



**POLICY RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS  
IN SOUTH ASIA**

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**CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF LAW AND GOVERNANCE  
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APRIL 2009**

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# **POLICY RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS IN SOUTH ASIA**

**Kuldeep Mathur\***

## **ABSTRACT**

Traditionally, governments in South Asia have sought inputs into policy decisions from the bureaucrats in their line ministries. Whether these inputs are based on research or on their personal experience has not mattered much. Thus, an administrator working in the ministry of civil aviation or in education becomes the resource for any change in policy in those sectors. The critical element is that of reliability, and it is for this reason too, that when a specialist is needed, he tends to be incorporated in the government bureaucracy.

The strategy of planned economic development began to change this relationship when the demand for expertise, not necessarily available in bureaucrats, grew. The first effort was to incorporate experts within government hierarchy. It was only later, that outside experts began to be recognised as resources for policymaking. Policy research organisations began to develop after the governments accepted this kind of a relationship.

However, South Asian countries do not present a common model for the growth of such institutions. Democracy, strategy of economic development, and an open socio-political system have greatly influenced the way policy research organisations emerged in these countries.

Initially, policy research institutions in all these countries were promoted and funded by government. Gradual decline in government funding affected most institutions, but many succeeded because they were able to find other sources of funding. With liberalisation and increased interest of international agencies in policy research, civil society and advocacy groups have also taken the initiative to form their own institutions.

The research conducted by these institutions does not necessarily meet the standards of value-neutral scientifically rigorous social science research. The quality of research studies has remained a contentious issue among the social science fraternity and been debated frequently.

# Introduction

With the rise and growth of relatively autonomous policy research organisations in the countries of South Asia, there has been considerable interest not only in their activities, but also in the role that they play in public policymaking. There is increasing recognition of the fact that government does not choose policies in a vacuum, nor do leaders decide without any basis. They seek policy advice and now do not restrict themselves to internal governmental institutions. Policy research organisations have proliferated because governments have sought advice from alternative sources, and also because civil society has become more active and finds space to influence public policy. However, South Asian scholarship has paid little attention to this dimension of the policy process. It is true that considerable social science research has been devoted to investigating policy outcomes and its impact. However, it is also true that considerably less is known on how and when social science research influences policy and why.

The purpose of this paper is to broadly understand the factors that have led to the rise of policy research organisations in South Asia and the kind of role that they have performed. The study will attempt to examine the general socio-political environment and character of social science research context that shapes the characteristics of policy research organisations. These contexts differ in countries of South Asia and the paper will attempt to delineate how this difference has shaped these organisations.<sup>1</sup>

That the character of the political system is the key to the way public policy is deliberated, formulated, and implemented, is a widely accepted notion. The two extremes of open and closed ended political systems are associated with a distinctive policy process. Closed political systems are more likely to have a policy process that is centralised, secretive and unresponsive; whereas open political systems are likely to be associated with a reverse set of characteristics: decentralised, consultative and responsive. However, these are ideal types, and characteristics associated with closed political system are not limited to authoritarian regimes but may continue to persist in new democracies in the developing world (Robinson, 1998). There can also be variations of policy processes as a political system evolves from a formal democratic system to a more meaningful participative democracy.

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1. The discussion is based on the broad trends in each country. Some prominent institutions are mentioned. This does not purport to be an exhaustive list of policy research organisations in each country.

Policy process is also influenced by the strategy of economic development. A closely directed and state-led economy leaves little space for alternative policy advice. Much of the advice emanates from the government establishment itself. On the other hand as liberalisation of the economy takes place, policy processes tend to be more open to critical evaluation. Essentially then, democratisation, participation, and liberalisation have a strong influence on the role that relatively autonomous policy research organisations play.

Weaver and Stares (2001) suggest that the nature of representative government is also changing. With the rise of many political parties, and formation of coalition governments, the nature of democratic process is becoming fractured. As a result, the demand for alternative policy advice is growing. In addition, civil society is increasingly becoming active; demanding greater transparency and accountability in the functioning of the government. This has further increased the demand for imaginative and impartial sources of policy advice. The response has been in terms of more policy research organisations and more research based advocacy groups.

Economic liberalisation has also led to the increasing role of multilateral institutions in a country's social and economic development. Before deciding on aids/grants, these institutions are interested in analysing economic performance of the recipients, and seek advice on how this performance could be improved if found inadequate. Consequently, they sponsor studies to help them formulate their aid/grant policies. This demand is also helping policy research organisations multiply.

## **II South Asia**

India and Pakistan emerged as independent nations in 1947, which saw the partition of India into the present two countries; while Bangladesh declared its independence from Pakistan in 1971. The history of the birth of these three nations was marked by severe social and political turmoil, the memories of which continue to influence public perceptions of each other till today. Independence came to Sri Lanka in 1948. One characteristic common to all these countries, is the heritage of British colonial rule which is discernible in their rules, laws, and institutions. Nepal is the only country of the region that was untouched by colonization and has been a monarchy till only a few months back.

Countries of South Asia have followed different political paths. India has remained a vibrant democracy since it declared itself a republic in 1950 and held its first national elections in 1951-52. Fourteen elections have followed, and the transitions of governments have been largely peaceful and orderly. The period of 1975-77 however, was an exception when the fundamental rights were suspended and Emergency provisions of the Constitution were invoked to govern the country. The elections of 1977 restored democracy.

Pakistan began as a democracy, but after the assassination of the first Prime Minister, it declared itself as an Islamic Republic in 1956. Soon after, there was a coup and the army took over the reins of government under the leadership of Marshal Ayub Khan. He was replaced by another army general, Yahya Khan, in 1969, after which came the Indo-Pakistan war that led to the secession of Bangladesh in 1971. This was followed by a spell of civilian rule under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, following which, the army again took over under the leadership of General Zia-ul-Haq. The general died in an air crash in 1988, making way for another spell of civilian rule, which again, was cut short by General Musharraf taking over in 1999. The country has gone through turbulent times and even the return of civil rule in 2008 was marked by violence and the assassination of a popular leader of a political party that was fighting the national elections.

