

## **Policy Research and Practice in India**

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This paper argues that there has been a perceptible change over the last three decades both in the types of organisations that contribute to policy research, and more importantly in the kind of frameworks within which such research is conducted. Reasons for this change include the growth of a vibrant civil society, recognition that many issues are not addressed by mainstream research, and funding priorities, which have increasingly tended to support policy relevant research.

Generating the facts and analysis that could lead to more sensitive and responsive policy making is of concern to many different types of actors. The starting point for this paper is to identify the basic motivation that has inspired many activist groups to engage in reflection, analysis and research; and therefore the emergence of a multi-faceted policy research community. At one end of this community are the researchers who are located within universities or research organisations, are part of the academic fraternity, and have chosen to engage in policy relevant research; at the other end are activists or 'thinking practitioners' who may be located within social movements or NGOs and who have written about and analysed the experiences of development action.

Not all academics choose to do policy research; likewise not all activists engage in reasoned reflection; and it is a common perception that 'academic excellence' and 'social relevance' cannot, in practice, go together. But within the realm of development research, analysis that is unable to bridge the gaps between academia and activism is often incomplete and unconvincing from a policy perspective. This paper suggests that policy networks have been one way in which academics and activists are brought together around issues of common concern.

Finally, just as funding has certainly been a factor in stimulating the field of policy research as a whole, future funding decisions will influence the evolution of the policy research community, and in particular whether or not 'bottom up' think tanks are able to develop out of action based research.

### **1 The planning process, and the emergence of the policy research community**

Discussions around policy research have some underlying assumptions. One is that in some sense, policy 'should' be based on research, should draw on evidence, should follow a rational path from problem to solution. As we know in reality policy is linked to politics rather more strongly than it may be to policy research. Another assumption is that academics 'should' contribute to policy making. Again, academics trained to address a body of knowledge with creative insight and depths of information are often unable to translate their work into bullet point policy prescriptions. But the normative value of engaging in policy research is strongly affirmed in the support it gets from research funders including the government.

A third assumption is that the ways in which research can influence policy are known (or knowable). This makes possible the development of policy advocates, and invites the participation of communicators and media. In this sense, the 'research to policy' process is seen as essentially linear: research findings provide a basis for the formulation of policy. To some extent, in India, the demand for data for planning purposes soon after Independence created a (somewhat linear) template of research for development. This picture has changed, particularly in the last two or three decades (see eg Sethi 2008). Today, as Kuldeep Mathur says, 'The model of how research is utilized for policy-making in India presents a haphazard picture' (Mathur 2008).

With Independence, the project of nation building contemplated the creation of strong local industry, strong institutions for research and technological innovation, and expected that investment in this institutional framework would lead to the broad based development of the economy, drawing into the growth process all communities and individuals. Looking at India in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we find that despite this serious effort, the Indian economy today is characterized by its dominant informality – over 90% of employment, 40 % of the GDP, originate in the informal economy. Planning for development had viewed the formal sector as the engine of growth. Consequently the research institutions set up soon after Independence were oriented to contributing through research and the generation of data to the growth and expansion of formal industry and modern, government sponsored institutions.

Research organisations in India, and South Asia, are often referred to as think tanks. Their orientation to policy is influenced by history. Research for development has a long history in India and the ICSSR institutes for example have a tradition to contributing to this in response to requirements of both state governments and the national government.

Mainstream research organisations in India have always had a close relationship with government in the sense of contributing data and information required for the formulation of policy and planning, undertaking programme evaluations, participating in commissions and committees, and so on. But the failure of this process to generate the nationwide inclusion that was originally expected has had the consequence of creating what might be called a collective 'cognitive dissonance'<sup>1</sup> – a sense that all the knowledge that is before us somehow doesn't solve the problem, doesn't address the problems that policy makers have to resolve. The dissonance may not be so much between research and policy: as between the community at large and the formal structures of governance and research.

