Climate change and jobs

Development expert Barbara Harriss-White leads a team of specialists from agriculture to economics, environmental science and policy to investigate neglected aspects of the climate change response in India.

• What was the impetus behind the start of this new project? What is the main objective of the work?

The main objective of the work is to measure resource burdens in India's informal economy. I started to research India back in 1969 by looking at the Green Revolution and agricultural markets. Meanwhile, I became concerned about climate change and realized that India's informal economy, the unregistered economy, where nine out of ten people work, had been ignored in India's official responses to climate change. I then explored the field of environmental science, discovered a well-established technique for measuring economic activity in terms of greenhouse gases — life-cycle analysis - and thought it would be a unique experiment to combine such a technique with social science approaches to the informal economy. I also realized that the rare studies of technology that look at any criterion other than costs — such as greenhouse gases — tend not to look at jobs. So, we decided to put the measurement of labour and livelihoods into the project.

How did you go about finding suitable collaborators?

It was clear that we needed to put together several knowledge fields ranging from economics to environmental science and policy. The informal economy itself is a fuzzy concept. I talked to many people and in the end put together a capable and enthusiastic team spread out across India. In addition to our team, we can also count on an 'informal' network of advisers.

• How many institutions are involved? In Oxford, we are based in the School of

Area Studies, which is multidisciplinary within the social sciences division, and we have contacts with the Environment Centre and the Environmental Change Institute. Our primary link in India is the Institute of Human Development in New Delhi. Other colleagues are from the Madras School of Economics, Jawarhalal Nehru University, Hyderabad University and Jindal Global University in India. We also liaise with researchers who work with the New Trade Union Initiative — the only major labour organization in India not associated with political parties and that mobilizes workers in the informal economy.

How important do you anticipate the findings will be for India and its role in the climate change debate?

This is a pilot project. The hybrid method we are trying to build for the rice sector will be relevant to other sectors, especially the biggest carbon emitters such as cement or energy itself. With our findings, we will contribute to debates about the viability of low-carbon labour-intensive development. Despite the arguments of a small number of highly placed politicians and decisionmakers, this is still a very unfashionable idea in the country.



How useful do you think this project could be to other countries?

Our approach would work anywhere in the world, even in countries with smaller informal economies. I have recently spoken to interested colleagues in Pakistan, Bangladesh and France to explore the possibility of follow-up collaborations.

What are the plans for disseminating the research findings?

First we are generating a network of advisers - researchers from a wide range of academic fields with whom we will engage closely. We're involving distinguished and established experts, but also young scholars. In addition, we are also engaging with significant actors in policy, politics and the media, as well as with activists and advocacy groups. Of course, there will be web pages where we aim to post short, peerreviewed essays as we develop methods and results. We will have dissemination workshops with a variety of stakeholders such as academics, people in business and in government. We also intend to follow up with a training programme to create a new skill pool and perhaps even some valuable new knowledge on the major polluting sectors that bridge the registered economy and the informal one.

Was it difficult to get financial support?

We applied for funds from the Economic and Social Research Council's joint arrangement with the Department for International Development, but the chances of succeeding were low as competition is severe. However, with a lot of hard work, we succeeded, and have obtained just under £300,000 for our 21-month pilot.

Any final thoughts?

There are two streams of response to climate change. One is to rely on market-based tools, such as cap-and-trade schemes. The other, which we adopt in this project, looks at a multitude of ways to reduce greenhouse gases that are justified on grounds over and above reducing emissions, such as the quality and quantity of jobs generated.

INTERVIEW BY MONICA CONTESTABILE