



Michael Roemer: An Appreciation*

Editor's note: We were saddened to hear of the passing of Michael Roemer. He was a long-time friend of this journal, and we will miss him. The following memorial was written by five of his former students.

INTRODUCTION

The development community is deeply saddened by the unexpected loss of Michael Roemer, a leading contributor to development economics in many capacities. His impact was profound and wide-ranging: as an author of numerous books and articles, an advisor to developing country governments, a leader and administrator at the Harvard Institute for International Development (HIID), and a teacher and mentor for Harvard University students. It is this fourth capacity which brings the authors of this article together: we have variously benefitted from Mike's roles as teacher, dissertation advisor, and research or teaching supervisor. Mike was an extremely caring and thoughtful person; he gave much of himself to us and demanded nothing but our best efforts in return. With this memorial article, we hope to celebrate the life he lived by sharing our recollections of his impact on our own lives as teacher and mentor.

MICHAEL ROEMER AND THE HARVARD INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Our account would not be complete without a description of Mike's beginnings as an economist and his professional activities with HIID. Mike began his academic career far afield from development economics: he received his bachelors and masters degrees from Stanford University in nuclear engineering, and thereafter he earned a masters degree in management from the Sloan School. His lifelong commitment to development economics began in 1962 when he joined an MIT project in Kenya sponsored by the Ford Foundation. The Kenya experience led him to pursue a doctorate in economics at MIT, where he wrote his dissertation on the fishmeal industry and natural resource-led growth in Peru. After graduation, he continued in economic development by securing a position at the U.S. Agency for International Development.

In 1970, Mike began his work at the Harvard Institute for International Development, at that time

called the Development Advisory Service. He remained at HIID for the next 26 years and played a leading role in shaping and strengthening the Institute. As Jeffrey Sachs said so movingly at Mike's memorial service, "Mike not only epitomized HIID — in his commitments, his spirit, his dedication — but he also imbued HIID with his own special humanity." Mike served as Deputy Director from 1979 to 1980, Executive Director from 1980 to 1984, and again Executive Director in 1996. He also served as consultant, resident advisor, and project director for development projects undertaken by HIID around the world, including Kenya, Indonesia, Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Ghana, The Gambia, Venezuela, Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia. His wisdom, keen insight, and persuasiveness, together with a commitment to sensible policy advice, helped contribute to improved living standards for millions of people in these countries.

Mike's career at HIID also involved extensive work with countless Harvard students pursuing studies in economic development, international economics, and public policy. In 1984, Mike became Senior Lecturer in the economics department and, in 1991, he became Senior Lecturer in the Kennedy School of Government. His developing country field experience gave his courses a sharp edge of realism and a comparative perspective that was unique, and his kindness, grace and commitment to learning made him a favorite teacher of many students. These same qualities, together with a well-deserved reputation for accessibility and conscientiousness, led many students to solicit Mike to advise on their senior honors theses, masters theses, or Ph.D. dissertations.

MICHAEL ROEMER AND THE ECONOMICS OF DEVELOPMENT

Mike published prolifically during his entire career. He wrote or edited nine books, including the leading

*Jeffrey Sachs, Director of HIID, kindly provided us with the text of his memorial address, on which we draw extensively in our account of Mike's activities at HIID.

textbook in the field, *Economics of Development*, which he coauthored with HIID colleagues Malcolm Gillis, Dwight Perkins, and Donald Snodgrass. He published 25 articles (including several in *World Development*), 18 formal working papers, and six book reviews, and served as a referee for numerous journals, including *World Development*. His research interests were broad, with extensively cited contributions in natural resource economics, parallel markets, macroeconomic adjustment, and the analysis of policy reform.

Natural resource economics

One of Mike's first major achievements was the publication of his dissertation, *Fishing for Growth: Export-Led Development in Peru, 1950–1967* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970). This book, which examined primary exports as an engine of growth in Peru, dramatically improved the profession's understanding of the potentials and pitfalls of primary commodity-led growth. In subsequent years, Mike published insightful articles on resource-based growth and its impact, including "Resource-based industrialization in the developing countries: A survey," [*Journal of Development Economics* 6(2), 1979] and "Dependence and industrialization strategies," [*World Development* 9(5), 1981]. Long before "Dutch Disease" treatises became common currency in the profession, his research and policy work was informing policy makers of the subtle dangers associated with windfall gains from natural resource booms.