The last two or three decades have seen the emergence of a stronger, independent civil society, and with liberalization and globalization a stronger private sector. The result has been the emergence of a number of organisations engaged in policy advocacy from varying standpoints. The mainstream PROs are oriented to doing research for the formal economy. The extent to which they have been able to accommodate the emerging diversity of interests and accumulation

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Mike Jackson for introducing me to this concept. See Jackson (2009).

of practitioner experience into the range of academic work has been limited. The restrictiveness can encompass many things – reluctance to step outside disciplinary boundaries, experiment with innovative research methods, respond to issues emerging from the field, recognize the role of experiential learning, and be accountable not just to the academic community but beyond that to the larger community.

## **II. Policy research organisations**

There is an overlap, although certainly not a perfect overlap, between organisational types and the nature of research generally conducted by these organisations. Broadly, three types of policy research organisations can be distinguished

- a PROs (government supported or independent)
- b Private research firms
- c Action based research organisations

### **PROs**

In India, PROs would include all research organizations with a stated interest in policy. Many will receive government funding, although few may have assured support to cover all expenditures. The availability of some assured funding whether from government or other sources means a degree of independence in deciding the research agenda and the tools used to disseminate findings. Being funded by the government (as in the case of ICSSR institutes) does not mean having a pre-set agenda. Project funding and consulting assignments are taken on by PROs. However in identifying their main concern as being with ‘research’ and thus at least in theory encouraging ‘long cycle’ research, they can be distinguished from the second group below.

### **Private research firms**

Private research firms have emerged for many reasons and this umbrella term hides considerable diversity. They are associated with short cycle, commissioned research; usually empirical/survey based; and the main funding would be from multilateral donors or private corporate bodies.<sup>2</sup> At times the government also contracts this group. However in the absence of corporate or donor demand this group would not be sustainable. Such firms usually work on short term contracts and do not have the longer term interest in research that is found in PROs.

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<sup>2</sup> Private research units set up by business associations or corporations are not discussed here, but would likely be engaged in both short and long cycle research and also may be very successful in policy advocacy. The main concern of this paper is not with these organizations but with the other two categories.

## Action based research organisations

The third group, action based research organisations are conceptually clearly distinct from the above two types. They start from the premise that knowledge is generated through experience and practice. Their commitment to policy advocacy is usually strong.

What is seen from the examples below is that action based organizations are no longer entirely dependent on research carried out by concerned academics, and that some have developed the capacity for independent research and analysis and therefore that organisations usually seen as being ‘activist’ and ‘policy advocates’ are also in fact contributing to the generation of knowledge. The change that has taken place in the last three decades has been in the spilling out of serious development research from ‘pure’ research organisations to other action based organisations.

NGOs concerned with development action are increasingly realizing the need to conduct research and disseminate in the form of publications.<sup>3</sup> Some examples of organisations concerned with development action/ feminist or environmental advocacy and simultaneously contributing to knowledge are given below.

Jagori, Delhi is a feminist organisation concerned with awareness raising, capacity building, advocacy for women rights and gender equality. It has carried out research on the rights of domestic workers and the findings of the study are easily accessible on Jagori's website. Jagori has also published a book on eviction and resettlement in Delhi titled 'Swept off the Map'. There are other publications with the target audience being grassroot NGOs.

People's Watch, Chennai, is a national human rights organisation which monitors practice of human rights, combats torture by torture monitoring and intervention, and has been organizing and coordinating a national coalition against torture. People's Watch has a Communication programme with research and publication as its central function. Books, articles and papers are published not only in English but also other vernacular languages.

Women's Research and Action Group, Mumbai was established with the objective of protecting and promoting social and legal status of marginalized women. It has been carrying out community development programmes especially around the concern of violence against women, changing personal laws, campaigns against communal violence, National Campaign on International Criminal Court. As the name of the organisation suggests it also carries out research on similar areas especially legal issues and has several publications.