Bangladesh was plunged into army rule soon after independence with the assassination of the leadership that had led the country to freedom. A series of bloody coups and counter-coups in the following three months culminated in the ascent to power of General Ziaur Rahman. He was assassinated in 1981 by elements of the military, and Bangladesh's next military ruler was General H. M. Ershad, who gained power in a bloodless coup in 1982 and ruled until 1990. Bangladesh reverted to democracy with keen contests from parties led by the daughter of its founder and the widow of its past ruler. Military rule has been interspersed with civilian regimes; and as of 2008, the leaders of the two national contending parties have been released from jail but no political activity is permitted by the military rulers. Only recently, in early 2009, elections were held and democracy was restored.

The name of Ceylon was changed to Sri Lanka when it declared itself a republic in 1972. It had become independent in 1948 and was granted a dominion status within the British Commonwealth. It has continued as a democracy since its birth as an independent nation. However, since 1983, the country has been battling severe civil strife due to a separatist militant organisation fighting to create an

independent state named Tamil Eelam in the North and East of the island.

Each one of the above mentioned four countries has had one stable feature - a unified civil service. Often, members of the higher civil service tended to occupy most of the critical positions in government in these countries. They were the single most important group of advisors in all sectors of economic, social and security policies. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, military advisors replaced these civil service advisors in many cases, but they usually worked together. In India, armed forces have not entered any civilian positions. Higher civil service has been powerful in influencing policy and has also been the sieve through which alternative advice is filtered. In all these countries, the civil service remains influential as gatekeepers of all information reaching the decision makers.<sup>2</sup>

Nepal has been a traditional monarchy. The monarchs have ruled with some semblance of people's participation, but the final authority has been the king. In recent years, Nepal has witnessed national struggles for adopting democracy. For some time it was in the midst of militancy propagated by Maoist groups. In 2007, an Interim Parliament was formed and a bill was passed which declared Nepal as a Federal Democratic Republic. Elections were held in 2008 and a democratic government took over.

With this thumb-nail sketch of the political history of South Asian countries it also needs to be mentioned that these countries are also among the poorer countries of the world. United Nations has placed them in the following positions in its rankings on Human Development in 2007:

**Table 1**

Countries	Human Dev. Rank*	Life Expectancy	Adult Lit.
		Yrs	%
India	128	63.7	61.0
Pakistan	136	64.6	49.9
Bangladesh	140	63.1	47.5
Sri Lanka	99	71.6	90.7
Nepal	142	62.6	48.6

UNDP Human Development Report <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>

\* Out of 177 countries

2. All these South Asian countries have adopted varying forms of parliamentary system of government giving pre-eminent advisory role to the permanent civil service.

What must be noted is that Sri Lanka has done better than all other countries of South Asia in the field of human development. India has had a higher rate of economic growth in the last decade or so, surpassing its own trend of 1951-1991, but has not done so well in human welfare sector.

In short, countries that are poor and have gone through, or are undergoing political turmoil since their independence, are the focus of this study. The process of policy making as well as the nature of policy research institutions have been influenced to a great extent by the continuities and discontinuities in the strategy adopted for social and economic development and for meeting political challenges.

### III India

#### Centralised Planning Effort

An institution that has had significant impact on determining the direction and content of public policies in India is the Planning Commission. Established as a technical body of experts and commanding a certain amount of autonomy from everyday political pulls and pressures, the Planning Commission often heavily influenced economic decisions. During the years of its primacy, the role of technocrats and experts rose. The institutionalisation of the role of Planning Commission was one of the major influences in establishing a technocratic policy environment in which government used technical advice to legitimise its policies. Many policies were defended only for technical reasons and not put to public debate. (Chatterjee 1998; Khilnani 1997)

Professor Mahalanobis, who headed the Indian Statistical Institute in Calcutta, played the most important role in shaping the Planning Commission and influencing public policies. The Indian Statistical Institute became a prominent player in research backup for the Planning Commission; a close associate of Mahalanobis headed the Perspective Planning Division. There was a steady stream of international economists, and Perspective Planning Division together with Indian Statistical Institute was host to many of their research endeavours (Rosen, 1985). With the return of more and more brilliant Indian economists from abroad, the Planning Commission was looking for ways of utilising their expertise. The concern was also to create national capability for policy research and not concentrate all efforts in Delhi or in Planning Commission alone.

'The need to strengthen capabilities of institutions outside the government in the field of economics in order to provide independent sources of economic data and of evaluation of planning and to improve management, especially for what would be a growing public sector' was recognised by the Planning Commission quite early, during the First Five Year Plan. A Research Programmes Committee, consisting of leading social scientists, was established in the Planning Commission to determine priorities for government support of institutional research relevant to planning (Rosen, 1985:88). At the same time, Ford Foundation came forward to strengthen existing institutions or help establish new institutions. Institute of Economic Growth was established in 1958. A grant was given to Gokhale Institute to expand its facilities. National Council of Applied Economic Research was established in 1956 with the support of Ford Foundation.

