

Reports continued

The present state of social science research in Asia

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THE FIRST PAN-ASIA CONFERENCE 'Status and Role of Social Science Research in Asia, Emerging Challenges and Policy Issues' (New Delhi, 13-15 March 2014), with representatives from 24 countries in Asia and some non-Asian countries, was intended to assess the present state of social science research in Asia and to set up a network for further coordination and support. The conference, at the initiative of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and funded by the Canadian IDRC (International Development Research Centre), sought to line up the concerns, mainly addressing the role of research granting councils in Asia and internationally (www.icssridrc-conference.com). In the final session, it was agreed that an Asia Network of social science research councils, institutions, think tanks and eminent social scientists will be established. The following report is a modified version of the closing lecture that I delivered at the conference to summarise the proceedings.

Somewhere in the 1980s, it was predicted that the 21st century would be the Asian century, the century of Asian dominance. In terms of population figures, there is no shadow of a doubt that Asia is a giant. In terms of economic magnitude and significance, Asia has been catching up impressively, albeit restricted to specific regions. In terms of academic achievement, however, the track record in many areas is insipid. The pan-Asia conference in New Delhi illustrated the ascending and declining curves in the different areas.

For social science research (SSR) to adequately support policy making, the organisers stated, the presence of supporting infrastructure is of crucial importance. But funding will not be the panacea. Various speakers at the conference lamented the low qualifications of the research staff and the low quality of output, and hence the inefficiency of such research funding. Some even suggested that the quality and policy-relevance of output in the publicly-funded institutions is dismal and that private-public partnership with well-qualified professionals is doing a better job.

Knowledge societies

Whatever the outcome of the debate, one firm and incontestable given should remain, or should become, the bottom line of any discussion: the importance of SSR. Sukhadeo Thorat, the chairman of the ICSSR, stated in his opening speech: "It enables us to empirically understand reality and it helps to throw light on the causes of mal-development, which will allow us to develop policies, reduce inequalities and tension and develop national goals".

This deserves repetition. We live in a world in which 'knowledge' is regarded as the driver of change and growth. Technological knowledge particularly has spread at an exponential rate, also in a number of Asian countries, and public and private funding testify to its importance. But in most countries, as the examples of Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Afghanistan have illustrated, research outlay is low and is mainly allocated to medical and physical science. SSR funding, which in many of these countries falls under the Ministry of Science and Technology, is abysmally low. It is peanuts rather than breeding money. It is remarkable how limited the number is of studies on most social issues in a region of close to 3 billion people, especially in comparison with the array of studies which are being conducted on social and psychological issues in western countries. Notwithstanding all the other problems and weaknesses in the SSR structure in many Asian countries, a higher level of funding may, to an extent, help us to understand the depth of social problems, the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion, the debilitating effects of old customs and modern (globalising) inductions, the consequences of polarisation and of development.

Research has been embedded in an economic model oriented towards product expansion and profit generation, towards improving and streamlining the material infrastructure. Funds are by and large allocated to technological research. SSR receives the remnants – close to the Arts – which are regarded as a luxury, especially in times of economic crises and resource constraints. Financial cuts are explained away as rational budgeting: the dominant neo-liberal philosophy, based on the orthodoxy of market-led development, regards societies as self-organising systems. During the last quarter century there has accordingly been an ideological onslaught against 'the makeability' of society. This is what the argument in favour (or against) social science research hinges on: the makeability of society or social engineering.

Such makeability of course should not be construed as an absolute factor, easily to be rejected. Rather, in the context of developing countries, the question should be asked why something, which after many dreadful decades of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, has in the twentieth century very much helped in the state formation and progress

of developed countries, should not be applicable to Asia. As Jan Breman (Amsterdam) argued in his submission, the development of the various social science disciplines played a significant role in streamlining the dynamics of change. In various ways, although not in a directly tangible way as is the case with technological research, SSR has contributed to development and to embedding of society in the economy, and the other way round. Moreover, unlike in the long gestation period of capitalism in the West, growth and social development can no longer be sequenced, as C. Rangarajan, the chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister of India, aptly stated in his opening remarks. They should develop simultaneously.

It is a credo that Gunnar Myrdal drew attention to in the early 1970s, with his seminal book *Asian Drama*, but which seems to have been forgotten in the context of market-driven development. The lesson in those days was rather simple, without being simplistic: the more the masses are included in the development process, the more development will take place and the more a need for understanding, controlling, enhancing, upgrading and galvanising social processes. The importance of SSR therefore seems to have a strong correlation with the truth and froth of the development process. SSR and the spread of social knowledge could be regarded as an amplifier in development.

In that process, various research fields and sub-fields of research need to be developed. The conference was a checklist of the multiple issues on which research ought to be done, but aspects of funding were always in the centre, or around the corner. Some, particularly those who work in private research institutes (think tanks, consultancy firms, etc.), with enough research grants and projects to tap, have argued that money is not the problem. It was contended that actually much of the funding is pure social wastage: it is distributed among malfunctioning public centres that excel in bad research and non-dissemination.