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<sup>3</sup> Lindquist suggests that the term ‘policy inquiry’ may better describe the range of activities carried out by PROs rather than ‘policy research’. This is also true for NGO’s. Lindquist 2001 p.4

Partners for Law and Development, New Delhi, focuses on achieving social justice through law. It has a separate programme named 'creating Knowledge', researches and publishes learning tools for other practitioners, the other objective is to draw upon field-experiences and alternative law strategies so as to inform the understanding of law, society and social justice. Advocacy and campaigns are carried out to influence policy making.

Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT), Mumbai is an NGO which is a research centre involved in research, training, service and advocacy on health and allied themes with extensive publications in the form of articles and papers.

There are also 'research wings' of NGOs. For instance, SEWA has set up SEWA Academy to co-ordinate research and training, and research consultants regularly participate and guide 'grass roots' researchers.

The valuable contribution made by NGOs to curriculum development needs also to be noted (examples include UKSN and environmental education; Eklavya and science education; Sandhan and life skills education). To appreciate the value of training and curriculum inputs, we need to remind ourselves that only around 10 % of the literate population has successfully completed schooling and the quality of school education leaves much to be desired.

The significance of this group of researchers is three fold. First, policy research carried out within mainstream PROs is usually addressed to the government. However research based on action usually addresses a wider constituency. It too may be addressed in part to government, particularly when a specific policy or action is being advocated. But being grounded in action, an important constituency for the research is people themselves: 'government policy is only one way of translating research into action'.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, an important aspect of policy research is implementation or programme evaluation. If we want to understand why policies do not always translate into the desired outcomes, and if better understanding of 'what works' is sought, then it becomes necessary to encourage research that builds on people's own categories of thinking about their lives and struggles. The objects of policy are people with their own internal contradictions, who while struggling against are also complicit in upholding oppressive structures. We need to see people – and not just policy makers – as agents of change.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, policy research to be effective needs to go beyond the discourse of accountability to understanding and articulating the behavior of people in varying situations.

Further, the constituency and approach to policy of action based research reflects a concern for groups excluded from mainstream discussion and development processes. An example, as given

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Dreze, personal communication, Feb 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Ajay Mehta, personal communication, March 2009.

in Sen (1999) is of Unnayan which 'believed that planning in the Indian context was limited to a small section of the population – the upper classes. A huge section of urban dwellers was ignored in the planning process, with no resources allocated or planning projects undertaken on their behalf'. (349).

Thirdly, it contributes to the development of a broader framework for research and the use of materials drawn from life. It has been said that 'activist research speaks to a structure of power; academic research speaks to a body of knowledge'<sup>6</sup>. However, this distinction may not be so valid anymore. To quote Professor Kuldip Mathur 'The dichotomy between activist research and academic research is to some extent false. We had believed that there is scientific research based on certain principles of knowing that could be generalized and quantified. Now these very principles and the effort to strive for universal laws and rules are being questioned. The entire post-positivist movement is a reaction to such an effort of equating social science with physical sciences. Narratives, anecdotes, folklore, personal histories are now being accepted as valid for understanding social behavior and then framing policies or evaluating them.'<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the experience of action based organisations has helped to shift the terms of discourse within policy making, and provided evidence for policy making that goes beyond standard quantitative methods used by economists (who dominate the field of policy research, as pointed out in Mathur 2009) to social and qualitative research and evidence.

A charge often levelled against action based research is that it tends to be anecdotal, presumably in contrast to statistical research that examines the 'whole' picture. In a different context, and speaking about business history, Hannah said 'It may be that in many fields we cannot progress to greater theoretical precision, for the analysis of change...is the most difficult problem the social sciences face.' (224) and again that 'Some economists ..suggest that students of such detail cannot see the wood for the trees; the proper object of study, they argue, is the system that generates ..success or failure, not the individual cases within it' (220). But anecdote can be the starting point for study. To dismiss experience as 'anecdote' is to prioritise a particular method of study over others without justification. It is also to gloss over the need for policy and programmes to recognise the vast differences that characterise society. Geography, class, caste, gender all suggest that the macro picture cannot capture the texture of difference, and without this understanding sensitive (and therefore more successful in its outcomes) policy making is not possible. It is often deeper understanding of the individual case that can help articulate the broader questions; opening up the black box of the household was needed to understand the gendered nature of economic behaviour, or the black box of the firm to understanding the role of entrepreneurship in development.

