



ACGS/MPAMS Discussion Paper



A Concept Note on Learning Networks

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Abstract

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) has a very prominent and important Learning Group in existence since 1999 - the African Learning Group on Poverty Reduction Strategies and the Millennium Development Goals (PRS/MDGs-LG). The goal of this concept note is to explore more generally issues and questions surrounding the use of a Learning Group (LG) to enhance policy research in economic development for Africa and to provide suggestions for possible use by the existing PRS/MDGs-LG. The main idea presented in this paper involves the concept of a Learning Group made up of a number of networks. The networks organize academic activities, research, training and particularly some Summer Schools. Financing options for the idea are discussed in this note, paying special attention to the role of consultants and consultancy budget lines which could be used to enhance the work of the Learning Group.

Acknowledgements

This concept note on Learning Networks was undertaken within the context of the *“Enhancing Knowledge Sharing to support the Poverty Reduction Process in Africa”* an initiative of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) - with support from the Development Account administered by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). The Project is the direct product of a series of meetings of the African Learning Group on Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP-LG) (www.uneca.org/prsp). It is consistent with ECA’s broad objective of strengthening Africa’s ownership of the preparation and implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSs) and is supportive of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD).

The Project was initiated by the Cabinet Office of the Executive Secretary and led by Ms. Elene Makonnen, then Principal Advisor to the then Executive Secretary Mr. Kingsley Yao Amoako, Mr. Kasirim Nwuke, then Senior Economic Affairs Officer and Team Leader Social Policy and Poverty of the former Economic and Social Policy Division (ESPD), and Peter daCosta, then Chief of Communication. Ms. Elene Mekonnen exercised general oversight of the Project until it was transferred to the Poverty Section of the erstwhile (ESPD) in May 2005. Following a re-organization of ECA in August 2005, the project was transferred to the MDGs/Poverty Analysis and Monitoring Section (MDG/PAMS) of the African Center for Gender and Social Development (ACGS) where it now resides with the overall oversight of Mr. Kasirim Nwuke, Chief, MDG/PAMS and the direct supervision of the project coordinators, Mr. Adrian Gauci, Economic Affairs Officer and Ms. Elizabeth Woldemariam, Economic Affairs Officer.

1. Introduction

The ECA has a very prominent and important Learning Group - the African Learning Group on Poverty Reduction Strategies and the Millennium Development Goals (PRS/MDGs-LG), in existence since 1999. The PRS/MDGs-LG has as its stated¹ mission the goal “*to promote African ownership of the poverty reduction strategies*” and to study “*issues and challenges that African countries are encountering during the implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), sharing of best practices, and formulation of recommendations on action to remedy the specific constraints of each African country.*”

The PRS/MDGs-LG made a number of significant strides in its mission of promoting African ownership of the poverty reduction strategies processes and papers (PRSP) and in particular in enabling the sharing of best practices and peer learning in issues related this. These important strides are evidenced by the continued extension of its mandate, for example, at the March 3 2007 Cairo African Plenary on Poverty Reduction strategies and the MDGs and the 2007 ECA Conference of Ministers². The plenary at that meeting noted with appreciation its role in serving as a mechanism for information sharing and policy dialogue. The plenary also noted the importance of the Learning group for the ECA’s Annual Conference of Ministers of Finance, and in the close partnerships that exist between the ECA and the African Union, UNDP and other members of the United Nations system.

The goal of this concept note is to explore issues and questions surrounding the use of a learning group to enhance policy research in economic development for Africa. The hope is that out of this concept note may come ideas which can be implemented by the PRS/MDGs-LG. In particular, this concept note will propose a number of activities in a rank order: “Summer” Schools; research visits; Annual or biannual Meetings where papers are presented; working paper series; and collaboration with a scholarly journal.

This concept note will then argue that it is possible to creatively use the process of the award of consultancies to provide a big boost for the Learning Group and therefore economic research on Economic Development in Africa. The idea is to set up the networks and wherever possible channel resources normally used in the consultancies to the networks within the learning group to enable them to both produce the results of the particular consultancy and also to further their own network aims of producing research.

2. A Unique opportunity for the ECA and for the Economic Development Researchers

The ECA has a number of unique assets and characteristics enabling it to play a leading role in enhancing economic development research on Africa.

The ECA is on the ground grappling with most of the economic issues and policy questions facing Africa. Through its collaborations with national governments and ministries it is up to date on the practical problems African countries face and the decisions they are contemplating. These are precisely the kinds of issues that many professional or academic economists want to learn more

1 See <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2002/AFR519.doc.htm> or the official PRS/MDGs-LG web page at <http://www.uneca.org/prsp>.

2 (see www.uneca.org/africanprsp).

about and which practitioners want to grapple with. The ECA is able to provide academics, researchers and policy-practitioners access to the most interesting questions of the day, as well as access to real-life anecdotal and statistical data on these questions.

The ECA also now has a cadre of top rate professional economists that many academic economists, researchers and practitioners would really enjoy working and collaborating with. The facilities of the ECA are also of the highest world standards - meeting rooms for conferences, internet access, support staff, reference materials, translation facilities, etc.

The ECA is also the conduit for a lot of consultancy work that is done on Africa, both directly for the ECA itself, and also on behalf of national governments. A part of this stream of financial resource flows, we argue, can be used to support the Economic Development research process and the Learning Group.

Recent statements³ by the Executive Secretary of the ECA, Hon. Abdoulie Janneh, indicate a sincere appreciation of the value of Economic Research in guiding policy and a willingness to be helpful wherever possible. There have also been statements of support for Economic Research by the heads of two sister organizations important in the Economic Research structure: President Donald Kaberuka of the African Development Bank and Prof. William Lyakurwa, the Executive Director of the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC). This support is not only for research in Economic Development but also for collaborations with the ECA and their organizations.

