Second Year</b>		
<b><i>Option A Production, Extension &amp; Marketing (Select Modules to a Total Value of 400 Marks)</i></b>		
<b>Extension Methods and Practices</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Food Marketing and Supply Chain Management</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Food Policy and International Food Trade</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Crop, Livestock and Fisheries Production Systems</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>Small-Scale Post-Harvest and Food Processing Technology</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Co-Operative Food Processing and Supply</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
<b><i>Or Option B Sustainable Livelihoods (Select Modules to a Total Value of 400 Marks)</i></b>		
<b>Sustainable Development &amp; Poverty Reduction</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>Social Development Policy</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Health &amp; Development</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Water Resources Management</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Livestock And Pastoral Development</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Plus:</b>		
<b>Research Methods &amp; Participatory Approaches</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Dissertation</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>300</b>

Whereas initially TFSCO and Mekelle University envisaged that the programme would be delivered as a “sandwich programme” with students studying full-time during the three summer months, the design changed, partly as a result of UCC’s experience with distance learning programmes. The programme is now delivered through a combination of distance learning and 10-day intensive teaching sessions (three per year). This approach fosters experiential learning, whereby the students work through each module sequentially (about 2 months is required to complete one ten-credit module) and, through a series of self-learning exercises and assignments, are able to relate the module material to their on-going rural development practice. Monthly tutorials are held in Mekelle University while UCC staff go to Mekelle on a four-monthly basis to conduct intensive teaching. Ultimately it is intended that the programme will be partly delivered through the web, once the technological

infrastructure is fully installed in Mekelle University, but face-to-face teaching and the field work organised around such teaching are invaluable elements of the programme.

There are a number of innovative features of the programme which make it appropriate to the specific capacity-building need it is addressing. These include:

- (i) the institutional link-up between the two Universities which (a) gives students access to on-going high-quality support, and (b) provides the structure for awarding a joint degree;
- (ii) the emphasis on a combination of distance learning and intensive teaching, which combines the flexibility of distance learning with the benefits of face-to-face teaching;
- (iii) the relatively low cost of the model, particularly relative to sending students overseas for higher-level study which, inter alia, reduces potential “brain drain” from sending students overseas;
- (iv) joint writing of the programme between the two institutional partners;
- (v) the emphasis within the programme on equal partnership between the programme providers, which allows for additional synergies, for example in terms of joint research, staff development, etc, which can be fed back into further enhancement of the programme.

### **Outputs and Impacts**

The first cycle of the programme was completed in June 2007 and 20 students graduated and were conferred in a graduation ceremony in Mekelle University in July 2007. In the meantime, the programme started a second cycle in March 2007 with 23 students: of these 10 are sponsored by Government Departments in Tigray Region, going beyond the previous focus on woreda-level officers to include policy-makers at Regional level; another 7 students work for NGOs and are sponsored by them; and 6 students are junior staff members of Mekelle University, for whom the programme provides a unique opportunity for locally-based capacity-enhancement. Negotiations are also underway to expand the programme to two other Universities in Ethiopia.

The outputs of the programme cannot be measured just in terms of the number of students graduating. The programme is intended to contribute to changes on the

ground in terms of the ways in which key rural development workers perceive development issues, which in turn should influence their planning and implementation of development actions. These are key development workers at community-level: they are in charge of delivering rural development services to populations up to 100,000 people per District, and with staff (including extension agents) in some Districts numbering around 150 people. It will be important to follow up with the students to ascertain precisely the extent to which the programme has indeed changed their approaches, and what wider effect that has had in terms of the effectiveness of development actions.

In the more immediate term, one of the most positive outputs from the programme has been the range of, in some cases exceptional, dissertations produced by the students as part of the programme. This has demonstrated one of the strengths of a programme working with practitioners: the students have considerable practical field-level experience, but needed support in terms of enhanced capacity in conceptualising specific development issues and in using appropriate methods to analyse these issues. The results have been dissertations, generally of very high quality and based on thorough primary research, addressing key rural development issues of practical importance, including:

- household-level livelihood analyses
- problems related to community-managed water supply
- determinants of extension adoption and implications for sustaining women's livelihoods
- vegetable marketing challenges and opportunities
- the impact of food for work on household food security
- the role of a micro-finance institution in women's empowerment
- production shocks and coping strategies of rural households
- implications of land titling on tenure security and long-term land investment.

The fact that these students are working on a daily basis at the forefront of rural development design and implementation, particularly in the context of decentralisation of many development functions to woreda level, means that these research projects have a practical utility and are likely to inform development

practice, rather than simply end up on the shelves of interested but removed academics. In this respect the programme is likely to achieve a broader impact than conventional programmes with students lacking the same field experience.

### **Key Issues for Programme Design and Delivery**

This programme has been built on a number of specific factors:

- (i) strong pre-existing institutional collaboration and mutual respect between the partners;
- (ii) a policy context where the programme was developed to meet a specific emerging need;
- (iii) identification of specific demand by a client, backed by a supportive funding agency;
- (iv) a set of transferable skills existing in UCC (expertise both in rural development and in development of distance learning programmes);
- (v) personal commitment of key individuals in each of the collaborating organisations.

Each of these factors has been important to the successful development of the programme, and it is questionable whether the programme could have developed if any one of these factors had not been present. Programmes which are artificially transplanted to an area or “pushed” particularly by an institution in the North are not likely to succeed, due to lack of ownership and “buy-in” by partners in the South. Equally, institutional arrangements between two Universities which are not linked to other key stakeholders or clients may also not succeed, since there may not be a sustained demand for the product of such limited institutional links.

Therefore it is desirable in development-oriented joint educational programmes of the type described, for the partners to develop wider stakeholder links, particularly with development agencies (Government and civil society), to ensure that such programmes are meeting a genuine need, to provide a source of advice and feedback on programme design and implementation, and to develop applied research links which can feed back into the development and enhancement of educational materials.

It is also desirable to carefully identify the key areas where capacity building is required and will be productive, and to tailor programmes to their specific needs. It is not uncommon for Universities in the “North” to attract senior policy makers from the “South” for further study overseas which, although sometimes productive, can also (a) not always be cost-effective, and (b) neglects a larger cohort of lower-level personnel, who can be trained through lower-cost approaches such as the one described in this paper, ultimately perhaps with greater developmental impact. It is necessary for Universities in both the “North” and “South” to adjust their systems and their mind-sets, in order to develop flexible programmes to address real development needs, which may require meeting demands beyond “traditional” student profiles.