## Onward from IFORS2002: next steps in OR for Sustainable Development

by John Friend, Stradspan Limited, Sheffield, UK)

and: Jackie Phahlamohlaka (University of Pretoria, South Africa)

**From Beijing to Edinburgh via Mpumalanga**

In the May 2000 issue of this IFORS newsletter, a report appeared in our joint names on the progress that had been made at IFORS 1999 in Beijing towards raising the profile of OR in the field of international development.

One of the immediate outcomes of IFORS 1999 was that we both started to lay plans – together with Rangalal Bandyopadhyay of India, whom we had met in Beijing – to build further on the growing profile of OR in development at the next IFORS conference in Edinburgh in 2002.

At Beijing, it was more by good luck than good management that we had found ourselves participating in a sequence of streams on different aspects of OR in development running consecutively right through the conference week. So why not plan for a similar continuity of presentations and discussions three years later? As it happened, IFORS had also in the meantime agreed to sponsor ICORD 4 - a fourth special conference on OR in development – in Mpumalanga Province of South Africa in May 2001. So here was an important staging post towards the 2002 conference. Indeed, the first author of this report – Jackie – is from Mpumalanga while the second author – John - grew up in Edinburgh, so each of us in turn would have a chance to play host.

**A Distinguished Plenary Speaker from Peru**

For us, there were several highlights in the Edinburgh conference. The one we should mention first was the presentation by Dr. Francisco Sagasti from Peru as keynote speaker in the final plenary session. Francisco began his life in OR as a doctoral student of Russ Ackoff at the University of Pennsylvania, since when he has gone on to carve out a distinguished career in the world of international development. Among the many international roles he has held are that of Chief of Strategic Planning at the World Bank and Chair of the UN Advisory Committee on Science and Technology in Development.

At the final plenary session of the conference, Francisco addressed the challenges of the new century in an address on **OR for Development in a Fractured Global Order**. Ten years earlier, he had been one of two plenary speakers at the first IFORS special conference on OR for development (ICORD) in Ahmedabad, India. At Edinburgh, he illustrated his theme with reference to three very different pieces of project work in which he had been involved during the intervening decade.

The first project was *Agenda Peru*, an extensive programme of national consultation that he had directed over eight years to establish national dialogue across all stakeholders about future directions of development within his own country. He then discussed a project with the University of Sussex, which analysed the interdependent roles of the transnational development banks, viewed from a systems perspective. The third project, co-ordinated in Peru by a senior civil servant with an OR background, had devised a participatory approach to the construction of poverty indicators that had been put to operational use and had since attracted wide international acclaim.

**A Spirit of Interactive Working**

In planning our succession of streams for Edinburgh, the two of us had agreed, with Dr. Bandyopadhyay, to include as many open discussion sessions as possible. This aim presented us with some tricky problems at the planning stage. For the electronic system that was devised for advance submission of abstracts assumed that each stream would consist of three or more 90-minute sessions, each of which in turn would require submission of abstracts for three 30-minute papers to a session chair to be appointed in advance. Thankfully, the IFORS program chair Ben Lev allowed us to interpret these rules flexibly, so we were able to plan for a good sprinkling of panel debates and open discussion sessions over the course of the week.

For the Tuesday – following the presentation on Monday of shortlisted papers for the OR in Development Prize, Dr. Bandyopadhyay had planned a series of presentations, responses and open discussions on OR for Sustainable Development. The day was to begin with a presentation of his own work on an ambitious long-term project to bring together different aspects of sustainability in development planning in rural India. At the last minute, family illness was to prevent him coming to Edinburgh. However, his role was ably taken over by Professor Subhash Datta from the Management Development Institute of India, who had also been closely associated with this work.

There followed further discussions on projects on HIV/AIDS in India; on poverty-focussed budgeting in Namibia; and on ongoing initiatives in Africa by IFORS and EURO; of which more will be said later in this note.

**A Student Support Team**

In maintaining this momentum through the week, two postgraduate students from developing countries were to play an important role. Through the newsletter of the UK OR Society, an award had been offered for two OR students at UK Universities to attend the conference as rapporteurs, drawing out highlights from the discussions on OR for development and then drafting papers on their impressions for publication after the event. The award was sponsored by the Steve Cook Memorial Fund, set up in honour of one of the UK’s leading visionaries of socially responsible OR.