As the role of the ECA deepens in this direction of enabling the Economic Research environment, the ECA will become somewhat unique in its prominence in its region of responsibility - Africa. There are very few other organizations which will be able to boast so important a role in Economic Policy research in its region of responsibility. This role of the ECA, when fully developed, could be a major illustration of the importance of the UN itself in these times of reflection and soul-searching on the appropriate place of that august body in the World.

3. The Proposals

In the immediate next sub-sections there will be a statement on the explicit proposals being advocated in this concept note. These will be itemized and then some comments will be provided, in some generality, making the case for the proposal.

3.1. The Holding Company: ECA's Learning Group

As mentioned earlier, the PRS/MDGs-LG has been in existence since 1999, and has had annual meetings, conferences, position papers, etc., over the years. In this concept paper, it is envisioned that the Learning Group will become a "holding company" which will have as constituent parts a number of different networks. The networks will be the units which will engage in collaborative research projects. There could be a research network on say Health Insurance; there could be another on Maternal Health; yet another on growth strategies; or financial institutions and financial liberalization; etc.

³ See the relevant statements and speeches from the 2007 African Economics Conference at <http://www.uneca.org/aec/>.

Later on in this section, this note will address issues of funding, issues of the capacity to have many such networks, as well as other issues relating to these networks.

There are a few guiding principles behind the proposals described below. First is the principle, asserted without proof, that a lot of collaborative research takes by people having the opportunity to spend time together to talk about research and to share ideas. In academia, some would say, most collaborative research (e.g., joint papers) takes place between people in the same university who have opportunities to observe each other making statements about their research and have opportunities to talk to their colleagues (perhaps at the water fountain) about research ideas.

The second guiding principle is that there should be a study into the incentive structure of participants as we discuss reasons for entering and being part of a network. The long run viability of a network requires there to be present the appropriate incentives for each member of the network. It should be stressed that for many members of the network, the required incentives will be non-financial.

3.2. Networks: Inception and Articulation of Goals

To repeat, the vision is to have the learning group be a sort of “holding company” which will have as subsidiaries a number of networks.

The ideas for projects or themes for a network could come from a number of sources. There could be an African President who would like to see further research into a particular issue - there is a statement in an article⁴ about the desire by President Abdoulaye Wade for a theoretical analysis of the NEPAD process, resulting in a number of academic papers in an academic journal. Alternatively, the ECA MDG group could decide that each of the 8 Millennium Development Goals should have a network. There may be interest in a topical issue - China and Africa relations or climate change, for example. Research questions requiring a network could also arise from requests from an external donor or funding agency.

One can put research networks into two broad classes - the broadly and narrowly defined. Broadly defined networks will have broad mandates and would be expected to be in existence for a while, handling different kinds of issues. There could be an economic growth network devoted to broader macro and theoretical issues. Members of that network could be on the more theoretical end of the spectrum, handling more macro issues like education and employment predictions, forecasts on HIV/AIDS numbers and impacts, etc. Other networks would be more focused and narrower in scope. There could be the desire, for example, to help some national governments who are about to set up health insurance schemes and need some advice quickly. Such a network could then be rapidly formed; it would perform its duties, report to the interested governments and then possibly fold up as a network, although there could be some follow up activities where results are shared with the more general academic and policy making communities.

Whatever is the precise scope or breadth of the network, some attempt should be made to be clear on the function of the network. The narrower and more focused networks will probably have clearer and more easily defined mandates. Others may be networks to maintain competence in some fields so as to enable them to become a resource available generally, and also available to other networks.

⁴ See Diery Seck (2007): “An Analytical Framework for the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD),” *Journal of African Development*, Spring 2007 | Volume 1 #1.

Some very successful examples of networks in the US are those of the US National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), the Behavioral Economics network at the Russell Sage Foundation, and the research networks at the MacArthur Foundation.

3.3. Identify the Leaders

A team leader or a group of leaders should be identified for each network. There are two possible models of this, corresponding to the two types of networks mentioned in the previous section.

(A) For the networks which are more broadly defined, it may be good to have a senior leader, perhaps someone in the holding company (ECA) to be the leader. The “senior” leader could be the one in charge of the network or else could appoint specialists or “junior “ leaders to lead the network at different times or consistently over time. For example, suppose that the principal activity of the network is hosting annual conferences. Then the senior leader may pick each year a different junior leader to run the conference for that particular year, or repeated over a number of years. This model has been used very effectively in, for example, the US National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER). Each year this group holds a number of conferences. A senior leader chooses a different junior leader to screen the papers and organize the events for the year, on different topics.

The second model, which would work for the more focused networks, is to pick an expert on a particular topical area, and have that person lead the events for a few years, culminating in a conference and/or edited volume, or some other output. This method is used quite often by the Council on Foreign Relations, for example.

Regardless of who is heading a particular network within the Learning Group (LG), it is still envisioned that the “Holding Company” - the LG of ECA - will continue to have the leadership role. By farming out the micro network leadership, this will ease some of the administrative burden on the very busy senior staff of the ECA. It is possible also that the staff, who are in sensitive political positions, may be able to have some “deniability” when contentious conclusions are drawn in the network reports.

The network leaders, of course, should be chosen carefully. First, leaders must be chosen who are able to get the network up and running. Although there may be initial enthusiasm, as the work involved in running the network becomes clear, there may be the desire of the leaders to back out. There may also be, in some quarters, resentment that one person was chosen as a leader as opposed to some other. So long as there is good work coming out, the resentments could be minimized.