In many ways, 'action based research' is similar to what has been described as 'socially engaged research' – which refers to research by academics/ mainstream PROs which connects to real life concerns and draws upon the experience of activist groups. There are good examples of the

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<sup>6</sup> Niraja Gopal, at ISST-IDRC Roundtable on Policy Research, Puducherry, Jan 24-5, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Personal communication, March 2009.

value added to policy research with strong vertical connections in addition to the horizontal connections with other academics. Mathur and Mathur (2007) suggest that the field of policy research is today much more informed by a 'grounded social science outlook and enriched policy research' which however continues to face 'tremendous resistance from the mainstream' (610). They argue that this change has had much to do with the growth of a vibrant civil society. 'In the space between service delivery and direct advocacy for policy change, NGOs have developed alliances with other non-state entities to further an alternative and participatory discourse of development. In concrete terms, NGOs have developed relationships with research institutions that tended towards a more progressive policy outlook.' (611). ....'The cross fertilization of ideas and strategies between NGOs and research institutes has developed into a vibrant dynamic of providing a clear set of alternative policy goals and action strategies in pursuit of an alternative democratic order' (612). The examples discussed in their paper in support of this understanding needs to be measured against the fact that NGOs themselves are not evenly distributed across the country or even thematically, and that very few researchers and research institutes have been engaged in these constructive and energizing relationships.

Some types of research, which need to be multi disciplinary and where the starting point is observed reality, have bridged some of the gaps and re-defined the meaning of academic excellence. In the case of women's studies the link between research, action and policy has been strong from the outset, as have multi-disciplinary methods. In India, such research has never been contained within the university framework, and some of the seminal work was done by women's activists and institutions outside of formal academia.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, environmental research has been more based in action and reality.

Action based research does not reduce the value of mainstream scholarship or academic rigour. To quote Jean Dreze:

'real knowledge is durable and cumulative, whereas sophistry and mumbo jumbo tend to self-destruct in due course. There is a wealth of insights to gain from academic training and scientific pursuit..... The value of scientific research can in many circumstances be enhanced *even further* if it is combined with real-world involvement and action. ...The flourishing of action based research could also pave the way for a healthy democratization of scientific research'. (Dreze 2002, p.192)

However, in practice, it can be difficult to straddle both worlds. Research carried out by NGOs is usually micro and qualitative, putting more emphasis on social and ethnographic factors, using participatory methods, and open to innovation. NGOs/ activist groups believe that researchers are part of the world and can have researched political and social positions, that objectivity is not equal to inaction, that all researchers have convictions and that unbiased research can be carried out despite personal convictions. NGOs do not usually maintain hierarchy between the researcher and the researched. For example in a research into handloom weavers, Gajjala and

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<sup>8</sup> Khullar 2005, p.18-19

Mamidipudi emphasize that 'These knowledge-building practices must of necessity remain non-exploitative and accountable to the weaver and his/her community.' (3) Mainstream PRO's feel that engagement of researchers with the researched may compromise on objectivity. Hierarchy is maintained. There are also differences in the approach to policy influence. At times, the role played by activists in the policy process is that of mediation ('policy broker') between the grassroots and the policy makers. The voices of those in the grassroots are represented to the policy makers in the form of research. Often pressure tactics on behalf of, or with those affected is also involved in seeking the acceptance of research findings in the form of policy initiatives/implementations.

### **III. Bridging research and reality**

In the case of science research, the emergence of a 'new social contract' between science and society has been noted. For example, Gibbons suggests that 'the sites at which problems are formulated and negotiated have moved from their previous institutional locations in government, industry and universities into the 'agora' – the public space in which both 'science meets the public' and the public 'speaks back' to science' and that 'research activities now transcend the immediate context of application, and begin to reach out, anticipate and engage reflexively with those further entanglements, consequences and impacts that it generates.' (Gibbons 1999: 14,15)

Whether this kind of development will be seen in the context of social science research in India remains to be seen. If a new social contract were to characterize social science research more broadly, this would likely mean changes in research methods and processes. To quote Gibbons, 'A new contract will require more open, socially distributed, self-organising systems of knowledge production that generate their own accountability and audit systems.' (17).