What is most significant about this Nehruvian period is that the influence of experts (read economists) and technocrats rose significantly as they moved effortlessly in and out of the government. They carried through the three Plans formulated under the leadership of Nehru without much dissension or debate. In general, experts either joined the government or chose to remain outside with adequate support to conduct policy-oriented research. Usually the policy advice emanating from this research fell within the planning framework that had been adopted. During this phase, government funded and helped develop some research institutes that conducted policy-oriented research. These institutions had close links with government and the Planning Commission, and they brought academic expertise to monitor and evaluate development programmes and provide data that would be direct inputs for the formulation of public policies.<sup>3</sup>

The period after Nehru was a period of transformation in the role of the Planning Commission. While the practice of preparing Five-Year Plans continued, the Finance Ministry played a greater role in financial allocations; and other ministries, in setting sectoral targets. As more and more state governments began to be led by political parties not necessarily in harmony with the party/coalition ruling at the Centre, the influence of the Planning Commission in determining state plans and priorities also declined. So, while in Nehru's time (1950s) critics were known to label it as 'super cabinet';

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3. In any case, there were few alternatives articulated to the dominant planning paradigm. The only dissent, came from the Gandhians; but their influence could not counter the dominance of the 'modernisers.' A lone economist (Dr. Shenoy) dissented on fundamental grounds of opposition to planning and spoke for free enterprise.

Rajiv Gandhi, (1980s) in a hurry to liberalise the economy, saw the institution as a 'bunch of jokers'.

In the period after the economic reforms were introduced in 1991, the Planning Commission began to play a role in identifying the dimensions of policy environment that needed changes to support the private sector. In some sense, as Ahluwalia (2007:397) points out, the Commission acts as a think-tank for the government by proposing policy initiatives that are necessary to achieve Plan targets and by providing advice and critical evaluation of the effectiveness of policies in all sectors.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever transformation may have taken place in the role of the Planning Commission and in economic policies, the belief in the superiority of technical expertise or economic reasoning continues to dominate policy formulation even though the membership of Planning Commission has diversified.

## **POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS**

### **Growth**

Centralised planning and the wide ranging role of the state in promoting social and economic development demand phenomenally large amounts of data and information. Because the Planning Commission alone could not generate this information as inputs to policy-making, Government of India began to build a series of institutions that could perform this task in specialised sectors. Over the years, such institutions proliferated and diversified. The Planning Commission contracted out research studies and sought help in procuring data as inputs into the work of many of its committees. When the Planning Commission dominated policy-making, most research institutions in turn sought support for their research projects. Thus, the policy research institutions of this phase were financially dependent on the government through the Planning Commission, and incorporated government functionaries on its policy making bodies. Having government representation on an institution's governing bodies ensured that the government's policy research concerns were met. Institutions also did not object to this practice because it gave them hope that their work would be accepted. Many of the institutions so established, have outgrown this dependence. In the past quarter-century, more institutions that claim

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4. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, currently Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, is a close confidante of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and was a member of Manmohan Singh's team that introduced economic reforms in 1991.

autonomy from government funding, and act as independent think-tanks and advocacy groups, have emerged.<sup>5</sup>

An important task undertaken by the government-supported research institutions was that of evaluating the implementation of policies and programmes. The Planning Commission had a Programme Evaluation Division that undertook such studies; but more and more of such studies began to be farmed out to these institutions as demands for independent evaluation grew. Such project-based research funded by the government was an added financial support for the research institutions. Research institutions found themselves linked with the Planning Commission in at least the process of policy analysis, if not direct policy-making.

Early in the era of planning in India, the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) emerged as the most influential research institution. Founded in Calcutta in 1931 by PC Mahalanobis, who had gained Nehru's trust and confidence, it was the main catalyst for basing India's strategy of development on heavy industry during the Second and Third Five-Year Plans (1965-65).<sup>6</sup> The ISI was a pillar of excellence in India's still sparse academic landscape (Adams 2006). During this period, the ISI became the hub of economic analysts; and the ties with the Planning Commission became so close, that it established its unit on the premises of the Planning Commission. Mahalanobis invited foreign as well as Indian economists to the ISI in order to exchange ideas and offer guidance on the direction of movement of India's planning framework. Visitors included John Kenneth Galbraith, Paul Baran, Nicholas Kaldor, Paul Streeten, Ragnar Frisch, and John Sandee (Rosen 1985).

The decade of 1956-1965 saw the establishment of many institutions, the motivation for which seems to have been a need to compensate for the absence of a policy research environment in Indian universities. Early research institutions were also established

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5. These institutions are additional to the nodal statistical agencies like the Central Statistical Organisation or the National Sample Survey Organisation, both part of the government that periodically generate information. Almost all departments of the central government have units or directorates to compile data, monitor developments and advise on policy.

6. In 1940, Jawaharlal Nehru asked Mahalanobis to prepare a statistical commentary on the reports of the National Planning Committee of the Indian National Congress. Nehru visited the institute in 1946 where, impressed by its activities and performance, he began a keen interest in its work. In 1949, Nehru asked Mahalanobis to work as Honorary Statistical Adviser to the Cabinet, Government of India. This caused a closer connection of the institute with national planning activities and, on 17 March 1955, Mahalanobis submitted to the Government of India a Draft Plan Frame that was accepted as the basis for the formulation of India's Second Five-Year Plan (ISI web-page).

to supply data (because the reason for failure of policies/plans was considered to be the lack of data interlinked with consequences of poor implementation). The establishment of many departments of public administration in universities shifted attention to problems of implementation and not policy analysis. During these years, key problems were framed as gaps in implementation; lack of coordination; and poorly developed roles of policymaking and implementation professionals (Mathur and Mathur, 2007:605).

The more prominent of these early institutions were the National Council of Educational Research and Training and the Indian Institute of Public Administration in 1954; the National Council of Applied Economic Research in 1956; and the National Institute of Education Planning and Administration (now a deemed university), the National Institute of Family Planning and Health (now Family Welfare and Health), the Institute of Applied Manpower Research, the National Labour Institute and the Institute of Economic Growth in 1958. A prominent institution not connected with economic research emerged as the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in 1962. Some of these institutions were fully funded and controlled by the government. Ford Foundation provided financial grants for institution building and for supporting specialised programmes to many of these institutions.