3.4. What the Networks Should do

This concept note has discussed networks within the learning group. The ultimate goal of the network of course is the production of research and policy advice for economic development in Africa. In the following sub-sections this note will describe some of the explicit activities of these networks. The basic premise is that the research networks will be most effective if they are able to get the same group of core researchers and practitioners together on a somewhat regular basis so that they can have discussions and interactions which will enable high quality research to take place.

3.4.i. “Summer” School

The first proposal is for each network to be a part of a summer school. There could be a number of networks having their summer school at the same time and place - this of course would be important at the beginning when there may not be that many networks - indeed initially there may only be one network.

One example which receives a lot of admiration among academics and practitioners alike in the US is the summer school the NBER hosts in summer in Boston. The summer school at the NBER enables researchers to meet for about a week in Boston to present their own papers, listen to talks of others, and to meet other researchers and policy practitioners. The NBER summer school has been very effective, and it is a great way for members of the American academy to meet, share comments and suggestions and listen to each other's papers. The meetings take place in the summer because they are attended primarily by academics who have the summer off. The bulk of the meetings of the NBER, for example, take place in June and July. Different networks meet for about a week during different weeks of the summer.

It should also be mentioned that the school need not be in summer. It also need not be once a year, although the summers are probably the best times to get members from the academy to participate.

If the meetings take place over the course of a few weeks, one could also run a training program. The training aspect could be a wonderful feature of the networks.

For example, there could be courses on Growth or Human Capital Theory in such a summer school - researchers wanting to brush up a little on that topic or to apply this to their work may be interested. Many would be interested in sitting in on networks handling econometrics of growth models.

The term “school” is used to convey the learning potential. Researchers can learn from each other. This is in contrast to annual meetings and conferences where the goal is to promote one's own work.

There is an added benefit of including formal training and learning components to the summer school. If there is a summer school where there is some formal teaching going on, there will be set a certain temperament, a certain cordiality, which will be great for collaborative research. It is easier to speak to someone after he or she has given a lecture on a field - cointegration techniques applied to growth regressions for example, than it is to speak to the same person after he or she has presented a paper on the subject and feels either defensive or view their work as proprietary. There can be snobbishness around academic conferences if an attempt is not made to ensure collegiality among participants. Adding a formal learning dimension could help with this.

Further, the training component of the summer school could be very important to graduate students from Africa and beyond, and also to the staff of the hosting organization (ECA), and others. This in turn could result in interest and sponsorship from African governments and other donors.

Of course, the summer school is of interest to the network members themselves, who will be learning from each other in a more structured manner. It is an added incentive for participation in the networks. Further, there may be the desire for staff and practitioners to brush up on their skills.

The concept of the “summer” school is the one proposal that holds great promise. There are a number of other related issues which should be discussed here and will now be proposed, but which are dominated by the summer school concept.

Pure Training Component: As just mentioned, through the summer schools there could be a very important training component to the research networks. Graduate students could be especially invited to be junior members of some of the research networks.

In comparison to the training at universities and at the AERC, the training at the Learning Group networks would be expected to be at a higher and more thematic and specialized level - more of the frontier or new techniques and methodologies, with an audience of both established professionals and academics as well as advanced graduate students. It is important to stress that the goal is not to duplicate work being done at the AERC or in Economics departments. Graduate students, for example, need to learn in their home institutions the basic tools and techniques of Economics, in a sustained and rigorous manner. There is no substitute for this. Listening in on conferences is something that advanced students within their field will be able to do. These will be students who already have the basics. For these more advanced students, the summer schools and networks could be extremely valuable.

3.4.ii. Research Visits - Short or Long

In addition to the summer schools, another proposal worth considering is a formal system enabling regular visits of academics or practitioners to spend some time in the host institution. Many academics, for example, are able to get sabbatical and other research leaves to spend time in Africa. Other academics are able to spend short periods- say one or two months or a few weeks - visiting the ECA.

Staff at ministries, NGO’s and international bodies may be able to get leaves of absence to spend time at the ECA. The visitor to the ECA will be able to interact with the staff there, and may be able to be helpful with various networks.

This policy will be great for junior professors who are contemplating moving to Addis or Africa after a stay abroad in the North America, Europe or elsewhere. It enables such junior professors to test the waters before making the plunge.

If the research visits can be coordinated so that they either take place while there is a meeting of a network, then this could be an advantage for the network.

3.4.iii. Annual or biannual Meetings

There are several reasons why annual meetings may be good. First, when there is a fixed date for a meeting looming ahead, and one has promised a paper at that meeting, one becomes focused and inspired to get the work done. This is an incentive, as there will be a desire not be embarrassed in a public forum.

Most staff, academics and policy makers are exceptionally busy people. All have multiple priorities - day jobs at either an international institution or teaching at a university are taxing. Presenting one’s work focuses the mind and one’s attention on the project at hand. The fear of being embarrassed with an incomplete paper or the joy of wowing colleagues with a good paper is a huge incentive to get one to do the requisite work.

Second, the annual meeting enables co-workers to get together to discuss research topics.

Third, in many universities there are research grants for travel. These, however, often can only be accessed when one's name appears on a conference list. Many international organizations also enable staff members to travel for staff development, and an annual meeting with papers in relevant fields could be a great excuse for a researcher to get his or her employer to pay for the trip to the research network.

One question that is important is the determination of when these meetings should take place. On the one hand there is the argument that they should take place when the summer school is taking place. After all, that way the network members are able to get together to talk. There are two issues with that though. First, it takes enormous amounts of time to run these annual meetings and it is often the same people who run the meetings as are the key members of the networks. Many of the ECA senior staff may be too burnt out from preparations for the annual meetings to have the calmness and presence to do research at the networks.