The demand for change, for allowing other types of influence on research, is also recognition of the value of 'tacit' (or personal) knowledge, in addition to 'explicit' (or codified) knowledge. Stiglitz observed that, 'The process of encouraging autonomous local social learning is closely connected to the whole process of promoting democracy'. (2000: 38)

Think tanks in the West, and global agencies, look to local organisations to provide the tacit as well as explicit content of knowledge; however increasingly, unless these organisations themselves engage more strongly with the rest of society, their ability to capture and understand the local context and texture is limited. This is especially so when the setting of international development goals recommends the need for policy research that generates global knowledge products. It has been noted that think tanks are 'fast building regional and international networks' (Stone 2008). Individual researchers are able to connect across space and location through participation in networks of various kinds. Technology especially internet access plays an important role in sustaining such networks.

One way in which policy makers attempt to bridge these gaps is through policy networks. When it comes to policy, most think tanks are primarily engaged with national policy debates, and

national policy oriented networks often include practitioners. This is recognition by policy makers that the academic analysis of problems needs to be supplemented by the contemporary knowledge of practitioners.

There are several examples of what might be called ‘government initiated policy networks’. The Working Groups set up by the Planning Commission as part of the process of formulation of each five year plan bring together academics, practitioners, and officials in intensive deliberations around different themes and sectors, and provide an opportunity for new ideas to be shared, agreed upon, become part of the approach and find their way into programme formulation. For example, the programme of environmental education supported by the Ministry of Education for several years since the early 1980s finds its origin in the recommendations of a working group set up for the Eighth Plan, and owes much to the academic inputs of persons working on education and development concerns in Uttarakhand. Similarly the Tenth and Eleventh Plan approach to adolescents, including education and going beyond it, has been strongly influenced by the experiences of an NGO programme in Rajasthan, and discussion with educationists and practitioners within working groups.

The Ministry of Rural Development has recently set up a ‘Professional Institutes Network’ or PIN to bring together research and documentation of best practices on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). The PIN includes IITs, IIMs, NIRD/SIRDs, Law Institutes, other Government institutes, other professional institutes, and universities, including agricultural universities. Areas for collaboration include monitoring and appraisal, training, evaluation and impact assessment, research, action research, case studies, curricula development<sup>9</sup>.

The above examples suggest that in India policymakers are open to inclusion of experiences of practitioners. But there is reluctance on the part of mainstream academia to include unmediated practitioner perspectives. However the existence of policy and other networks and the knowledge generated through them helps to build up a case for academia to be more responsive and connected. This also leads to some re-thinking of research methods and processes. One reasonably successful academia-activist linkage is around the informal economy, discussed below.

An example of ‘informal networks’ that do not have dedicated staff or secretariat but where a group of persons and institutions work in collaboration, or independently but with frequent sharing of findings, in order to carry forward an idea or approach to policy making and into programme implementation is the informal economy networks, especially interesting because they seek to influence the research work being carried on within mainstream economics based PROs. Traditional economics relies on data based and technocratic analysis. But in the attempt to collect data on the informal economy for example, standard methods of survey etc cannot be

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<sup>9</sup> Presentation at Roundtable on Professional Support for NREGA with Social Science Research Institutions, MORD, Nov 11, 2008.

used. It is to be noted that just after Independence, considerable emphasis was placed on quick surveys and data collection to map and understand the economy. Over the years the institutionalization of data collection has led to good data on the formal and organised economy. Today, understanding the informal economy requires methodological innovation and it is interesting that this research has been motivated by activists so that academics and statisticians, and policy makers as well, have responded to their articulation of concerns.

