

Saldru toasts 30 years of research

By Murray Leibbrandt

Saturday night saw nearly 200 people celebrate into the wee hours. They were honouring the 30th birthday of one of the country's eminent research institutes, the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, or Saldru.

As an economist, I should be more precise. There were 193 RSVPs for the party but no reliable data on the extent of hangovers the next morning is available.

People came from far and near. David Featherman flew in all the way from the University of Michigan in the United States, where he is director of the Institute for Social Research.

But Saldru's longevity is not merely a good excuse for the University of Cape Town School of Economics to throw a party. It is also an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of detailed, numerate, statistically-sound, time-consuming research. We cannot tackle the problems of South Africa without knowing the roots of those problems. For this, we need organisations such as Saldru.

Our 30th anniversary also provides an ideal moment to reflect on how far we have come. If you read the now-yellowing Cape Times newspaper clippings from the 1970s and 1980s, there was a time when it seemed impossible that Saldru would reach 30.

Saldru was then seen as a radical hothouse by the ruling National Party, largely for doing academic research into issues such as the labour market. This was work which raised uncomfortable questions and challenged conventional wisdom. In many ways, we still strive to do interesting research which continues to raise difficult questions.

Saldru is now intensively involved in economic demography, which has been described by cheeky journalists as the only economic discipline involving sex.

Economic demography tracks life's balancing act: finances affect your chances of marriage and children; on the other hand, an ageing population or a baby boom or an increased death rate from Aids have significant impacts on your opportunities to earn an income or progress through school.

"It's great to see an institution such as Saldru, which has been in the frontiers of research in labour markets for years, staying on the cutting edge of research in labour markets, poverty and inequality," says David Lam, an economics professor from the University of Michigan, a world leader in the field.

"But Saldru also has a whole new set of research agendas that take it into new territory."

Lam is working with Saldru associates such as economics lecturer Cecil Mlatsheni and Professor Jeremy Seekings, director of UCT's Social Surveys Unit, on the Cape Area Panel Study, which is tracking a representative sample of 4 800 young adults in the 14 to 22 age bracket to see how they manage the tricky transition into adulthood - and hopefully, work.

"It is one of the few studies that follows the same young people over time," says Lam.

"It will provide the best data that we have on grade repetition, youth unemployment, behaviours related to HIV/Aids and condom use. Government and agencies can use Saldru's work to make better policies."

Some of the publicly available data from the first wave of the Cape Area Panel Study will be posted on the internet early next month.

This week, on February 24, Johannes Fedderke, the new director of Centre for Social Science Research (CSSR), will offer the first seminar in the 2005 CSSR series on a very topical issue: how to assess the impact of foreign donors who now link aid to good governance.

In May, another Saldru associate, Daryl Collins, will be launching her Financial Diaries project online, which provides a fascinating glimpse into the day-to-day money issues facing poor South Africans in Langa in Cape Town, Diepsloot in Johannesburg, and parts of the Eastern Cape.

There is a lot going on, but at least these days, Saldru staff and associates can discuss and debate without a hindrance common in its earlier years: spies and informers.

It wasn't always so. Another UCT academic, historical studies professor Christopher Saunders, has managed to get some military intelligence files declassified in which an anonymous spy in 1980 made some very interesting observations about Saldru.

The spy was critical of Saldru for being "the most influential non-aligned institution in the RSA". This was apparently a bad thing. This person targeted Saldru's founder and long-term director, Professor Francis Wilson, writing that Wilson might have been communicating with "the enemy".

As a result, the spy's report argues, it was necessary to "crack" Francis. It would be interesting to hear from military intelligence operatives today how they would interpret the word "crack".

The spy condemned Wilson for being "intelligent, sophisticated, well-informed, powerful and shrewd" - clearly dangerous attributes in the stifling atmosphere of 25 years ago.

Despite the threats, Saldru contributed enormously to a wide variety of debates.

Research into farm labour, health care, wages, working conditions, co-operatives, forced resettlement and trade unions were among the wide variety of tasks undertaken by the unit.

"Undoubtedly the most prestigious project in the 1980 to 1984 period was the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa," remembers Saldru deputy director Dudley Horner. "The report was later published by Francis Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele as a pivotal book, Uprooting Poverty: the South African Challenge."

Another highlight came after two South Africans by the name of Jay Naidoo and Thabo Mbeki approached the World Bank to investigate the possibility of analysing South Africa poverty as a whole - something never done across all race groups before -- prior to the installation of a democratically elected government. Normally, the World Bank only deals with governments. In this case, they chose Saldru.

This "daunting task", as Horner puts it, resulted in the report South Africans rich and poor: baseline household statistics being presented to the new government in the year of South Africa's first democratic elections, less than 12 months after fieldwork had begun.

The database is so comprehensive that it is still widely used around the world.

Saldru was also well-known for its extensive internship programme and its long list of associates. "Exceptional talent," is how Dudley Horner phrases it. "Many went on to make significant contributions to South Africa."

Not all stayed in economics or even in academia. Fikile Bam went on to become judge-president of the land claims court, Willie Hofmeyr is with the assets forfeiture unit, Helen Zille is an MP while Wallace Mgoqi is the general manager of the City of Cape Town.

All of this happened during the 26 years that Francis Wilson directed the unit. And he hasn't slowed down. He has been a key member of the team that created the Centre for Social Science Research at UCT, incorporating Saldru and his own pet project, the visionary Data First Resource Centre, one of Africa's largest collections of electronic data.

So it is appropriate that Saturday night's birthday party was also a farewell to Francis Wilson. He can survive apartheid era spies, but he cannot outwit mandatory retirement age.

Or perhaps he can. Wilson says he will be coming in to the office this morning to continue his research interests. Clearly, his retirement will be a little bit like Nelson Mandela's.

Leibbrandt, an economics professor, has been director of the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (Saldru) at UCT since 2001.

CAPE TIMES Published on the web by Cape Times on February 21, 2005.

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