The second phase of the growth of policy research institutions began with the establishment of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), that today funds 27 research institutes. During the time that the Planning Commission acted as the 'think-tank' for the country, it funded research and encouraged scholars who had not joined the government to conduct research on issues on which it placed high priority. Funds came through its Research Planning Committee (RPC) that had been established during the First Plan period. As planning came under a cloud, and when a 'plan holiday' was declared during 1966-1968, the formulation of the Fourth Five-Year Plan encountered difficulty. At this time, a proposal appeared to transfer funds administered by the RPC to an autonomous institution that would promote research institutes and sponsor independent research. The ICSSR was therefore established in 1969 to establish research institutions on a regional basis. All the institutions established during the first phase had been located in Delhi. Many of the strong institutions outside Delhi were started with the explicit intention of countering the centrifugal attractions of the capital. The aim was to provide substantive inputs to regional policies, as well as the evaluation and interpretation of central mandates at regional level (Sudershan 2001).

Establishing policy research institutions outside the universities was also a commentary on the state of social science research in them. They were seen burdened by teaching and less concerned with research. Within the science sector, a model of establishing research institutes that could support industrial innovation under Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, had been accepted. This model came in handy for social science research too.

Another spurt of organisational growth appeared in the 1980s, a decade that saw a shift towards greater liberalisation in Indian macroeconomic policy as well as in the use of foreign funding. This period was characterised by fewer state funds for research, but an increase in donor and private domestic funding. These factors, along with the availability of a generation of Indians who had been involved in policymaking by post-independence governments, lay behind the creation of 'second-wave' institutes. Notable among these are the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations in 1981, the Research and Information Systems in 1983, the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research in 1986, and, earlier, in 1973, the Centre for Policy Research.

The third phase can be identified as a period when civil society organisations and privately supported institutions emerged as research-based policy advocacy groups. Think-tanks with sectoral specialisations and an advocacy stance were set up at different times. Some of these specialised institutes have played crucial roles in defining policy and advocacy. These include the Indian Institute of Population Studies in Mumbai in 1956; the National Institute of Rural Development in Hyderabad in 1958; and in Delhi, the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade in 1963, the Institute of Defense Study and Analysis in 1965, the Tata (The) Energy Research Institute in 1974, the National Institute of Urban Affairs in 1976, the Centre for Science and Environment as well as the Centre for Women's Development Studies in 1980, and in 1982, the Society for Participatory Research in Asia.<sup>7</sup>

These institutes aimed at providing opportunities to non-economic social sciences to address policy needs, and were also meant to serve as centres for multidisciplinary research. The names of most of these institutes underlined the multidisciplinary nature of their academic interests. Thus, there was a Centre of Development Studies in Trivandrum, a Madras Institute of Development Studies

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7. The policy research and advocacy institutions mentioned do not provide a full listing of such institutions in India.

in Chennai, an Institute of Social and Economic Change in Bangalore, and a Sardar Patel Institute of Social and Economic Research in Ahmedabad. Eminent economists like VKRV Rao, KN Raj, Malcolm Adisesasiah, and DT Lakdawala led many of these institutes. But, aspirations to the contrary notwithstanding, major research projects continued to be dominated by economists, who also filled most of the faculty positions. However, as more studies began to focus on evaluation and on the impact of government programmes, inputs from other social sciences began to rise and the character of the faculty also changed.

In 2006, there were around 500 members of faculty in the ICSSR supported institutes. Institute of Social and Economic Change in Bangalore and the Institute of Economic Growth in Delhi were among the largest institutes with faculty exceeding 40 members. The smallest were those located in Dharwar, Bhubaneswar and Gauhati where the faculty numbered between five and nine persons. Exact data about the specific social sciences represented in the faculty are not available; although, from the output of books from these institutes classified by disciplines in the 2007 Review Report, economists seem to be most productive. Of 69 books published by the faculty through selected publishers, 29 are from Economics, 19 from Sociology, 14 from Political Science, 6 from History and 1 from Geography (ICSSR Review Committee Report, 2007).

The manner in which these institutes emerged influenced the space that they came to occupy in their relations with the government. How much notice the government took of their research findings depended greatly on the role and influence of their respective leaders. Working as members of important government committees, the leaders acted as 'policy brokers' to promote the research findings of their institutes and mobilise funds for more research. As the founders left the scene, the bridges that these institutes had built with the government weakened. For other reasons too, most of these institutes no longer command the status and prestige that they once had. Many institutes that emerged after 1989 are struggling to establish themselves. In most cases, they are inadequately funded and have been unable to attract alternative sources of funding.

In a perceptive study of ICSSR-sponsored research, Weiner (1982) acknowledged the wide variation in the quality of research conducted at these institutes and their kinds of policy-oriented work. However, he stressed that even "though these institutes have not yet made a conspicuous impact on public debates over policies, several have

made state governments – at least some officials, if not politicians – aware of the value of research for policy and programme development, and for assessing the consequences of governmental interventions” (Weiner 1982:315). Many years later, the Fourth Review Committee of the ICSSR expressed the following opinion (2007:37):

Operational and policy-centric studies have been and will remain an important component of social science research. It will continue to attract substantial funding from government, business and international organisations. Even if it needs larger funding, it is necessary to pay more attention to improve quality; make the studies available in the public domain open to professional scrutiny; and utilise them to widen and deepen the knowledge base.

It is difficult to assess the actual role of these institutes in the policy process. One director of an eminent institute emphasised that their main role has been in the generation of ideas. Sometimes, politicians and bureaucrats pick them up; but, to make an impact, the ideas require constant repetition like the chanting of a ‘mantra’. He had found politicians to be more receptive to change than bureaucrats. A member of another institute noted that bureaucrats needed a great deal of convincing, a process that takes time. Then, when one bureaucrat who can make a difference gets convinced, he is transferred to another post. His replacement may be unwilling to pick up the thread from where it had been left, and another round of convincing must begin.