The summer school may be a whole lot more relaxed if it is not paired up with the annual meeting. Further, by making them distinct, one could have the summer school for more leisurely research and learning and then have the annual meeting for the presentation of hopefully finished products from an earlier summer school.

3.4.iv. African Economics Conference

In the earlier section, annual or biannual meetings were discussed. There are biannual meetings of the AERC research networks. Last November there was the very successful African Economics Conference (AEC) meeting. These should be studied further. It is not clear whether there is an African Economics Association, and if not, one should be created. The AEC meetings could then become the annual meetings of the African Economics Association. Participants of the most recent AEC in Addis in November 2007, have expressed in public how happy they are with that conference⁵ - both in terms of research and networking with other economists.

3.4.v. Working Paper Series

It is important to have a working paper series to publicize the work of the networks. These papers should be distributed, according to interest, to various members of the policy world, as well as to academic institutions. If the working paper series is a success, other academics, policy makers and the press will look forward to seeing the working papers and bestow upon them prestige. This will be one of the principal incentives for people to join the networks. The circulation of working papers is one of the big incentives for many academics and practitioners in the US to become a member of one of the NBER networks.

The argument above of course works in the reverse. If the working paper series contains very low quality papers then there will be a disincentive to join the network and certainly a disincentive to have papers appear in the series. Whereas many working papers series are not refereed, it may be a good idea to have some gentle and quiet refereeing of the working paper series at the initial stages.

The past working papers of the existing PRS/MDGs-LG should of course be studied and insights gleaned. This has not been attempted that at this time in this note.

⁵ Again, see the relevant statements and speeches from the 2007 African Economics Conference at <http://www.uneca.org/aec/>.

3.4.vi. Journal

The question of a journal comes up often in discussions of learning networks. As mentioned above, the working paper series is probably much more important for the learning group networks than is a journal.

There is probably no need to start a new journal. It may not be a bad idea to collaborate with an existing one. The Journal of African Development (JAD) (formerly the Journal of African Finance and Economic Development, JAFED) is run by the African Finance and Economics Association (AFEA) a professional association of primarily, though not exclusively, North American academic and policy economists of African Descent, as well as those with an interest in African issues. In years past there has been talk at the annual AFEA meetings of getting a leg of the journal in Africa. This could be an opportunity for collaboration with the Learning Group.

If there is a journal, the quality of the papers becomes of utmost importance. Some independence from the holding company, the PRS/MDGs-LG of ECA, would be a must. If the Journal is in-house, e.g. JAD handled at ECA, the usual strict standards should be applied to refereeing process in journals - there should be a good board and editor, papers should not be refereed by co-authors or people in the same department, etc.

4. The Special Role of Policy Makers

The sections above mentioned a number of meetings and gatherings of the learning group networks. It is important that wherever possible, policy makers be encouraged to attend these meetings. The attendance could take the form of high level presentations at plenary sessions of large meetings (as for example took place at the Addis African Economics Conference meetings with presentations by the Executive Secretary of the ECA, Hon. Abdoulie Janneh and the President of the African Development Bank, Dr. Donald Kaberuka, among other). Even better would be for policy makers to attend the smaller more thematic networks wherever possible. The discussions at the network meetings would be much livelier when there is, in the audience, a current or former head of state or finance minister, say. Further, the presence of policy makers is itself a big incentive for the members of the network to attend the network meetings. Since ultimately the policy makers are the final recipient of the research and analyses of the Learning Group, it is important that they participate in the meetings whenever possible.

5. How much capacity is there?

It is unclear how much capacity there is in terms of researchers and policy makers with the interest, skills and time to participate in the Learning Group networks. The following communities should be actively tapped into:

(A) *Academics on the continent* in universities and think tanks. AERC will be an important contributor to this.

(B) *The Academic and Policy Practitioner Diaspora community*. This will result in a re-connection with Africa which is sought by many. By couching this in terms of the Diaspora, there may be other

sources of funding available - from those interested in “reversing the brain drain.” The African Finance and Economics Association, AFEA, becomes important in this regard. There is an effort underway at the ECA to construct a database of African economists in the Diaspora. This will be very important in getting interest in the Learning Group.

(C) *Economists in other sister international and regional institutions (AfDB, other UN Agencies, the World Bank).*

The numbers of available economists will determine the number of different distinct networks that will be able to be run. Some have argued that there is not a large enough pool of economists to make viable a large number of high quality networks. On the other hand, hopefully the networks and particularly the summer schools will lead to an increase in skill levels and an increase the pipeline of highly skilled economists to participate in future networks.

Some research will be required to determine how many Ph.D’s in Economics are being produced in Africa and also abroad. This will determine the flow of potential participants in the networks in future years.

The MDGs/PRS Young African Professionals Fellowship

In this regard, it should be mentioned that there is a fellowship program at the ECA for recently graduated professionals either currently enrolled in doctoral studies or who have completed their Masters Degree programs and are intending to proceed to doctoral studies within two years of completion of their Masters Degree studies. There are currently three Fellows in this program, which began last year. This fellowship program could become a very critical part of the Learning Group, especially for the training component and as part of the audience of the various research meetings and seminars. As these students graduate and become academics, researchers and policy makers, they will be obvious targets for membership as full participants and possibly leaders of the Learning Group networks.

6. Incentives

What keeps members a part of the network over time?

(A) *Interest in real life African problems.* Hence ECA must enable the access to inside information on the working of African economies, the big questions about to hit the public domain, access to proprietary data sets, or first use of those data sets. This is one of the great strategic assets of the ECA, and is an area where the ECA could carve a very important niche for itself. This strategic asset is what will pull researchers into the ECA networks.

