Making Research Matter in South Asia

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A report on four round tables held in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka on the state of policy research in the social sciences in south Asia.

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Though literature on policy research and policy research organisations in south Asia is limited, key pieces of work (such as the Report of the Fourth Review Committee of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, March 2007) raise concerns on the state of social science research. Exchanges with researchers across south Asia highlighted the need to better understand the state of policy research in the region, so together with the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), New Delhi, the "Think Tank Initiative" (a new programme of core support to policy research organisations) held round tables in Galle (Sri Lanka), Kathmandu (Nepal), Puducherry and New Delhi (India), on the state of policy research in south Asia. These discussions provided an opportunity for think tanks or social science and policy research organisation leaders from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, to discuss the business of doing research, running a research organisation, and influencing policy. The initiative also supported papers on aspects of policy research to inform the round table discussions (Mathur 2009; Sudarshan 2009; Arunachalam 2009; Bhasin and Zaidi 2009).

This note summarises the views of eminent thinkers, researchers and heads of policy research organisations. At times, these views are divergent; the idea is not to make generalisations, but rather to share the ideas that emerged from these discussions. Overall, the round tables reinforced that improving the policy influence of quality social science research in south Asia requires a long-term perspective and efforts on multiple fronts.

Research Environment in South Asia

The attitude of the government on the usefulness of research, the extent of political stability, external drivers of research agenda setting, and the willingness and ability of stakeholders to engage in public debate on contentious issues were identified as key factors of the research to policy setting in south Asia. The research to policy linkages institutionalised in south Asia has a history that continues to influence research and policy systems in the region in ways that may be quite distinct from other regions and linked to the experience of colonisation and post-colonial history. Mathur (2009) demonstrates how in the early 1950s, planning was the key development approach in the region and planning bodies were the central institutions doing research. He details a second phase (late 1950s to 1980s) where research institutions were set up and funded by government in order for research to support policy and a third phase (1990s) characterised by multiple sources of funding, including multilaterals, bilaterals, and foundations.

It would be naïve to believe that empirical social science research on any issue leads to a single policy message. Research findings in the public domain are further

interpreted through the prism of politics. With planning, the dominant paradigm of development, the issue of independence of research from government is not central. Many key institutes were set up by figures strongly connected to, or previous members of, planning bodies. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, the role of retired army officials setting up think tanks has also shaped the research landscape. The importance of committees in research policy linkages also stems from this history. In all countries, membership in government committees and commissions was identified as a key space to communicate research findings to policymakers. Another dimension of this history is the continued dominance of economics and economists in policy research.

Gender-related policies were cited as good examples of research placing an issue on the policy agenda. In India, the Committee on the Status of Women (1974) built up a new range of research, had excellent communication and dissemination strategies, and led to the formation of an independent department (now ministry) for women and child development.

The political context was identified in the round tables as a strong influence on the possibility and the role of policy research; militancy and extreme conflict posing a challenge in Pakistan, identity and exclusion in Nepal, narrowing space for dissent in Sri Lanka, and the "politics of funding" in all countries. In Bangladesh, the environment has enabled research on politics and governance but not on democratic transition and institutions, and certain subjects are considered taboo (e g, fundamentalism).

In India, there was a strong and repeated call for "untied" research funding. Anxieties around the role of donors were a central concern of research leaders, flagged both for the influence on research systems and agendas. A recent study by Meena Acharya found that of the total European Union funding committed for Nepal between 2003 and 2012, only 9% went to Nepali organisations. The shaping of research agenda can also be seen at a national and sub-national level. In Pakistan, the influence of militancy and conflict, and the global stake in and responses to, both were flagged as core in shaping the research context. In Sri Lanka, the dominance of foreign funding was also flagged

as characterising the research environment. Sri Lankan research leaders noted that persistent conflict has led to geographic and linguistic asymmetries in research and a lack of quality data or no data in some districts. Perhaps, the deepest concern articulated in the Sri Lankan round table was the diminishing space for dissent. Conflict has been the context of and the focus of research in Sri Lanka but space for debate and research is diminishing, particularly around issues of human rights and ethno-political issues.

Participants prioritised that for research, to be used in the making of policy, there is need to find ways to reinforce a culture of debate and allowing space for dissenting views. The challenge in all countries is to maintain and enhance the space for debate. Public debate encompasses reflection, discourse, examination of evidence and reaching out in local languages, to different parts of each country, to all stakeholders, to institutions and policymakers at local as well as national levels.

Knowledge Production

Policy research is built on basic research; increasing the quality and influence of research on policy requires strengthening of the whole system. This means both addressing issues around quality (such as norms of validation, peer review, etc) and building stronger educational/university systems where a culture of research, questioning, learning, openness and debate is central. However, funding is often available only for policy research. The research organisation – university relationship is complex. The university system in south Asia emphasises teaching over research. This has implications for the policy research world. Research organisations recruit university graduates, but have to invest in further research capacity – building and training. This was reiterated in all the round tables. Universities supply researchers to applied research organisations and are also attractive career options. Keeping open this option creates incentives for researchers to publish academic articles in refereed journals, often in preference to policy papers or briefs.