A prominent member of the faculty at an Indian Institute of Management, working in the area of urban governance echoed similar views. He felt that sponsoring a research study is seen only as a formality, and usual comments of bureaucrats ignoring findings of a study are ‘not relevant’ or ‘not feasible’. He went on to add that public policymaking in India is ‘individual-centric’ and bureaucrats do not pursue any systemic change.

Furthermore, rarely do the researchers interact and discuss the findings and policy recommendations of their study with decision-makers. Bureaucrats act as gatekeepers and allow only such information that they perceive useful for policymaking to go through. This is usually a behind-the-scene process and has disheartening effects on most staff in these institutes. An ICSSR administrator, long involved in monitoring the work of these institutions laments that ‘today, neither policy relevance nor excellence in research is the identifying feature of these institutes’. It is fair to say that few institutes have developed an ideological identity. Influential views

were more often expressed on an individual basis by policy-oriented scholars spread across these institutes.

Due to this increased awareness, many institutes outside the ambit of the ICSSR have appeared. Some have partial support from the central government. Others have raised funds through endowments from state governments. Still others have received support through international funding. Most do not depend on a single source of funds. Among the institutes that promote alternative policies are the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, the Centre for Science and Environment, the Tata Energy Research Institute, and the Institute of Social Sciences. A characteristic of these institutes is that, apart from conducting research, they play an important advocacy role by publicising their studies in the media and holding seminars for relevant policymakers. Replying to an interview question by a newspaper, the Director of the Tata Energy Research Institute defined his role by asserting that ‘[the institute] has generated a wealth of information and data and it is our job to bombard policymakers through letters, workshops and individual meetings. I think the challenge starts from here’ (Express Newline, 24 February 2000).

Today, India boasts of a large network of research institutes supplemented by university departments. Despite the large output of research studies, the debate in India centres around the extent to which these studies influence public policies, as well as the nature and quality of this research.

### **Research Policy Dynamic**

There are several ways of conceiving the research-policy dynamic. Stone (2001) identified ten ways, but concluded that the impact of research is uncertain and depends on social and political contexts. She further argues that the normative dimension of research and policymaking cannot be ignored. Reference to ‘knowledge’ or ‘research’ does not signify a single body of commonly recognised and accepted thinking, data or literature. However, although research may not directly influence specific policies, it is widely recognised that the production of research still exerts a powerful indirect influence by introducing new terms and shaping policy discourse (De Vibe et al. 2002).

Concerning the role of economists in public policymaking, Reddy (1997) distinguishes between economic ideas and economists’ ideas. He suggests that one role of a trained economist in public policy is to clarify and dispel notions that intuitively appear to be

right, but actually cause adverse consequences (i.e., counterintuitive but rational); they also evaluate the consequences of lobbies for various causes (neutral analysis or counting the cost). To describe the role of economists in policymaking, Reddy uses the term 'technopols'. A successful technopol needs to combine two very different types of skills. One is that of a successful applied economist, able to judge what institutions and policies are needed in specific circumstances in order to further economic objectives. The other is that of a successful politician, able to persuade others to adopt the policies that he or she has judged to be appropriate.

From the strength of the discipline as well as the needs of public policy, economists have been the most important policy advisors in India. During the early days of planning, Indian economists were joined by many Western economists. Rosen (1985) provides a comprehensive account of the interactions between American and Indian economists that were mediated by the Centre for International Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and funded by the Ford Foundation. Another facet of the involvement of Indian economists in policy deliberations came through internal participation. Most of them joined government at various points in their careers and mobilised research support for the institutions to which they belonged. This involvement helped to strengthen the institutions in their policy focus, and establish linkages with government departments.

The role of research institutes in policymaking has depended on who carried their findings to government. Convincing arguments and scientific consensus are not sufficient to shift policy. During the 1950s and 1960s, the dominant ideology of planning was not questioned; attention was focused on finding ways to devise strategies that would improve the performance of planning. In her study of NCAER, Sudershan (2001) states that in the earlier decades, the Council did not question the government's approach to development. The policy environment changed after 1980, when economic reforms were introduced. Greater disputation of the policies followed, and alternatives were suggested. A different genre of research institutes appeared. Some of them were headed by neo-liberal economists; others responded to the impacts of environmental degradation. Institutions of the former type included the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy; the Centre for Science and Environment was among the latter type.

## **Policy Research Institutes and Social Science Research**

An important reason for the Planning Commission favouring the establishment of new research institutions, was the perception that universities in India were not yet at a level of competence suitable for policymaking. Because universities could not provide adequate research, a decision was made to support institutions outside the university system. The institutions would focus on research rather than on teaching and examinations, emphasize policy issues rather than theory, and be allowed flexibility in personnel and salary scales that would permit them to attract able young Indian social scientists who were being trained in India and abroad (Rosen 1985:88). The Indian Statistical Institute, already working outside the university system, provided the model for government-supported institutions that were established after the First Plan. The years after the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1965-1970) featured much discussion on the role that these research institutes played in contributing to policymaking and building social science knowledge. Weiner (1979) was among the earliest to consider these issues.

In a study sponsored by the Social Science Research Council in New York, Chatterjee (2002:94) comments on the state of social science research in India. His report notes that scholars at the research institutes; referring to their connections with training programmes and dissemination efforts by reaching out to decision-makers, movements and activists; agreed that their institutes were appropriate places for serious academic research in the basic as well as applied social sciences. The major issue, however, remains the quality of research. A recurrent theme in discussions of social science research in India is that the institutions and practices of social science are on the verge of irretrievable collapse. Other social scientists lament the poor quality of research output and indifferent impact on policymaking (Sethi 2000, Vaidyanathan 2001).