In various countries in Asia, even in various institutions in countries with a better track record, inefficiency and incompetence may very well be the rule rather than the exception. Despondency and a further cut in the already dimly low finances, however, would be the wrong response. It is rather a matter of heavily investing in a low quality product so as to lift it to a higher level, or, in economic terms, from a low equilibrium to a high equilibrium. The emergence of a critical mass of well-equipped research institutes and qualified researchers is a *sine qua non*. This requires much more than the scraps presently available for SSR in most Asian countries.

Research as different concepts

The presentations and discussions at the conference were fascinating, but it struck me that participants were sometimes speaking different languages. When delegates argued that enough funds were available, that research should be policy-oriented and could involve commercial partners, bypassing the universities, that foreign project funding was a helpful makeshift in difficult times, etc., they were indeed talking about research, but one could not help but become conceptually confused. Semantically, 'research' has at least two different meanings: applied research and core research, or, problem-solving research and problem-oriented research.

Below: Professor Sukhadeo Thorat, chairman ICSSR: "to enhance the importance of social sciences in informed policy making".



Any industrial house has an in-house R&D department, where day-to-day problems and processes are investigated. Ministerial departments, political parties and NGOs similarly (should) have an investigation wing or consultants to rely on when dealing with nasty social issues or new social phenomena. In many Asian countries, we have been told, there is in-house research, investigative journalism, action research, rapid appraisal, etc. These activities, however, could not possibly substitute for core SSR as it is done in the universities and research institutes.

Actually, both components in the 'research' arena are fairly related. Any research, in whatever constellation and for whatever purpose, requires a robust set of qualified professionals. Applied research in that sense has an instrumental function. It can only be done by well-groomed researchers, having gone through the university system and having been trained in the nitty-gritty of research methods and methodologies. Many of us, on an honorary basis or on a pecuniary basis, have done applied research, but have done this on the basis of professionalism. It is this type of research that the conference addressed when interacting on funding, capacity building, and institution building. Achieving such professionalism, on a higher level of equilibrium, that appears to be the big job ahead, particularly in the many Asian countries, which have not progressed that far, or which are slipping.

This is the perspective – the difference between SSR and its instrumental use in applied research – from which I have tried to understand the debate on various issues. I shall elaborate on three of them here: the needs versus demands issue, the relevance and impact, and the funding quagmire.

Needs and demands

The relevance of SSR has generated much discussion. Research funding, after all, is mostly financed by the so-called tax payers' money, and answering to public demands would be a factor of concern. There basically is nothing wrong with demand-driven, policy-oriented research (even with policy-supporting research by those who wish to do so). At the level of applied research, demands (by the funding agency basically) would normally be accepted as the guiding criteria, but it was felt as a disquieting factor that these demands follow the fashion and the hypes of the day and may have a very short-term horizon. They would also cover only a small portion of the entire gamut of research that needs to be done on issues that may not have mainstream attention, but which nevertheless are important to understand.

There are three other disquieting features related to a policy-oriented, policy-supportive and/or stakeholder-driven research agenda. One problem is that such research more often than not is consultancy-oriented. Whereas in quite a number of countries in Asia, universities are in a state of intellectual impoverishment, as some of the country reports have indicated, the private research establishment is flourishing. Since more openings, and better-paid opportunities, become available in private research foundations, the better qualified research staff, raised with taxpayers' money, will be tempted to leave the publicly-funded and publicly functioning research establishments.

In the second place, such research is inhibiting the spread of knowledge in the public domain. If the output of research, by contractual prohibition, does not enter the public arena, it hampers the intellectual development and understanding of social processes.

In the third place, such research does not have a breeder function. Research projects go to the lowest bidder. It was mentioned by the director of an important high-quality research institute in New Delhi that presently 75% of its research project is acquired on the basis of bidding. The narrowly earmarked funding does not allow for a spread effect and internal capital formation within research establishments, nor does it extend into university education. It does not have the knowledge-amplifier function, which SSR should have.

This is what could be regarded as collateral damage. In the words of Abid Suleri (Karachi), it leads to "a process whereby the connection of research to policies is fragmented, non-systematic, involving a plethora of actors and institutions acting relatively independent of others (and) never seeing the light of the day because they are not published in the public domain, not peer reviewed and thus not scrutinised for their validity in contributing to sound policy".

These hallmarks of the new research agenda were summarised by Ravi Srivastava (New Delhi) with three epithets: *privatisation*, *marketization* and *fragmentation*. Examples from Pakistan, Thailand, India and Bangladesh clearly testified to this triple process. If not reversed, the entire mission of SSR will be at risk. That mission was cursorily summarised by S.R. Deshpande (Bangalore): "the understanding of social processes by an emancipatory interest in welfare and wellbeing". Such mission is outside the purview of applied research.

