Michael Ward, one of the world’s most experienced and widely travelled development economist/statisticians, and a Life Fellow of the RES, died of a heart attack on 18 October 2008, aged 69 years. Over a long career, working in more than 30 developing countries and on the national accounts of many more, he helped to create or improve basic economic statistical systems nationally and internationally.

Michael obtained his first degree in economics and statistics at the University of Exeter. After graduating he was appointed in 1963 to the Department of Applied Economics in Cambridge.

Whilst at Cambridge he undertook assignments for the Overseas Development Administration including the establishment of the first Bureau of Statistics in Fiji as well as providing advice to Tonga and other islands in the Western Pacific, and was also Director of Studies in Economics and Dean of Selwyn College.

In 1972, he moved to the Institute of Development Studies in the University of Sussex and for three years provided statistical support and advice to most of the countries of Southern Africa. He was then appointed a Fellow of IDS where he led a project on statistical needs of developing countries and worked with Dudley Seers on using life expectancy as an integrating concept for social indicators. He also spent six months in Thailand evaluating the impact of sharp increases in oil prices on the Thai economy.

From 1982-85 he worked at the OECD on international comparisons of national accounts. Two of his early influential monographs were written for the OECD — The Measurement of Capital, an essential basis for growth accounting, and Purchasing Power Parities and Real Expenditures in the OECD, a meticulous examination of the problems of making accurate cross-country comparisons of economic performance in OECD countries.

From 1985 until 2000 he was on the staff of the World Bank as a senior economist in both operations and policy areas. His work combined support for another large range of countries especially in the Asean region with further pioneering work on the measurement of poverty, income distribution, environmental accounting and developing and applying purchasing power parity measures to national accounting data in developing countries.

In addition to many technical reports, manuals and papers, Michael published more than 60 articles in academic journals. His recent book, Quantifying the World, was praised as a seminal work which analysed the political economy of international statistical efforts and priorities. In 1999 he was awarded the President’s Medal of the International Statistical Institute for ‘outstanding contributions to international statistics’. A year later he was elected President of the International Association for Research in Income and Wealth.

Michael had a wide circle of friends in many parts of the world. He was greatly respected for the warmth of his personality. He was as sensitive to people in all situations as he was to the needs and differences in the many countries in which he worked. He liked his food, especially meals with good friends and professional colleagues. He leaves a wife, Rosemary, a son Andrew, and two daughters, Rachel and Kylie as well as six grandchildren.

Sir Richard Jolly
Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex

This is a shortened version of an obituary that appeared in The Guardian, 13 November 2008. We are grateful for permission to use it.