Perhaps, more important than the vehicles for sharing research was the question whether research is shared at all. A consistent message in the round tables was that a

great deal of policy relevant research simply does not enter the public domain, making it difficult to assess its quality, or for it to contribute to public debate. Research reports not in the public domain because of institutional or donor policy includes research commissioned by the government.

The issue of quality also raises questions of epistemology, and differences in views on what constitutes valid knowledge and evidence, or "whose knowledge matters?" The round tables highlighted an ongoing tension between goal-driven activist research and open-ended academic research. Many participants argued that distinctions between activist and academic research were becoming less relevant. Several suggested that action-based research improves quality and inclusion. The round tables in all countries conveyed a sense that research to be useful to policy needs better "groundedness".

Organisational Development Challenges

While there is a wide spectrum of organisations engaged in policy research, with different sources of funding, different organisational forms, and different research to policy objectives, the round table discussions established that similar management challenges are faced by these organisations. Challenges raised by participants in the round tables were, funding and the implications of dependence on project funding; staffing and related questions of recruitment and retention; organisational performance measurement; and management and strategic leadership.

Funding: In India, core government grants given to Indian Councils for Social Science Research (ICSSR) institutions are "equity driven" reflecting the initial intent that each state government would have access to research support. Some ICSSR institutes have been able to access project funding more than others.

Participants pointed out that it remains difficult for national research organisations to access funding, particularly if the agenda they set does not match donor priorities. Responsibility for fund-raising is distributed in different ways among the participating organisations, but the capacity to raise resources was flagged as a key organisational challenge.

Greater project dependence, some argued, makes it more difficult to retain a long-term research focus. Project-based funding can also limit scope to derive conclusions from across projects and build longer term organisational assets and capacity. Alternatively, some participants argued that project funding model helped create focus on timeliness and delivery.

Staffing and Structures: Unsurprisingly, concerns around the recruitment and retention of staff were highlighted by many. Losing staff to better paying organisations, especially international ones was a common experience. Parallel with the concern of retention, a different view was also expressed, that what south Asia needs is "mobile and highly trained researchers" who can respond to and contribute to research that needs to be done, rather than feeling that researchers should have a fixed territorial location.

Organisations with assured funding offer permanent jobs, while with project-funded organisations, contractual employment is the norm. The pros and cons of various models of staffing were debated. The idea of needing a core team of researchers in addition to contractual project staff came up in discussions everywhere. The dilemmas for capacity-building of staff in such structures and in the absence of core funding were also flagged. Comparing policy research organisations to universities, participants noted that, problems faced in universities did not come from the permanence of jobs, but rather that the selection process was politicised and promotions were automatic. Thus, regardless of whether a contract or permanent staffing model is used, an important aspect to strengthening organisational performance is to be able to spot and attract talented individuals and give them a longer term horizon for research. Creating a congenial environment was also flagged as important to retaining and attracting talent, with participants recalling the old axiom that one learns more in the bar (or coffee shop) than in the classroom.

Issues of retention are linked to compensation. In India, the recent enhancement of government salaries has created an upward pressure on other research organisations. Many of the policy research organisations noted that they cannot offer market rates but take on contract research and permit staff to supplement their salaries through consultancy fees. Consultancy income as a top up and to increase retention is allowed with varying norms in terms of time spent and the institute share.

Measuring and Improving Performance: Organisations have different ways of measuring the impact of their work. Areas flagged for measurement included: innovation, stakeholder engagement, niche, social movements/dissent, research quality, reputation, timeliness, relevance, quality, agenda setting (who, how). However, participants noted that measuring change is challenging for a range of practical and methodological reasons. Timelines are difficult as impact of research may actually come much later and the purpose of research is often to stimulate debate rather than close debate with recommendations.

Looking Forward

Though the key focus of the round tables was deepening understanding the state of the research environment and research organisations in the region, ideas for strengthening organisations emerged. These included: the need for continued networking among policy research leaders, strengthening the role of boards, and earmarking a proportion of all project grants for organisational strengthening, and the creation of executive education or continued peer support for think tank managers focused on supporting cultures of accountability, evaluative thinking and organisational assessment. Suggestions on further research and analysis were also raised. Participants highlighted the need for investment in the environment and infrastructure to support better policy research – creating a vibrant and exciting policy research environment within and around organisations and bringing a stronger research focus into universities. The need to cultivate a multidisciplinary approach was highlighted with some participants arguing that the dominance of economics in the policy research field has led to neglect of other social issues. Several participants flagged the need, for example, to support and push more political analysis.

Areas flagged for further research included an interest in analysing how policy is being made in context through case studies that could break into the "black box of policymaking" in south Asia. It was suggested that such analysis could and should include an impact assessment and a programme evaluation as core to the research, policy, programme, evaluation nexus that constitutes evidence-based development. Finally, the lack of data on research funding was also flagged with participants pointing to the need for data on what is being spent, the research that is being commissioned and by whom.