The role of activism in generating research on the informal economy and influencing the collection of official statistics as well as policy dialogue in India is well known and has had also an international impact. Briefly, SEWA (a trade union of women in the unorganized sector) initially worked with GIDR, then with GIDR, NCAER and ISST on a set of studies to examine the contribution of the informal sector to the economy. The research programme included an advisory committee and held regular workshops so that dialogue and discussion across researchers, policy maker and statisticians was fairly continuous. (see Sudarshan 2001). The scope of studies has extended since then to include many more areas of research and many more organizations and individuals. Among policy outcomes, the inclusion of WIEGO in the Delhi Group; the canvassing of a special module by the NSS to estimate home based workers; the setting up of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector and its focus on many of the labour and employment issues raised by activists are some examples. Clearly, the increased international attention being given to informal work and workers has several reasons and the contributions of SEWA and WIEGO while substantial have also been in harmony with the environment. What is indisputable is that at least in the Indian context the activist concern has been leading this research; and that the sustained commitment to advocacy, using and translating the research, has again been led by activists.

The dominant informality of the economies in the South Asian region, along with a continuing tradition of technocratic and data based economic analysis, creates an interesting situation in which a level of social engagement has been necessary for furthering research in this area. Official data has been able to capture the formal economy far more accurately than the informal economy. Inadequacies in data mean that in order to correctly capture the ground realities, there is a need to engage with both quantitative analysis but also with field work based and qualitative information; and to use methods that might fall outside disciplinary boundaries.

In the last ten years, networks that actively seek official participation but are not initiated by Government have emerged, and these are different from informal networks such as described above in having a dedicated staff and secretariat (and relatively assured funding) that allows them to spend more time and resources on linking research and action, and on the translation of experiences into policy recommendations. Examples include CBGA, ASER, below.

<p>Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA) carries out analysis of the Central Government's budget and tries to connect both with the context of macroeconomic policies as well as the perspective of the disadvantaged sections of society. CBGA has developed a network of countrywide alliances with grassroots civil society groups and social</p>
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movements. It encourages, through training as needed, the use of budget analysis by civil society groups as an instrument to seek accountability from the Government for its commitments.

CBGA tries to analyze the implications of budgetary policy priorities, track the implementation of the budgetary proposals, and advocate for policy initiatives in favour of the marginalised.<sup>10</sup>

Pratham started its work in the slums of Mumbai in 1994. It has worked closely with the government towards universalizing primary education, as well as with the corporate sector. The goal is "every child is in school ..... and is learning well". An accelerated learning method has been in use since 2002. From the work of Pratham has emerged the ASER Centre. This centre has research and policy goals – ‘Are social sector programs leading to desired outcomes? Is public expenditure effectively leading towards stated goals?’ ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) is an attempt at ‘independent assessment by citizens’ as a tool for accountability in the sector of education. Since 2005, ASER has tried to engage citizens in evaluating educational outcomes. It has built up a nationwide network. The ASER Centre seeks to institutionalize this effort, with regular training to build capacity, dissemination and communication, and research. The core funding for the ASER Centre is being provided by Google.org.<sup>11</sup>

Networks as a way of drawing in expertise from many different institutional locations have been present in India in different forms. Most are temporary, formed around a particular issue or project, although some have greater longevity and others may even lead to organizational development. For example, the Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE) was a landmark study on education in India. The report itself is accessible and simply written. It is based on careful research. The group that did the research included researchers located in different places as well as those recruited for the project. Subsequent to this report, some members of the core group continue to do research in education (with the formation of Collaborative Research and Dissemination, or CORD).

One motivation behind the emergence of policy advocacy networks is the desire to scale up an activity. This is especially so for the education networks, where the desire to universalize schooling, eliminate child labour, and improve quality of schooling, have been strong motivating factors, and where the links between research and activism have also been very strong. Thus, the current Chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights is a former university professor and the founder of an activist organization for elimination of child labour and getting all children into school.

