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Book Review

Review of the Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC) Repository hosted by the Southern African Institute for Policy Research.

Introduction

The EPRC Repository is an online, open access site established in 2014 and hosted by SAIPAR, a new center for policy research and the proprietor of this journal. SAIPAR is quickly establishing its name in the region as dynamic, innovative and not averse to using modern approaches for its outreach to academics and policymakers. The institute brings a new excitement to social research and policy in Africa. Research at SAIPAR is also included in the EPRC. By June 2014, after only six months of existence, the EPRC Repository had accumulated close to 140 quality papers from various institutions in Southern Africa and beyond. The total number of items now totals over 400.

The purpose of this brief review is to present the contents of the EPRC Repository to a broad, but not necessarily specialist, audience. Reviewing an online site might be unduly influenced by the reviewer's immediate research interests. To avoid this, I try to describe what is available in a general manner, while also highlighting the Repository's emerging strengths. I list areas where the EPRC could be expanded, or where it could establish a niche. The interest and willingness of researchers in the Southern African region and further afield to deposit their papers on the site will be crucial. For although the repository is still in the early days of its development, it could become an important engine of socio-economic policy research.

Overview of Content

The EPRC site divides its contents into numerous subject areas: economic policy and economic development; government and public administration; international relations and cooperation; finance and taxation; business; industrial production; trade; agricultural and rural development; infrastructure; natural resources and environment; tourism and service industries; and labour markets and social protection. However, the number of entries in each area varies considerably. For example, agricultural and rural development claims 99 entries, followed by economic policy and economic development, finance and taxation, trade, and government and public administration. Others have only a couple of entries, although it is still impressive that the collection already has 7 recent papers on infrastructure and another 7 on labour markets and social protection. Considering that individual papers often have over twenty references each, this Repository will have a notable multiplier effect and it might indeed be a treasure trove.

The EPRC site, for good reasons, is dominated by entries from Zambian authors and institutions, but there are also a number of entries from other countries/institutions in Southern Africa, and further afield (for example the Centre for Chinese Studies at Oxfam; the African Studies Center at Leiden; USAID; Sida; UNDP, etc.). The entries are fairly recent,

and I have not seen a paper that predates 2008. In fact, the bulk of the entries are from 2010 and beyond. This makes the site fairly up to date with respect to recent developments. Obviously, effort will be required to attract entries from earlier years, to ensure wholesomeness.

Sample of the Content

To give a feel for content, I provide a quick overview of some of the papers on the website. For example, Chilufya Chileshe of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (many papers have been written under its auspices) reflects on how Zambia could boost international trade and argues that supply side constraints, notably energy, need to be addressed. She argues that the government should have a good idea of what it wants to achieve—reflecting on the importance of creating an enabling environment, including a well-streamlined regulatory framework. Similar arguments are made by Simon N’gona and Cornelius Dube of Consumer Unity and Trust Society, who add that trade needs support from the grassroots, because trade development is not merely a concern for governments alone.

Papers from the Indaba Agricultural Policy Research Institute offer a number of interesting perspectives on methodologies, policy and impact for developing agriculture. They describe a number of research projects, including one funded by USAID in Zambia’s Eastern Province, with the goal of lifting a quarter million people out of poverty. Another Indaba study, undertaken by Jones Govereh, T. S. Jayne and A. Chapoto, on alternative maize trade and marketing policy interventions in Zambia, illustrates the versatility of the papers from that institution. The study by Mary Lubungu, William Burke and Nicholas Sitco looks at soy value chains in Zambia’s Eastern Province. The EPRC site provides many other papers on agriculture in Zambia, notably on cotton and cassava, providing a basis for the comparison of outcomes, a deepening of knowledge on particular subject matters and various methodologies.

The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency jointly commissioned a paper on budget support for Zambia. This paper illustrates another dimension of the material on the site, as a number of papers have been commissioned by donor governments, examining the impact of their aid support. Note, for example, the comparative analysis by Arne Bigsten, Jorgen Levin, and Hakan Persson on ‘Debt Relief and Growth: A study of Zambia and Tanzania’, done for United Nations University WIDER and linked to the website.

The website also has interesting papers on infrastructure, such as that on the crisis in Zambia’s roads by Gael Raballand and Alan Whitworth, and feeder roads on the Copperbelt by Sydney Mwansa. Other notable areas of focus include banking, employment, poverty, and inequality. The Zambian public sector is also discussed in several papers. The papers on macroeconomic development and finance comprise a good part of the collection on the website.

Conclusion

The EPRC website is an important initiative that is already bringing a number of valuable papers to the attention of the research and policy making community. It well complements SAIPAR’s research activities and outreach. The bulk of the papers are on Zambia, and

mainly from think-tanks—as opposed to universities—including innovative ones such as the Jesuit Center for Theological Reflection. Some effort could be made to post more papers from university research. There is also much more work on regional economies that has been undertaken in Europe and America that could be linked to the website. EPRC could consider “specializing” in two or three areas, attempting to bring as many papers on those topics as possible. These topics could include urbanization, private sector development and good governance/public policy and development. This would of course not pre-empt other interesting areas already listed above.

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