More often than not, the non-university research institutes set up with government support decline due to lack of adequate financial support. Faculty positions lie vacant, facilities including libraries deteriorate, and funds are not available for research. Project funds, whenever available, respond to the immediate concerns of a client agency. Suffering from gross under-funding, the research institutes have to seek alternative sources of funds. 'Social support and respect cannot be assumed; it needs to be earned. As a research community, our ability to influence state policy and society will improve only if we can also put our own houses in order' (Sethi 2002). The President of Centre for Policy Research echoes similar sentiments in a

comment in a newspaper. Pointing to the lack of a robust, serious, and deep culture of academics, think-tanks, and a vibrant university system, he doubts that engagement with outside world will be as effective as the situations demand (Mehta 2008:10).

### **Autonomy**

Unlike the early days of planning, social scientists in contemporary India feel hesitant to associate too closely with government. Given a severe ideological divide, working for the government, labels the social scientists. Consequently, the former easy movement of social scientists between their research institutions and the government has been affected by the phenomenon of 'commitment'. This commitment recently became contentious when some objected to the appointments of the Planning Commission to its many committees alleging that the appointees owed allegiance elsewhere because they had previously served international agencies. Such an issue had not appeared in the 1950s when the Planning Commission served as a sounding board for development economics by allowing all economists – national and international – to serve together on its committees. The political environment thus, has changed considerably.

Associated with this situation, many social scientists underline the need for autonomy from the government in order to conduct quality research. 'Autonomy' is linked with the perception that government support generally focuses a little too sharply on policy relevance and takes the researchers away from theoretical concerns. In the academic pecking order, work on theory ranks higher than that on practice. Thus, by inviting far closer scrutiny and rigorous examination, policy-related research discourages many. There is also the feeling that as the institutes move towards multiple sources for funding for their research, policy demands tend to displace the concerns of quality research. This is particularly true with increased project funding.

The demand for well researched advice is declining from the government's side as well. Political leaders and administrators look for quick-fix solutions; preoccupied as they are with day to day problems. Even if they do commission research, their interest wanes by the time the research gets completed. In addition, their successors sometimes do not evince that kind of interest.

One other dimension of autonomy, that is not discussed so often, is the freedom of the professional faculty led by the head of an

institute from the unwarranted control of the governing board.<sup>8</sup> It was pointed out that the role of an academic leader belongs to the head of an institute and the governing boards should not usurp it. It was further argued, that most directors want a non-interfering board that looks at broad policy and helps the institute follow the vision it has set for itself.

### **Research Utilisation for Policymaking**

The model of research utilisation for policymaking in India presents a haphazard picture. Initiative taken by the government in establishing research institutions at the beginning of the planning period indicates recognition of the fact that research can contribute to policymaking. During that early phase, government aligned itself closely with the Indian Statistical Institute and some other institutes that it had established. One characteristic of these institutes had been their academic orientation; they sought to influence public policy through the excellence of their research. Unlike 'think-tanks' in the US or the UK that play avowedly advocacy roles, these institutes try to project an image of 'neutral' research that is internationally recognised. Professionalism in research, and recognition in the academic world, are actively sought values. The expectation is that the government will pick up research findings for policy use because of these attributes.

Another characteristic of the research-policy dynamic in India is the prominent role of economists. They were appointed to advisory positions in the government and their advice was eagerly sought. Economists within and outside the government have played a significant role as policy advisors. No other group of social scientists has achieved the prominence that they have achieved.

Changes in the policy environment began when planning went into decline and policies were contested. Institutions within the government also improved and began providing better quality data that administrators considered more reliable. While the government-supported institutes pursued goals of social science research that were not of particular short-term relevance to the policymakers, other institutes funded by NGOs or private business groups conducted research in order to contest existing policies and to provide alternatives. Since the 1990s, the government has chosen its 'own' research to formulate policy. It is widely recognised that, although research institutions may have influence on specific policies,

8. Discussion at the IDRC Round Table on Policy Environment Puducherry, January 25, 2009. Invited social scientists from India participated in this Round Table.

research institutions in general lack the direct influence that existed in the first decade after independence. Contemporary research indirectly influences policies by introducing new terms and shaping the policy discourse.

An indicator of the diminishing interest of public policymakers in utilising research in their policy decisions has been the gradual decline of financial support to government-sponsored research institutes and to the Indian Council of Social Science Research. The research gap appears to be filled by increasing number of nongovernmental institutions and independent policy analysts. International agencies are becoming major sponsors of policy-relevant research to support their programmes of aid and advice to governments. These agencies often fund projects and hold the policy research organisations accountable for them. In other cases, individual academics are supported by them. Some Indian academics find this channel rewarding to pursue their policy interests. Rarely have the international agencies supported policy research institutions through endowments. What is significant, is that the results of such research find a more favourable echo in policy channels, than those of research having local sponsors. At the Round Table cited above, some concern was expressed about the way policy research is getting increasingly directed through international funding.

#### **IV Pakistan**

Pakistan's commitment to economic development emerged at the same time as that of India as they both became independent together. As already pointed out, Pakistan's political history has been one of democratic regimes interspersed with military rule. As a consequence, there are discontinuities in economic policy. In narrating the experience of the Ford Foundation and the role of the Harvard Advisory group, Rosen (1985:149-99) has pointed out that different regimes had different priorities, and more attention was given to consolidation of power than long term plans of development. Conflicts were engendered because of strong political regional differences between the two provinces of West and East Pakistan. Any rational policy analysis floundered on the issues of regional imbalances, and the tussle over division of resources was essentially political rather than economic. The east - west tensions also coincided with the period when the Pakistani elite was fighting its internal battles between those who had migrated from India and those who were native born in Pakistan. Both of these struggles had

significant impact on the way staffing of the Planning Commission was approached and particularly on the working of Pakistan Institute of Development Studies that came as a policy research organisation to support its work.