There are also clear differences in the ability of the government sponsored, versus other non-governmental networks to reach relevant officials and policy makers, as also in cases where the

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.cbgaindia.org/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://asercentre.org/>

issue is already on the policy agenda versus those where the effort is to introduce new issues on to this agenda. This translates into the need for more time and/ or the development of a range of tools and methods as pathways to policy influence. This can stimulate either policy brief focus within an institutional framework (as in CLRA) or can set up an agenda for formal/ informal networks (HNSA/ HNI), examples given below.

Centre for Legislative Research and Advocacy (CLRA) is a national level organization mandated to strengthen and promote institutions of governance in order to ensure transparent, accountable and participatory governance. Its activities started in 2004, and it is now a registered Trust. Activities include research, advocacy, and networking. CLRA works closely with civil society groups, parliamentary institutions, legislators, political parties, civil servants and media. CLRA seeks a positive engagement with the Parliament, and one of its widely appreciated products is regular policy briefs around proposed or new legislation.<sup>12</sup>

Home Net India is a network of organizations working with home based workers, consisting of a heterogenous group including NGOs focusing on enterprise support, groups with links to political parties, trade unions as well as individuals, with varying priorities and sources of funds. What they share is a view that home based work is viable, and needs to be recognized as work and home based workers as workers, in order to be able to provide legislative and other policy support for the group. HNI has received support from UNIFEM, for example, to carry out research on groups of home based workers in partnership with ISST (Institute of Social Studies Trust). Such exercises in mapping and basic documentation assist the network in strengthening its own membership as well as sharpening issues for policy dialogue. The role played by research here is not so much problem solving, as putting new issues on to the policy agenda. As an example, research findings were shared at workshops with government officials in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Punjab and provided enough information to be able to persuade the officials that this was an area needing policy attention (such as minimum wage coverage). However the research itself was based on a small sample and the absence of 'representative' data became a reason to delay any actual response in some cases. Interestingly, however, in one case the Home Net partner had sufficient personal credibility with the state government that issues of research quality were not raised here. Attempts are being made to extend these concerns across the region as well as within India. HomeNet South Asia is a network organization of women homebased workers promoted by UNIFEM and SEWA. It was set up after the Kathmandu Declaration, formulated in conference in Nepal in year 2000. In South Asia, there are about 50 million homebased workers, out of whom 80% are women. The Asian Region is a key area for organizing homebased workers due to the high number and a strong history of successfully organizing these workers. The Networks of homebased workers are expanding in India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Objectives include making visible the home-based workers and their issues; advocating for National Policies for home-based workers in each country; strengthening the grass roots and particularly the membership-

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<http://www.clraindia.org/>

based organizations of home-based workers in each country; and create and strengthen South Asia Network of home-based workers and their organization<sup>13</sup>

Gender, Livelihoods and Resources Forum (GLRF), Jharkand, is an advocacy group seeking to ensure land rights of tribal women.<sup>14</sup> When GLRF was formed in 2005 there was an agreement that women's land rights would be the focal issue of the organisation, but that this work would also include working on labour rights etc. Since that time GLRF has collaborated with various organisations including national level women's organisations, UNIFEM, etc. and has also built alliances with Dalit organisations, unorganised sector organisations, and anti-trafficking organisations. GLRF is a kind of network with a core committee of 10 people and a forum of small organisations which work in different districts.<sup>15</sup> It is also an example of an activist group that has sought active support from researchers.

Networks are a useful device to bring together information from different places and link practitioners, researchers and policy makers. But it needs to be remembered that networks are not a substitute for institution building and that institutions have a non substitutable role to play in building up research capacity in a developing country. The best networks are those that are institutionally embedded – but this requires strong institutions. Moreover the tensions between activists and academics should not be ignored. The former function from a position of vulnerability, with insecure incomes and funding support, have little patience with the slow and careful work that good research requires, and are eager to step from research to advocacy. Academics are far more secure financially, have a primary loyalty to the discipline or the university, and are usually reluctant to be seen as advocates. These partnerships are rarely perceived by both sides as being between equals. Networks are thus cautiously advocated.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.homenetsouthasia.org/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://groups.google.com/group/GLRF-Tribal>, <http://GLRF-Tribal.blogspot.com>