Both the winners of this award – one female, the other male – came from developing countries. They were Abi Jagun from Nigeria, a doctoral student at the University of Strathclyde, and Ajatshatru Sharma from India, a Master’s student at the University of Hertfordshire. One of their agreed tasks was to work on a set of PowerPoint slides on highlights from the development streams for presentation to the conference at large just before Dr. Sagasti’s final plenary address.

**An Informal Workshop Session**

As is customary at IFORS conferences, the whole of the Wednesday had been set aside for excursions to enable visitors to explore the scenic delights of Scotland. However several of us involved in the development steams agreed instead to meet for an informal workshop session in Edinburgh to take our shared agenda forward. As it was rare for so many of us to be together, we agreed it was important to make the most of the opportunity.

So fifteen of us – including our two student rapporteurs - met for an informal lunch in a glass-walled conservatory adjoining the main bar at Edinburgh University’s student halls of residence. After lunch, we worked interactively – facilitated by Dick Martin - to distil the main messages that were shaping up from our discussions so far, using flip charts posted around the conservatory windows. Our key messages were:

* that the multiple threats of poverty to sustainable world development should provide our primary focus;
* that we in OR could claim to be already deeply involved in many aspects of sustainable development such as health, education and water;
* that we had distinctive contributions to offer in our approaches to the management of uncertainty, complexity and resource constraints.

**Capacity Building for Development**

The theme for our Thursday stream – chaired by Jackie - was *Community Development and Capacity Building;* these are both phrases that have now attracted a high profile in the wider world of international development. We were fortunate that Jackie was able to attract to Edinburgh two of his South African associates – Gawie Engelbrecht and Maritha Snyman – who do not claim an OR background. They had both, however, given close academic support to the community education initiative that Jackie has been leading in his own rural district of Mpumalanga Province over the last decade[[1]](#footnote-1). We had also keenly anticipated the planned participation in the conference of Jerry Mariba, the Provincial Government’s Youth Commissioner; but, as is always a hazard with senior civil servants, he was suddenly called away on other urgent business the previous week.

There were further presentations on innovative OR and systems work in community development and capacity building from Venezuela, from Colombia, from Australia and from the United Kingdom. From the UK, Rebecca Herron reported on the developing activities of the Community OR Unit at the University of Lincoln since her move there two years earlier. Then Dick Martin used his recent experiences with community groups in London to argue the case for building new capacities forOR workers if they were to add the socio-political skills necessary for community work to their technical repertoire of soft and hard OR methods.

**An Important New Connection**

As we had found three years earlier in Beijing, one of the important benefits of the gathering in Edinburgh was the opportunity to make new connections with people – sometimes on our own doorsteps – who were undertaking fascinating project work of which we had not previously been aware. One such person who came to Edinburgh to describe his work is Paul Randall, an OR scientist employed by the UK government’s Treasury in London.

Under contract to the sister Department for International Development, Paul has been responsible for developing a new strategic budgetary system for the government of the Republic of Namibia in southern Africa, with a specific focus on goals of socio-economic improvement. This system, bringing together various dimensions of public sector performance, had now been integrated into the national budget, providing a new kind of framework for debates on priorities.

Indeed, during the very week that we were meeting in Edinburgh, a news release appeared in Namibia in which the adoption of this new framework had been officially proclaimed. The statement pointed specifically to the fact that the original features of the Namibian budgetary framework were being presented by Paul Randall at a large international conference in the UK that very week.

This surely is a shining example of the kind of publicity for the role of OR in international development for which we would all like to aim on a broader scale. Are there links to be pursued with Dr. Afuso’s work on poverty indicators in Peru, as reported by Dr. Francisco Sagasti at the conference? What are the wider implications for the UK government’s focus on poverty alleviation in Africa, and for the priorities agreed at the World Development summit in Johannesburg?

**Building a Post-Conference Agenda**

At the closing plenary session on Friday, the two of us plus Subhash Datta from India were first given the opportunity to spend ten minutes presenting highlights from the sequence of development streams, before the IFORS President, Paolo Toth, introduced Francisco Sagasti as keynote speaker. The background to this presentation of highlights was the sequence of PowerPoint slides that had been prepared by our two student resource people as a result of our Wednesday workshop session, with later additions.