Parallel markets

Mike wrote extensively on parallel markets, beginning with his article "Simple analytics of segmented markets: What case for liberalization?" [*World Development* 14(3), 1986]. Working to develop a clearer understanding of the role of informal markets, he served as guest editor of the December 1989 *World Development* issue on parallel markets in developing countries. In this issue he coauthored an article with Shantayanan Devarajan and Christine Jones, "Markets under price controls in partial and general equilibrium" [*World Development* 17(12), 1989], exploring the effect of black markets on price control policies. His work in this area culminated in the volume edited with Christine Jones called *Markets in Developing Countries: Parallel, Fragmented, and Black* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1991). The chapters he coauthored in this volume help define the characteristics of parallel markets, their causes, and their effects on policy.

Macroeconomic adjustment

Mike's experience in advising developing country governments during periods of macroeconomic

adjustment led to several important publications. In 1979, he coauthored a book with Kwang Suk Kim on Korea's growth experience and the government's outward-looking strategy. This volume was part of Harvard University's highly influential series, *Studies in the Modernization of the Republic of Korea, 1945–1975* (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, 1979). His long-lasting advising efforts in Kenya culminated in the 1986 publication, "Sessional Paper No. 1." This inconspicuously titled paper on Kenya's economic reforms set a standard in the literature on developing country policy reform and is still used in Kenya to guide policy making. His other publications on macroeconomic issues in developing countries include the article "The macroeconomics of counterpart funds revisited" [*World Development*, 17(6), 1989].

Analysis of policy reform

Throughout his career, Mike was concerned with how to bring analytic techniques from the textbook to the policy arena. In *The Appraisal of Development Projects: A Practical Guide to Project Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1975) and *Cases in Economic Development Prospects, Policies, and Strategies* (London: Butterworth, 1981), Mike and Joseph Stern tackled these concerns head on with a pair of textbooks designed (as their titles suggest) to provide policy analysts with usable and useful tools for making informed recommendations. These two volumes helped to provide students with a veritable treasure of practical techniques, shortcuts, and actual case study examples.

Mike's most recent work has focused more on the lessons of policy reform. Two books in particular serve as a mainstay for those seeking to understand the determinants of successful economic reform in developing countries. *Reforming Economic Systems in Developing Countries*, which Mike edited with Dwight Perkins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Institute for International Development, 1991), draws together the lessons of experience accumulated by HIID researchers and consultants through involvement in dozens of reform initiatives. These lessons include making markets work more efficiently, creating incentive structures that allow for well-functioning governments, and understanding political economy forces that affect the success of reform efforts. *Asia and Africa: Legacies and Opportunities in Development*, which Mike edited with David Lindauer (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1994), argues that differences in policy between Asia and Africa account for much of the difference in economic performance between these two regions. The book is packed with wisdom. It contains policy lessons drawn largely from the Southeast Asian experience by policy

advisors such as Mike Roemer who have worked extensively in both Southeast Asia and Africa. Mike authored or coauthored four of the 11 chapters in this volume, and two of his chapters are about legacies. Mike has truly left a remarkable legacy with this valuable book, one of his last publications.

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF
MICHAEL ROEMER

Yana van der Meulen Rodgers

Mike invariably saw potential in every student who walked into his office, from the strongest students to the weakest. He always had interesting research ideas, sensible suggestions for a course of action, and abundant confidence that the student would get the job done. I first experienced this confidence when I met with Mike early in 1989 to apply for a job. As a second-year doctoral student in Harvard's economics department, I wished to gain some field experience in a developing country. Various inquiries all led to the same direction: Mike Roemer's office. Mike hired me for a project assistant job in Indonesia that involved extensive computer work, with data processing, database management, and computer training sessions for Indonesian bureaucrats. Although Mike must have known that I was virtually computer illiterate, he gave me that precious chance to succeed. My career would have taken a very different direction were it not for Mike's confidence that my eagerness to learn would translate into a job well done for HIID.

Mike's position as resident advisor and project director in Indonesia's Finance Ministry coincided with my own year-long position as project assistant. Because we worked in the same office, I could observe first-hand the striking frequency with which top-ranked Indonesian officials sought out Mike for his sound policy advice. Mike attended innumerable meetings, most of which involved a round of coffee and a delicious array of snacks, but he kept in shape with an admirable workout routine. Mike produced a dizzying volume of policy memoranda while he continued to pursue his own research, but he made plenty of time for one of his greatest passions: birdwatching. He and his wife Linda also entertained frequently during their stay in Jakarta; their residence was a warm and inviting home-away-from-home on the other side of the world.