The relationship between economic decision-making and research was tenuous. The First Five Year Plan was prepared in 1955. At this time, much of the work was done by the Harvard advisors; the Pakistani staff was either not available or not of the required level of competence. An advisor (Rosen, 1985:154) described the procedure of allocation of resources as highly subjective - 'very arbitrary...decisions...reached almost exclusively by economists though not really on economic grounds...'. The greatest limitation on economic decision-making based on research was the domination of political interests. Commitment to economic development became the main plank for the Ayub Khan regime and the Second Plan was prepared on time in 1960. The Planning Commission was strengthened and an able administrator took over as chairman. However, by the time the need to prepare the Third Plan came, the political differences between the two provinces had become acute. The east Pakistani elites felt that the Ayub regime was moving far too slowly to bridge the widening disparity between the two provinces; they wanted each region to control its economy. The Ayub Khan regime rejected this as a prelude to political separation (Rosen, 1985:188).

This conflict spilled over into issues of professional staffing in the policy planning institutions. Economists appeared to be better trained in University of Dacca, that had a strong economics department. Unable to find too many jobs in government departments, these economists tended to move towards research positions. However, the need for trained economists was very high. The whole discussion about the strengthening of Pakistan Institute of Development Economics through a Ford Foundation grant revolved around the kinds of economists needed and training programmes required to fill in research positions. The institute did excellent work and came to be well known for its policy research. Its work till the country was split has been an important legacy for the institutes that came in different forms in the two countries.

One dimension of the legacy is the pre-eminent role of economists in the policy setup. As argued by Zaidi (2002:3644), 'in terms of number, prominence, power and privilege, influence, and visibility, economics dominates social sciences collectively, by a large multiple.' This has also meant that over the years, economists

have become powerful members of the state providing advice and formulating policies.

### **Policy Research Institutes<sup>9</sup>**

One consequence of discontinuities in policy regimes is the depleting space for policy debates in the public domain. Most social scientists reviewing the development and growth of social sciences in Pakistan have lamented the fact that the government, over the years, has not done enough for funding higher education and research (Inayatullah et.al. 2007). We will discuss the state of social sciences later, but the point is 'the influence of the armed forces has dispossessed analysts and academics of the ability to conduct deeper analysis and become stakeholders in the field. Sadly enough, retired diplomats and military officers have emerged as analysts' (Ayesha Siddiqua, 2007:73).

### **Some Prominent Policy Research Organisations**

As research input into policymaking is embedded in the wider context of the state of social science research, it may be useful to identify distinctive phases of the history of Pakistan that may have had an impact on the growth of social sciences. Zaidi (2002:3646-3648) has identified five phases. The period 1947-58 was one of continuation of pre-independence history and efforts for planned strategies for development were begun. The second phase was the period 1958-71, when there was a rise in US influence in policy sectors and in the education sector. The period 1971-77 was marked by the first democratic era in Pakistan and expansion of public space for debate and discussion. The period 1977-88 was marked by the assertion of Islamic ideology and had a tremendous impact on the education system. From then on, the impact of globalisation and influence of multilateral institutions on public policy became salient.

In this way of presenting Pakistan's history of political economy, Zaidi (2002) highlights two or three kinds of phenomenon. One is that in the initial period, teaching and research was limited to a small number of institutions and continued the pre-independence traditions of work. Later, some significant features impacting on the research environment emerged. These were the rise of American influence; the regional conflict and ultimate division of the country; rise of Islamic ideology; and finally, the continuing period of globalisation and heightened influence of multilateral institutions.

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9. The listing of policy research institutes and limited information on them is based on the website of each of these institutes.

Each of these dimensions has had profound influence on the direction of research in the country.

Institute of Development Economics, established in 1957 in Karachi, was one of the earliest policy research institutes. The institute was established with the support of the Ford Foundation and supported the activities of the Planning Commission. 'The focus of research was very significantly on solving young Pakistan's numerous economic problems, and the institute played an active role in giving policy relevant advice' (Zaidi, 2002:3646). It was accorded an autonomous status in 1964, when it came to be known as Pakistan Institute of Development Economics. It went through severe strain during the period before the regional conflict in the country. In 1970, the institute had shifted to Dhaka, but after the country was split in 1971, a new institute of the same name was established in Quaid-i-Azam University campus in Lahore in 1972. The institute was granted a degree giving status in 2000; it trains people towards the award of Ph.D. Apart from this, keeping policy oriented research in focus, the institute continues its training programmes for civil servants of Pakistan.

Applied Economics Research Centre was established at Karachi University in 1973. From its inception, the Centre has undertaken research on issues in applied economics, with special interest in the areas of agriculture, human resources, urban and regional economics, and public finance. With the subsequent growth of the Centre, its activities broadened to include the advanced training of economists from all parts of Pakistan. Institutionally, this growth in capacity, size and scope has led to the Centre being awarded the title of *Institution of National Capability in Applied Economics* by the University Grants Commission of Pakistan (Chatterjee et.al.2002). The Centre's research is policy-oriented, with emphasis on areas such as the economics of agriculture, public finance, urban and regional economics, trade, human resources, health and environment, poverty, and social issues. As the Report of American Social Science Research Council (Chatterjee et.al. 2002) points out, contract research has rapidly become one of the major activities of AERC. There is considerable demand from international agencies and government departments for policy-oriented quantitative research, and the Centre possesses the capacity to provide it.