(B) *Interaction with Policy Makers.* An earlier section mentioned the importance of policy makers to the networks. The presence of policy makers in the meetings and conferences is a huge incentive to both academics and researchers on the one hand, as this provides further access to learning about the real on-the-ground issues; and also to the staff of international institutions who are part of the networks, who also get to learn on the ground issues but also will receive encouragement and perhaps mentoring from many who have followed their own career trajectories and are now in high policy making positions.

(C) *If prestigious, having papers in the Working Paper Series may be an advantage.* Many academics and some practitioners in the US have as one reason they are so interested in the US NBER research networks is access to publication in the NBER working paper series. When journalists and other researchers realize that great papers come out of a working paper series, it makes that series more important to the network members, conferring prestige on the members.

(D) *Access to co-authors for research papers.* Theoretical people in the academy would love to team up with more applied people in the field, and vice versa.

(E) *Learning latest tools and techniques from other members of the network.* If there is a forum for skills upgrading, many will again be drawn to the research networks.

(F) *Tourist* - Many do appreciate the ability to visit Africa, and to go to a new country. There are many who often remark publicly “I love Africa ... and want to stay here.” Those in one African country appreciate the opportunity to learn about another. Those outside of Africa appreciate the opportunity to be in Africa and become involved in the contribution to the solution of problems in Africa. This aspect of the Learning Group should not be underestimated as it could be one of the biggest attractions to the networks.

(G) *Financial* - Then of course there are the financial incentives. This is mentioned last in this section because there are many successful networks, mentioned earlier, that do not provide financial incentives (other than reimbursement for travel expenses). Of course, the financials can not hurt, especially when there is proprietary work involved, semi-consultancy projects, etc. Wherever available, financial stipends should be given to researchers. This note mentioned earlier the ways in which monies spent on consultancies could be used creatively to support the research networks. When and where available, these funds should be used. The importance of financial stipends should not be over-emphasized though.

To maintain incentives to join the network and to discourage free-riding, it is important to insist that people in the network do the work required for them to get the advantages of the network - participation in meetings and access to publication in the working paper series.

7. Networks of People or of Institutions?

Most of the presentation so far in this concept note has worked on the implicit assumption that members of the networks join the networks as individuals, representing themselves primarily and not their institutions. At the end of the day, most needed are the individuals who will drive the networks - provide leadership, attend summer schools and meetings, do the research and the training. There is no substitute for this. Further, the continuity and cohesiveness of many of the networks may depend on there being a core group of “regulars” who are able to commit to repeated participation in the network activities.

On the other hand, one could imagine there being institutional memberships in networks of the Learning Group. One could think of the Economics department of University X having strength in, for example, China-Africa relations and therefore wanting to be an institutional member of a China Africa network in the Learning Group. A representative of the institution, perhaps the head of department, could commit to recruit and send faculty and graduate students to the various summer workshops and annual meetings related to that network.

There are a number of advantages to institutional memberships.

a. Institutional Commitment to the Network: When there is an institutional membership, there could be an institute leader - the chair of the Economics Department, or Director of a local research institute - who will take it upon himself or herself to recruit faculty and graduate students to participate in the network. When one individual faculty member loses interest in the network, the chair or Director would help recruit others. This could lead to a much more sustainable flow of participants to the research network.

b. University Exchange Programs: Many university deans and administrators like signing exchange agreements, as these enhance the international reputation of the university. These agreements, signed at the higher administrative levels of the university, usually come with some modest resources as well as encouragement at the highest levels for faculty to participate in the exchanges. This encouragement could take the form of funding for travel and living expenses, release time for longer stays, etc.

c. Funding Opportunities: One can imagine many foundations and donors being in funding local universities in Africa in their attempts to participate in the Learning Group, since this will be a form of capacity building for the local African university. The same applies to institutes or departments in North American and European Universities that would like to form institutional relationships with African institutions. Many western funding agencies and foundations are very supportive of Western Universities or think tanks pairing up with African institutions on research projects - a collaboration between a research center at a US university and the Learning Group would be thought of positively by many foundations.

d. Institutional Funding: The institutions themselves, like Economics departments within universities, often have their own resources to which teams of faculty could apply. In many cases, funding from the department or home institution would be much more readily available if there is a team of faculty making the presentation rather than an individual faculty member. Within universities there are often stand-alone centers which also have funding for precisely the types of cooperative activities implicit in their institutional membership of the Learning Network.

A Country as a Network?

In principle, one could imagine a country being a network. A country, say South Africa, could become a network, and specialists in South Africa could form the network to focus on some particularly issues pertaining to South Africa alone. As there may be country-specific questions, there is some justification for a country as a network. On the other hand, one would imagine that the home country should and could itself form a network for the country within its borders. This logic would imply that there seems to be much less of a need for a continent-wide learning group network devoted to a separate country. Further, if not handled right, this could be perceived in the home country as a “ministry-in-exile” working on the country’s development questions.

8. Funding Structure

Of course, in the best of all worlds, there will be a large pot of resources to fund all the proposals mentioned earlier, and the summer school and working paper series in particular. It is possible that the ECA will be able to provide the funding. On the other hand, by tapping into resources used

for various consultancy services provided for the ECA, there may actually be a lot of funding for the learning networks. By appropriately choosing the consultancy projects and the consultants, a mechanism can be obtained for sustaining the research networks.

A consultancy on, say health insurance could be used as the occasion for a meeting of a panel of the health network. At the very least, there will be one person (the consultant) who will have a financial incentive to make a presentation at the panel. If at all possible, different divisions of say the ECA and also the AfDB, could time their consultancies over the course of the year so that all activities in health could be presented at the same time during a meeting of a health network.