The issue of needs and demands would better be discussed at this level, rather than at the level of an alleged contradiction between needs (what researchers feel) and demands (what funding organisations need). Whereas demands relate to policy issues of today, needs relate to the understanding of processes,

past, present and future. The latter are the core SSR concern, but a good SSR basis facilitates a demand-driven research agenda. Such an agenda should emerge in an autonomous process.

Nationally embedded SSR research in public institutions would help to provide insights in social processes and in turn would help to upgrade the applied research projects. It would help to challenge existing (western-dominated) paradigms, rather than validate what already exists, with only the addition of local circumstances, as Khalid Riaz (Karachi) argued. He framed much of present-day research in his own country as imitative research and vividly described how a history of funding through private sources has left the universities in Pakistan in a state of intellectual impoverishment. That point was also taken up by Likhit Dhiravegin (Bangkok) who, drawing on his long-standing experience with (the decline) in Thai research, reasoned similarly and even framed such commercialised, foreign inducted research as research delinquency. Rehman Sobhan (Bangladesh) qualified the consequences of such a regime of externally driven research as devastating.

Relevance and impact

Even if it is readily accepted that SSR will never be in the driving seat of policy making, and that much of the research output is not directly useful (redundant, low-quality, not-in-tune with policy demands, etc.), social scientists would like to consider that they have an impact, and therefore need to be properly funded.

Core SSR may have a low direct impact on policies. It is safe to suggest that impact remains a mystery, and that a cost-price analysis is nonsensical. Direct policy-oriented applied research may have some relevance, but even there reports, even if they are of good quality, may disappear or may get lost in the lowest drawer in the office, may eventually land on the office desk for a while and then be forgotten, or may be executively summarised by an assistant; it may eventually also be glanced through by the person in charge who may lift the less relevant points for action and then subsequently realise that finances are lacking and then leave it to the implementing agencies, who have their own agendas and botheration.

The overall conclusion could very well be, as some have argued, that relevance and impact are fairly limited. But one should also measure the other way round: not assessing the forward linkages but the backward linkages as well; feeding societal knowledge and contributing to the knowledge society. In one of the sessions, the role of the media was emotionally discussed; the media reproaching the academia that they were operating in an ivory tower and did not use the media as a tributary of their findings, and the academia reproaching the media that, given the commercialisation in all the platforms, there was no real interest in academic experts or research results.

Intellectuals in the past, also in Asian countries, have played an important role in critical analysis and in the spread of knowledge generally. It is something that in the past was referred to as the upliftment and conscientisation of the masses; but such enlightenment, still on the policy agenda in the 1970s and 1980s, seems to have given way to entertainment and has narrowed the avenues for delivery of knowledge.

At the conference, some voices advocated the hybridisation of higher education, with a lesser role for established universities and a bigger role for various types of private institutions. Whatever the argument, none of the institutes of (higher) learning can live up to their role unless they have publicly-transparent SSR as a feeding ground. In the knowledge-based chain, the developing and nationally-based insights can then be spread via the professional cohort of teachers to all levels of society. Such a backward linkage of research is as important in terms of relevance and impact as the forward linkages to policy makers.

Funding

A number of international funding agencies – the International Development Research Centre (Canada), CNRS (France), the German Research Foundation DFG and International Development Research (United Kingdom) – dwelt on the various ways in which funding is available and the technicalities of the selection procedures.

All funding has conditions attached and these conditions generally are the ownership of the funding agencies. The funding agencies by and large set the intellectual climate, concepts and parameters for research. This is where the shoe pinches. Not surprisingly, the modalities came up for discussion. Even allegations of western intellectual imperialism were thrown up by Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (Malaysia) and Likhit (Bangkok).

All (foreign) funding, Larry Strange (Cambodia Development Research Institute) argued, should be supportive of long-term commitment and to avoid the treadmill of reactive project opportunism, which in his view is detrimental to institution and capacity building.

As an alternative to fragmented, top-secret, short-term, non-enduring research, block funding to public institutions was advocated. A good example of such block funding in the last quarter of the previous century, it could be recalled, was the Indo-Dutch programme on Alternatives in Development. It was a joint effort in which ownership was properly divided and the funding agency, with its own set of needs and preferences, was not in the driving seat. Such an approach would be the way forward.

Summing-up

For various reasons, as stressed during the conference, many more funds will have to be made available for core SSR. It will ultimately help to lift the research capacity and relevance to a higher equilibrium. Reducing research to its instrumental function, namely applied research on topics and issues to be decided by policy, would be detrimental to the core SSR. SSR essentially provides the breeding ground for knowledge enlargement and enlightenment. The backward linkages of research, feeding into education and in to society at large, are immeasurable. The contribution of SSR in this respect can only be neglected at a high social cost, hampering cohesion and development.

Block funding to public research institutions is mandatory. It feeds into publicly available knowledge and synergy. The present trend of diverting research funds to private firms and institutions hampers many of the direct and indirect benefits that SSR could deliver. Too often, it was also agreed at the conference, SSR is still at a low quality level. The setting up of a Council of Asian Research Institutes may help to mutually reinforce institution building and orientation.

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