In the following three years, back in the States, I had the good fortune of turning to Mike for help on my dissertation. Although Mike was not formally on my thesis committee, he carefully read every draft that crossed his desk, and he consistently provided insight and ideas that led to strong improvements. But Mike's commitment to my research did not end on graduation

day. Since 1993, Mike has helped me to publish five of my papers as HIID Development Discussion Papers, the series for which he served as editor. Mike's genuine interest in my family life also did not end. After my husband and I excitedly sent Mike and Linda a card in January 1996 announcing the birth of our beautiful baby girl, we received an infant-sized Fenway Park T-shirt in the mail. We will forever treasure this little T-shirt as it reminds us of Mike and his other great passion: the Boston Red Sox.

Joseph E. Zveglich, Jr.

"You should talk to Mike Roemer." That is what my advisor told me when I was doing some preliminary research on my dissertation. At that point, I had heard Mike's name and read his work but had never met him. So it was not without a little hesitation that I went to ask his advice. Disarming — that is the best way to describe Mike. Listening carefully as I sputtered out several half-formed ideas, he pointed out issues that needed to be addressed, mentioned other people to consult, and suggested some articles he thought would be useful. But the meeting is memorable less for its content than for the ease in which it took place. That indescribable feeling that he was speaking to me as a colleague made a lasting impression at a time when I could not see myself as more than a student.

Over the years I have had the pleasure to work with Mike through a few HIID projects and workshops. I came to learn that my original impression stemmed from the respect for others that Mike doled out in generous quantities. In the classroom, he excelled in presenting complex material to a broad range of students, but his greatest asset was the art of the classroom discussion. He would engage the students, juggling the diversity of opinions, while managing to maintain the focus of the discussion. All opinions — even those he personally disagreed with — were open to discussion with the simple restriction that the students support them with economic theory. His seemingly effortless handling of the class made him a favorite among students and a role model for my own attempts at teaching.

In many little ways, I have benefitted greatly from my interaction with Mike. When I would chance to meet him in a seminar, on a project, or even in the hall, he always made time to ask about my research or to mention an article he had read (or written) that might be helpful. As my research progressed, he was instrumental in disseminating the results through the HIID discussion paper series. This support helped me to maintain my focus throughout the process. So Mike, thank you for your patience, your consideration, and your encouragement. And thank you for the articles. You're right, they are useful.

Mary Kay Gugerty

"Let's get our thinking straight." How many times did I hear Mike say that over the years? Whether we were working out the econometrics on a paper or helping a student with a tricky diagram, this was one of his favorite phrases. During the several years that Mike and I worked together, I came to realize that in his work Mike valued clear thinking above all else. This did not mean that he cared for nothing else, of course. He took interest in all of his students, and was just as interested in how my dissertation was progressing as in whether or not I had finished the work he had requested.

First when I was a masters student in the Kennedy School, then when I was a doctoral student in the Program in Political Economy and Government at Harvard, Mike was always a source of support and inspiration for me. Few students are lucky enough to have mentors who are worth emulating in terms of both their intellectual capacity and their moral character. Mike was certainly such a person to almost everyone who knew him. You had to respect his thinking, but you also valued and learned from the thoughtful and respectful way with which he treated everyone around him regardless of their position.

Teaching with Mike was truly a joy. How many teachers have finished a comprehensive set of typed lecture notes, complete with diagrams, several months before the semester begins? Mike was unbelievably organized and meticulous. The open economy macroeconomics course he taught for the last four years at the Kennedy School was a real teaching challenge. The students' backgrounds in economics varied from a masters degree to an introductory course; the class therefore had to be challenging enough to stimulate the former students while accessible to the latter. Mike was able to develop a framework to communicate essential concepts clearly and concisely.

Mike loved a challenge. Once, while we were sitting at the little round table in his office trying to work out a complicated and frustrating analytical example for a paper, Mike stopped and exclaimed, "This is fun. I love this stuff." In teaching as well, he loved a good debate and loved to challenge his students to think clearly and logically about difficult and sometimes emotional topics. He was always open to other viewpoints, as long as they were logically expressed and well thought out. Again and again in class he would repeat: "You've got to get your thinking straight." This is one of the many legacies Mike left to those of us who worked with him. Whenever we write, whenever we prepare to teach, we will always ask ourselves: "Do I have my thinking straight?"