Every now and then there are statements in the press about the billions of aid money that go into consultancies. The proposal here is to use some of this money to indirectly help the Economic Policy making and research environment.

9. Dissemination of Results

Many of the component parts of the LG networks are themselves means of dissemination of the results of the networks. The working paper and Journal are important outlets for the work of the LG. Further, the meetings proposed for the LG are also a means of dissemination of results. The Summer School, Research Visits, Annual/Biannual Meetings, and African Economics Conference – they all involve a discussion of the results of the LG networks.

Earlier, it was proposed that policy makers be encourage to participate in the work of the LG though attendance of the major meetings as well as the smaller network meetings. This too will enable dissemination of the results of the network to the ECA member countries and international organizations.

As much as possible, the working paper series should be circulated to a wide email list – wider than the list of LG members and should include wherever possible economists working in the press and those whose job it is to cover economic issues. This should be both the African Press and the international press and international magazines. This will then encourage the press to dig in a little deeper into the work of the LG, which will then hopefully result in press articles and thus maximal exposure and dissemination.

10. Evaluation of Performance

10.1. Metrics of Success

1. *Implementation by Policy Leaders - when president's, ministers refer to papers written by Learning Group members, then there is a success at least by one criterion.* When policy makers actively seek working groups to analyze problems on their behalf, then there is obvious success of the Learning Group. It will be important to determine metrics for measurement of these types of impacts. Most of this type of data may be anecdotal, but it should in principle be possible to list citations, references by policy makers, etc. For publicity reasons, many schools and colleges keep track of their alumni in the news, publishing

newspaper clippings, etc., to illustrate how well their alumni are doing. In principle, some slightly more objective and quantitative method should be available using the same basic idea for tracking this kind of success of the network.

2. *Adoption of Specific Outputs of the Learning Group* – Even better than criterion number (1) above, would be the adoption (as opposed to citation) by African countries of specific outputs of LG. This could be in the form of specific policy recommendations, guidelines, frameworks, etc.

3. *When new questions, and their solutions, are generated internally within the working groups and then gain the attention of policy makers, leaders and the general African public.* As the networks increasingly define new questions or when they propose new and bold answers to existing ones, there will be indication of the success of the network. Again, measurement of the type described above, although somewhat subjective and anecdotal, may provide a glimpse as to the success of the network.

4. *When working group members are quoted abroad, or solicited abroad, and the outputs of Learning Group members on African issues are being implemented and discussed in the context of development for other, non-African, regions.* With this, there is probably slightly more numerical and objective data - citations. Many of these works should appear in existing citation indices, thus providing a metric for evaluation of the success of the network. Related to this would be presentation of research finds in international associations – the Allied Social Science meetings, for example.

5. *When top journals publish the research of learning group members.* The hope is that the research output of the networks, which first appears in working papers, will eventually find its way to top journals, worldwide. If there is a functioning working paper series for the Learning Group, it should then be easy to map working papers into published papers in refereed journals. A tighter measure of the productivity of the networks would then be possible. One issue of course with the journals is the long time it takes for the refereeing and publication process. A publication in a journal would be a measure of the success of the network many years earlier. With this caveat though, journal publication is a good measure of output.

10.2. Signs of Failure

While we are on the subject of measures of success, it may be useful to point out some of the obvious signs of failure of networks.

i. Re-cycling usual theories, with resulting failure to get significant numbers of papers published in journals.

ii. Soft or simple PowerPoint presentations masquerading as research papers. For example, simple descriptive papers which are easily obtained say from the web after a few hours of work.

iii. Generally low quality research work.

11. The Evolution of Networks

11.1. The Birth and Death of Networks

Some thought should be given to how networks die. If there are clearly defined leaders, those leaders may decide to kill the project or change it into something else as and when the original topics become stale. Networks will therefore be born and die as time proceeds. Indeed, the most effective networks may often be the quickest to die.

11.2. Addition and Removal of Members of the Network

Some attention needs to be paid to how to add and remove members of the network. The process of addition should be seen to be fair otherwise after a while this will result in some resentment in some quarters. If the addition and removal process is not done fairly and transparently, the networks may then be seen to be exclusive clubs with little legitimacy. Further, there should be a means of removing members who are no longer interested or who are no longer participating. In many networks there are rules which require participation in meetings and working paper series to continue membership in the network.

12. Electronic/Virtual Networks

There is a natural appeal of electronic and virtual networks that are web based. After all, one could in principle be able to communicate without leaving one's office and without incurring travel costs – both the financial and the time.

On the other hand, the types of interactions required for successful learning group networks require much deeper interactions than possible virtually. The production of co-authored papers requires somewhat intense interactions, sometimes on a blackboard, sometimes with a pen and paper at hand. Other interactions, training for example, require a full lecture. The interactions required for the types of networks suggested here could not take place virtually.

An email listserve for the exchange of routine announcements of meetings, simple requests for information, encouragement of researchers – all these could work well. If the group is small – 2, 3 or 4, then simple emailing back and forth of comments, iterations on a paper, etc., would work. That however, requires very little further from the network itself – existing email capacities do just fine.

Often the expectations of a virtual network are very high while in practice there are severe limits to what can be achieved through a network. There is doubt as to whether a major piece of research work can be done via a network.

In addition to the unrealistic expectations of a network, there are ways in which a network can be harmful. There are many cases of list serve where members respond too quickly and make off the

cuff remarks on issues that really require much more thought and background checks and analyses. There are also list serves in existence which do nothing other than lament the poor state of the continent and have a number of extremely superficial back and forth discussions on the issues of the day.