After this plenary session, scheduled for a post-lunch slot on the Friday, the program left time for one final 90-minute session in our final stream on *Managing International Development*. Here was an opportunity for those of us who were still around to hold an action planning session in the same room where we had held all our earlier development discussions.

There were 18 of us at this final action planning session. The workshop materials we had at our disposal included a supply of large oval PostIt stickers[[2]](#footnote-2); some coloured marker pens; and a large blackboard surface - to which fortunately the stickers adhered without any of the anticipated problems. This session was if anything even more interactive than the Wednesday session at the Halls of Residence, with Dick Martin, Alberto Franco and John Friend sharing the facilitation role and vigorous contributions from many others. Among them were Elise del Rosario from the Philippines, in her role as IFORS Vice President for developing countries; and Arabinda Tripathy and Subhash Datta from India. South America was represented by Alejandro Ochoa and Ernesto Lleras from Venezuela and Colombia; and Africa by Jackie and Abi Jagun. The community OR and international development movements in the UK as host country were represented by Jonathan Rosenhead and Colin Thunhurst – now based in the Republic of Ireland – and by Rebecca Herron and Leroy White in their current Unit and Network roles.

**Priorities for Further Action**

Together we used the oval stickers to do some quick listing, rearrangement and clustering of issues for future action, using a bespoke methodology that tended to evolve rapidly as we went along. Dick Martin has since produced a report on what we achieved, accompanied by a diagram that reflects our progress in problem structuring on the blackboard.

Each of us was then allotted three sticky red dots to place on the ovals, to indicate our views on the most important issues to be followed through after the conference. Strikingly, the most votes went to the issue “Opportunities to address real problems” which had remained frustratingly broadly defined. We expect that putting this into action will be a high priority for the new team driving the network. “Influence” also received a high number of votes, and is being taken forward by Subhash.

More modest numbers of votes went to more clearly-defined clusters of issues that had figured in the discussion, where actions and options for the OR community could be articulated in more specific terms. Among these were clusters relating to education in OR for development; future international OR conferences; publication of case studies; and guidelines for the OR in Development Prize. Some of these are being developed by named individuals or teams. The new driving team will be expected to discuss which other areas to develop as priorities and how.

Perhaps the most important lesson to draw is that the OR community by and large remains only a modest player, and indeed often no more than a bystander, in the wider international arenas of discourse about world development. In these arenas, many more well-established professions, and many contending political forces, jostle with each other for influence, brandishing the banners of sustainability, participation, partnership and capacity building.

Yet Edinburgh showed that many of us do have our points of entry into this wider world. – among the leading examples being Francisco Sagasti, both in Peru and on the global development stage; and Paul Randall linking the UK with Namibia and potentially other countries of sub-Saharan Africa. We are also moving into a position where we can project richer concepts to help other people get to grips with the complexities of such persuasive terms as sustainability, participation and capacity building; though there remains much further work to be done before our contribution can be more fully realised. We are making our own contributions too to the facilitation of group processes in community and other multi-stakeholder settings; while some of us have developed fresh approaches to the training of development workers, not just OR professionals. We should consider how we can publicise this work more widely, especially in development rather than OR media.

The stronger and more robust our international networks within OR become, the more we will be able to contribute to building the capacities of other activists in the world of global development. In Edinburgh, we began to make significant progress. We exchanged e-mail addresses among the 18 of us present at the final session; we identified five of those present to drivers our network; and we identified forthcoming OR conferences in India, Burkino Faso, Chile and Tanzania as staging posts for the immediate future. But this is just a start. Over the next twelve months, there are many further steps to be taken if the functioning of our expanded global network is to be adequate to the challenges ahead.

**John Friend**

**Jackie Phahlamohlaka**

1. A case study paper by Jackie Phahlamohlaka and John Friend, describing a workshop in which soft OR methods were used with the volunteers of the Siyabuswa Educational Improvement and Development Trust, has been accepted for publication in the European Journal of OR in 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The latest development in intermediate technology for soft OR; supplies available through www.ovalmap.com [↑](#footnote-ref-2)