Natalie Pickering

I would like to relay a conversation that Mary Kay and I had one evening in early December about our

upcoming jobs as teaching fellows for Mike's open economy macroeconomics class. I had taken Mike's class and had spoken to him on numerous occasions about various academic matters, but I had not taught for him before. Mary Kay assured me that if there was anyone I would want to be a teaching assistant for, it was Michael Roemer. Having worked with Mike for years, she always found him helpful, considerate and genuinely concerned about his students. I also thought he was exceptionally dedicated and good-natured, on top of being a talented teacher. We agreed, Mike was really nice and good at what he did. In addition, he was organized, he gave you his time, and listened to your point of view. But that wasn't quite what we were trying to get at. Finally, we decided that it was not just that he was good at his work and good with people, but that he was a good person. We couldn't find a better way to say it. What Mike exemplified encompassed deeper dimensions of character than the computerized course evaluation forms allowed one to convey about a teacher.

This conversation was representative of the graduate student gossip I heard about Michael Roemer in my two and a half years I have been around the Kennedy School and HIID. The themes resurfaced again and again. Mike was a clear and effective teacher, conscientious, concerned about his students, and dedicated. He made everyone feel they can do it — they have a contribution to make. As a student in Mike's macroeconomics class, I was particularly impressed by the respect Mike showed for the personal experiences of his students. Mike was often teaching to the non-converted, skeptics of neoclassical economics. Whether we were doing a case on hyperinflation in Bolivia or Dutch Disease in Indonesia, he would start class by asking whether there was anyone from that country. He would then encourage them to start the discussion, challenging them along the way to use the frameworks developed in class to strengthen their analysis. He saw the value not only in teaching the material, but also in creating a common point of reference. Sometimes the discussions were heated, but Mike showed considerable skill in entertaining other points of view without letting the class get bogged down in ideological debates.

What I will remember most about Mike is the sheer enthusiasm and joy he brought to his work. He was clearly a person who loved what he was doing. I hope that we, his students, will be able to carry his energy and optimism for the field of development far into the future.

Jeffrey D. Lewis

Purely by chance, I recently came across a long forgotten photo. Labeled "Caracas — January 1977," it showed Mike and me posed in front of some anony-

mous statue in the Venezuelan capital. Mike looked relaxed and fit, as he always did, and much as I recall him looking the last time we met around a year ago. However, a glance at the Harvard senior standing next to him in the photo provided ample evidence of the passage of time, and a clear reminder of the prominent role that Mike played in my personal and professional evolution.

That I was in Caracas at all was largely through Mike's efforts. Having completed all the usual academic courses on economics and development (including one from Mike), the trip to Venezuela captured in the photo was my initiation into the *practice* of development economics. I spent a month on site as a research assistant gathering data for an HIID advisory project on resource-based industrialization strategies, which also provided me with the raw material for my undergraduate honors thesis (written under his tutelage). At that time, I was thankful for (and somewhat amazed by) Mike's willingness to make this extra effort on behalf of a student; only later in my career did I fully appreciate how much I had benefitted from serving that initial apprenticeship under Mike's capable handling. With much encouragement, I completed the thesis even more interested in economic development than when I had started, making my continuation in the field seem almost inevitable.

For countless undergraduates, such faculty friendships end with graduation, but in my case, there was an even longer-playing sequel. After completing my doctorate, I chose to return to HIID, drawn primarily by the opportunity to combine research, teaching, and policy advising into the one career — the way I had seen Mike do it. Over the next decade, the challenges and frustrations of this juggling act left me even more amazed by how much Mike contributed to HIID, to the university, and to the profession. After teaching

the same undergraduate course that I had taken from Mike almost 20 years earlier (and using some of my notes from that course), the strength of his open-ended commitment to his students stood out as even more impressive; after balancing extensive travel, teaching, and family demands, his good-natured willingness to always take on one more task or assume greater responsibility seemed that much more noteworthy.

Throughout my career at HIID, Mike remained a dependable source of support and insight to me, and others in my cohort. This was not always easy: we spent half of the time in different parts of the globe, and even in Cambridge, different teaching and travel schedules made it hard to connect. But there were exceptions: we spent a year together as advisors in the Indonesian Ministry of Finance, where I could (again) learn from his capable policy advising and analytic skills. No matter how busy he was, his willingness to provide constructive commentary on a policy memo or research paper often left me feeling guilty about my own lack of charity in the same arena! He seemed particularly skilled at stripping a complicated argument down to its core, and then picking it apart; I was always secretly relieved when one of my efforts had survived his scrutiny relatively unscathed.

But more important than any research commentary was Mike's role in my life. Whether it was wrestling over writing an honors thesis or deciding where my career interests should lead, I knew that when I needed advice or counsel, he would make the time to listen and understand. With the news of his untimely death, I felt robbed of something, although initially I couldn't identify exactly what it was. But at his memorial service, a colleague summed it up quite succinctly for me with one simple remark: "Good mentors are hard to find." Exactly.