<sup>15</sup> Praveer Peter, presentation at IDS-ISST Workshop on Organising Women Oct 20-21

<sup>16</sup> The above analysis is based on Indian experience. In South Asia as a whole, some trends are similar – the dispersion of research to NGOs and consultants outside of PROs, for example. The emergence of NGO research which finds its roots in grassroots experience may be stronger in India, given stronger democratic traditions and the emergence of civil society organizations. Another possible difference may be that a larger quantum and proportion of policy research outside of India is directed at influencing the policies of foreign donors directly. Bangladesh has seen the development of large NGOs supported by foreign donors and providing services in parallel with the government. A large part of ongoing policy research is likely to be carried out outside the government supported institutes and to be done in response to concerns of the NGOs and the foreign donors, multi or bilateral. While in India, influencing the policies of the government is the focus of most policy research, it is possible that in Bangladesh, research that influences the policies of NGOs which are development agencies is equally or even more important. In Sri Lanka, the economic space for NGOs expanded after 1977 with economic liberalization. In activities as well as perhaps in policy research, the ethnic conflict has dominated NGO agendas. In Pakistan, it has been noted that 'Intellectuals are the principal players in NGOs' (Nejima 2002; 105). The outstanding development achievements for example of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) have been influential in the development policy not just of Pakistan but much beyond. Nepal has seen the growth of many NGOs though not with the dominating effect of Bangladesh NGOs. Research NGOs have the potential of influencing both government and donor policies.

#### 4. Role of funding

The future evolution of the policy research environment and the nature and priorities of think tanks will certainly be influenced by funding flows. For example, action based research could build up to long cycle research, and contribution to theory, but this is possible only if institutionalization and a degree of secure funding is possible. The gradual reduction in full support to ICSSR institutes has forced a degree of effort to attract project grants and even consultancies from other sources.<sup>17</sup> However these organisations continue to have an assured staff budget. For non- ICSSR PROs, there is likely to be in most cases a mix of funding: corpus income, recurring annual grants, and research project grants; and consultancies. It is sometimes argued that consultancies divert the attention of researchers away from long cycle research, and this will be more so when the consultancy work is not embedded within a longer term research agenda. PROs may thus need to adjust their research agendas to attract additional funds. For private research firms, consulting is the main source of income. The growth of private firms shows that quick research carried out in response to demand, has a premium value, and the willingness and ability of these firms to produce well packaged policy messages meets a growing demand.

In the case of action based research, the financial situation is usually precarious. Project funds generally do not allow institutional expenses to be covered in any sustained way. Planning and institution building are difficult. John Hamre suggests that think tanks can be either 'top down' or 'bottom up' institutions. 'the advantage of these bottom up institutions is that they are free to question and criticize policy directions of the government. The disadvantage of these institutions is that they have to raise money all the time, and as such have to struggle to preserve their objectivity and honesty as they constantly search for financial support' (Hamre 2008: 3). The action based research NGO has the potential to develop into a bottom up think tank. There are examples of research institutions that have an avowed policy focus and also strong field base, including the Centre for Science and Environment around environmental research, Participatory Research in Asia around governance, Institute of Social Studies Trust around poverty and gender. That there is a route to policy influence that starts with practice and analysis of experience is reasonably well accepted. In the field of development and in an economy dominated by informality and diversity, the need for these experiences to also influence the research agenda is strong. Creative social science requires engagement. 'The key to progress in the social sciences is often asserted to lie in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary work.'<sup>18</sup> In the Indian context, progress in social science might rest crucially on the ability of research to respond to the voices and experiences of practitioners.

The organizational route this takes – indeed whether or not it happens at all – will certainly be influenced to an extent by funding – and the extent to which ‘socially engaged research’ or ‘action based research’ are seen as worthy members of the policy research community.

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<sup>17</sup> For the history and evolution of ICSSR institutes see Mathur 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Hannah 1984: 232

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