There are good uses of virtual networks – in providing information on meetings, general announcements, posting of working papers, etc. It is very important to set up the virtual networks so that there is a system for the announcement of the current working papers from the LG, as well as an archive of old working papers. The electronic network, however, is not a good means of doing the actual research work required of the Learning Group networks.

13. The Language Barriers

One major issue that this concept note will not be able to deal with adequately is the issue of the different languages used by researchers and academics. Although one could argue that most of research in Economics in Africa is done in English, there is quite a bit of work in French and also in Portuguese. Many researchers would like their research to have outreach into all parts of Africa, regardless of the language spoken there.

Unfortunately, there does seem to be emerging parallel universes of the Economics Profession in Africa, with a Francophone universe somewhat self-contained, and not necessarily interacting with the Anglophone universe, and vice versa. It is often interesting to hear people jokingly refer to Professor X as a Francophone version of Professor Y.

Others argue that among academic economists, there is somewhat common use of English, but the problem comes with the policy makers. In particular, it is argued, although most French economists are able to speak and interact freely with other economists in English, French speaking policy makers are not similarly as fluent in English to be able to access research work written in English. Although there are no hard empirical data on the language issue, this does come up in many conversations among potential and current members of the ECA learning network.

One thing for sure is that if there are ways to bridge the language hurdles, ECA is the best suited to do this. ECA does communicate with all African countries, regardless of language, and has the infrastructure to enable translation in real time of meetings. Whether this will be enough to prevent the development of parallel worlds of Economic research in Africa remains to be seen.

14. Comparison with Latin America

Latin America provides some interesting illustrations of many of the ideas and suggestions of this concept note. Today in Latin America there is a deep pool of Economic Development academics, policy makers and staff at international and regional institutions who do research and interact with each other, many also circulating between Latin American universities and policy institutes as well as with North American and European universities and institutes and international institutions like the World Bank. In many ways, a principal goal of this concept note is to provide means of

enhancing the interaction and circulation of researchers, academics and policy makers that already occurs to a great extent in Latin America. There are a number of institutions and activities which have contributed to the development of collaborative research in Latin America – we list some of these below.

14.1. ECLAC

There are many aspects of the activities of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) which are insightful for the activities proposed here. Like the ECA, ECLAC is celebrating its 60th anniversary year. ECLAC describes itself⁶ as the “the think tank of the Latin American “development thought”.”

ECLAC has a summer school program currently in its ninth year. This is a three month course aimed at graduate students at the Masters and doctoral levels. ELAC provides personnel and facilities, but no scholarships. Mastery of English is required, although the classes are in Spanish. This takes place in the Northern hemisphere summer months in Chile (during Chile’s winter).

ECLAC also has a “Experiences in Social Innovation competition”⁷, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to showcase how community participation at reasonable costs can help overcome poverty in the region. Prizes are given to the top 5 projects. The competition focuses on innovative initiatives in eight areas: community health, primary education, youth programs, income generation, corporate social responsibility, volunteer work, rural/agricultural development and food security/nutrition.

Most of ECLAC’s activities seem, however, to have much less impact in the area of research on policy issues, and ECLAC does not seem to be at this time a major driver in getting the research and policy communities together. The ECLAC programs seem less directed at interactions between policy makers and academics. ECLAC appears to be more on the fringe of the Economic Development and Policy research arena. This illustrates a difference between ECA and its sister organization ECLAC. As mentioned in the introductory sections, the ECA has a unique opportunity to carve a very important and distinct niche for itself through the Learning Group Mechanisms, in contrast to ECLAC.

14.2. The IADB’s Research Networks

An important component of the current visibility and interactions of the Latin American economists is the Research Network of Centers of the Inter-American Bank (IADB). According to its web page, the IADB “helps foster sustainable economic and social development in Latin America and the Caribbean through its lending operations, leadership in regional initiatives, research and knowledge dissemination activities, institutes and programs.” The IADB has a number of networks which promote knowledge creation and dissemination on topics relevant to the region. There is a research network which is made up of some 300 research institutes and centers based in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Research Network announces a call for proposals to address pre-defined key issues of interest to the bank. A competitive process ensues to pick the winning proposals.

6 See <http://www.eclac.cl/cgi-bin/getprod.asp?xml=/ddpe/noticias/paginas/5/13075/P13075.xml&xsl=/ddpe/tpl/p18f.xsl&base=/ddpe/tpl-i/top-bottomdirector.xsl>

7 http://www.cepal.org/dds/Innovacionsocial/portada_i.htm

The grants also provide funding which enables collaborations between researchers. Further, often the funding is for conferences and seminars to bring together researchers, practitioners and policy makers working on a particular topic. Although the proposals are submitted from a Center or institute, in practice there could be one individual who is doing all the work in a particular project.

Not only does the bank provide funding and a venue for publication of the proposals but, in addition, the funding also provides some overhead to the home institution or center submitting the proposal. These overheads are an important and often critical source of funding for the centers and institutions and help keep many afloat. The hosting institute or center receives the overheads even when there is essentially only one person submitted working on the proposal.

14.3. LAMES – Latin American Meetings of the Econometrics Society

Among academic economists and many practitioners, the Econometrics Society is one of the most prestigious academic societies. It publishes one of the flagship journals of the profession, *Econometrica*, and it holds professional meetings several times a year. It also has six regional standing committees – (i) Australasia, (ii) Europe and Other Areas, (iii) Far East (iv) South and Southeast Asia (v) Latin America and (vi) North America. It is interesting to note that there is no Africa regional standing committee. (There is a society called the African Econometric Society, but this has no affiliation, as far as we can tell, with the Econometrics Society and is headquartered at the University of Stellenbosch.)

The Latin American regional standing committee was formed in 1980, with the first Latin American Meetings of the Econometrics Society (LAMES) in Buenos Aires in that year. Rolf Mantel was the Chair of the Program committee and was very influential in the establishment of the Latin America branch. This was one of the early means in which academics and policy makers in Latin America came together for professional meetings and discussions. It was, during those days, one of the principal venues for the interaction of professional economists – academics, practitioners and policy makers.

14.4. LACEA – Latin American and Caribbean Economics Association

Following the progress of the Latin American branch of the Econometrics Society, there was a desire to form a local institution catering more to the interests of Latin American academics, practitioners and policy makers. There was some feeling that the Econometrics society, being a world organization was a bit more academic and a bit more North American focused than some desired.

The Latin American and Caribbean Economics Association (LACEA) was formed in July 1992. The first president of LACEA was the then UC Berkeley Professor Al Fishlow (1993-1997). There were also a number of policy makers and academics on the initial board of LACEA including, among many other distinguished economists, Guillermo Calvo, Sebastian Edwards and Ricardo Hausman. LACEA holds a number of professional meetings of academics and policy makers. These meetings are both independent and also joint with other organizations – some are with the Allied Social

Science Association (ASSA) which holds one of the largest groupings of top professional economists each year in January; and there are also the joint LACEA-LAMES meetings.

A few years after the formation of LACEA, at its fourth annual meeting in Santiago Chile, LACEA announced the formation of an academic Journal called *Economia*. The goal of the journal, according to its web page, is to provide “*a forum for influential economists and policymakers from the region to share high-quality research directly applied to policy issues.*” The founding editor was Professor Andres Velasco, then a Professor of Economics at New York University and currently the minister of Finance of Chile.

LACEA gets its core funding from the Global Development Network (GDN) as part of GDN's program on Regional Research Consortia capacity building. LACEA also receives funding from the IADB, World Bank, Hewlett Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

15. Conclusion

The ECA African Learning Group on Poverty Reduction Strategies and the Millennium Development Goals (PRS/MDGs-LG) has, since its inception in 1999 made a number of significant strides in its mission of promoting African ownership of the poverty reduction strategies processes and papers (PRSP) and in particular in enabling the sharing of best practices and peer learning in issues related to this.

This concept note has provided some thoughts and suggestions on the general Learning Group concept. As remarked in the introduction the basic idea is to have the Learning Group be a holding company - and to have the Learning Group be made up of a number of networks researching different topics. Issues of funding were also addressed in this note, with the suggestion that some of the monies spent on consultancies could be used creatively in helping to support the networks.

In conclusion, it may be useful for this note to engage in some “blue sky” thoughts. Where will African economic research community be in 20 years, where will stakeholders want the community to be in 20 years, and how can this image of the community be achieved in 10 as opposed to 20 years? In the ideal near future, there will be a cadre of world leaders in the Economics profession based on the African continent, circulating within the world community of economists. There will probably be different camps of African Economists debating among themselves different distinct approaches to Economic Development. Africa will have a distinct economic policy, most probably free from influences of donors. Just as the IMF and World Bank are of very little influence in the UK today, so too will they be of little influence in Africa at the end of our transition period.

In that future, although there are still pockets of poverty in Africa, due to new theories developed by the Learning Group Economists, there is consensus on the one or two different paths that need to be taken to ensure long run economic development. Some African countries would be comfortably in second world status, knocking on the door of first world status. Economists at policy institutions, think tanks and government ministries will be more like, as described by Keynes, dentists -- giving advice on regular checkups and providing guidance on necessary surgery when, per chance, things go bad.

The community of Economists in Africa will be deep at the end of the 20 year period, with large numbers in different areas of economics. Ministries of finance and Economic Planning would be well staffed with professional economists. There will be a deep cadre of professionals in African

institutions like the ECA and AfDB in different fields of Economics. There will be micro-economists and micro-development economists doing field work to update the profession on what is going on in the field, in the inner cities and in the rural areas. Game theorists would be advising governments on auctions of mobile licenses, and other public assets required for the post-internet post-knowledge economy societies. Within each African Country, there will be anti-trust boards keeping in check large African companies which are monopolizing markets or otherwise engaging in unfair practices. There will be competitive bidding for exploration and exploitation of natural resources, with lots of transparency in the bidding process. In this ideal near future, Economics has now become less frenzied, less like manning a boat that is about to collapse, less a matter of life and death, but instead more of navigating a nice and steady cruise ship with a full set of controls, early warning systems, radars, etc.

Of course a great deal of what has been described does take place today - without a doubt. However, it is fair to say that today the Economic Policy environment is nowhere near the above described ideal, although again of course there are individual organizations and institutions that are making bold strides despite lots of impediments. Today, for example, big debates are raging as to the whether the way forward for Africa involves scaling up of aid transfers from the west to Africa (Sachs, and co.) or whether Aid is ineffective and not managed properly (Easterly, and co.). As eloquently described by Executive Secretary Abdoulie Janneh⁸, despite the fact that this question is of utmost importance to Africa, and even though there are a few who are gallantly working on these issues, it must be admitted that most of the major debates on this issue are taking place outside of the continent with very few African voices, and very little input from African Institutions and think tanks.

The hope is that the suggestions in this concept note for the PRS/MDGs-LG will assist in hastening the march towards the ideal economic research environment that all stakeholders would like to see.

8 Opening Address by Mr. Abdoulie Janneh, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Secretary of the ECA. 15 November 2007 - see <http://www.uneca.org/aec/speech-janneh.htm>.