Sustainable Development Policy Institute was founded in August 1992 on the recommendation of the Pakistan National Conservation Strategy (NCS), also called Pakistan's Agenda 21. The NCS placed Pakistan's socio-economic development within the context of a

national environmental plan. This highly acclaimed document, approved by the Federal Cabinet in March 1992, outlined the need for an independent non-profit organisation to serve as a source of expertise for policy analysis and development, policy intervention, and policy and programme advisory services. SDPI is registered under the Societies Registration Act, XXI of 1860. Its mandate provides for

- Conducting policy advice, policy oriented research and advocacy from a broad multidisciplinary perspective.
- Promoting the implementation of policies, programmes, laws and regulations based on sustainable development.
- Strengthening civil society and facilitating civil society-government interaction through collaboration with other organisations and activist networks.
- Disseminating research findings and public education through the media, conferences, seminars, lectures, publications and curricula development.
- Contributing to building up national research capacity and infrastructure.

SDPI provides policy advice to a number of organisations in the public, private and voluntary sector on issues and themes related to different aspects of sustainable development. This policy advice emanates from SDPI's research programme and identifies alternatives for existing policies and practices. SDPI also plays an active role in providing advice and suggestions on contemporary issues such as the government's Devolution Plan, problems related to the Kalabagh Dam, or those related to education, and even on the environmental policy in general.

In its role as one of Pakistan's most active and successful advocacy and networking organisations, SDPI has played a key role in raising awareness about environmental and social issues in Pakistan, particularly in the Islamabad region. In its advocacy role, SDPI has played a "reactive" role on such issues as human rights, gender, academic freedom, peace, religious tolerance, the nuclear issue and other themes pertaining to justice, freedom and development. In addition, it undertakes research on the basis of its research findings. The SDPI uses its research output to advocate policies by participating in conferences and workshops and through contributions in local newspapers and magazines. SDPI also has strong links with many NGOs in Pakistan as well as with several

networks of NGOs both locally in the South Asian region, and internationally.

Institute of Policy Studies was established in Islamabad in 1979. It has focused mainly on research on Pakistan society and politics, education, economy, foreign policy and security issues, regional and global developments related to Pakistan and the Muslim World, and the issues with regard to Islamic Studies and Islamisation. It has produced around 200 publications and over 1000 unpublished reports. Seminars and conferences are a regular feature at IPS. Besides research activities, the institute has a training programme for both corporate and social sectors.

The Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) was founded in 1999 as an autonomous body to produce well-analysed inputs and ideas to formulate responses. It is a research institute dedicated to undertaking analyses and evaluations of important national and international politico-strategic issues and developments affecting Pakistan, South Asia, and world affairs. The institute projects an independent viewpoint and provides well considered options to the policymakers. IPRI freely interacts with similar national and international fora and scholars to benefit from exchange of ideas and views through holding and participating in seminars, workshops, and discussions.

The Collective for Social Science Research was established in 2001 with a small core staff of researchers in social sciences, having extensive experience in conducting multidisciplinary research, both in Pakistan and internationally. Their areas of research interest include economics, education, development policy, gender studies, health, labour, migration, poverty, and urban governance. The Collective collaborates with a number of local and international academic organisations, the government of Pakistan, and international development organisations, to conduct this research. It is recognised for three main areas of innovation in the practice of applied social sciences in Pakistan: the introduction of a political economy perspective in macro and micro-issues; the attention to informal collective action and social networks; and the combination of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The Collective's objective is to produce high quality academic research in the social sciences and to foster informed debate on social, political, and economic issues and policies. However, it must be recognised that most of the research projects are consulting assignments for development organisations or collaborative partnerships with local and international academic organisations.

Only some are self-generated by the Collective in pursuit of its own research agenda.

Social Policy Development Centre is an organisation in the private sector engaged in policy research. Since its inception in 1995, it has been giving policy advice to the public sector. Its research is focused on analysis of policies, pilot project monitoring and evaluation. It also serves as the database for the social sector, and disseminates information.<sup>10</sup>

These are only some of the policy research organisations that have emerged in Pakistan. PIDE and AERC are among the oldest institutions; while others came into being after the 1990s. A study that surveyed non-profit organisations in Pakistan has identified around 7815 such organisations involved in what it calls, civil rights and advocacy. This is around 18% of the total non-profit organisations so identified. Majority of these are community based organisations working at the local level, conveying day-to-day problems to various levels of government and assisting their communities in resolving issues like water supply, electricity, sewerage, etc. The group 'Civil Rights and Advocacy' also includes organisations working at the national level and providing advocacy on national issues. (Ghaus-Pasha et.al, 2002)

### **Context of the Status of Social Sciences**

The Council of Social Sciences, Pakistan, sponsored an evaluation of the status of various social science disciplines in Pakistan universities. The period chosen was from 1947 to 2003. All the contributors to the volume expressed deep dissatisfaction with the state of their respective disciplines. In spite of a phenomenal increase in the actual number of departments and teachers, the quality of academic output has been mainly from low to average (Saigol, 2007:471). A major reason for this state of affairs, as Saigol (2007:477) points out, is that 'the overwhelming ideological orientation of teachers across the disciplinary spectrum revolves around religious and nationalist thinking.' The result is that 'the absence of debate and controversy, discussion and contention, makes most of the universities very dull and insipid places where received knowledge from old books is transmitted from generation to generation.'

Most contributors to this volume have underlined the lack of an independent environment in which free enquiry can be carried out.

10. Information abstracted from Anwar Shaheen Contribution of the NGOs to Social Science Research in Pakistan in Inayatullah et.al. op.cit

Ahmed points out 'that social sciences are nourished on debate, on the testing of existing knowledge, and on discovery and innovation. This is possible only in a democratic society and with democratic institutions of governance and justice (2007: 308). Similarly, Hasan (2007:279) suggests that another factor that has reduced the importance of social sciences in the country is the fragility of democratic culture and weak democratic structure. Social sciences flourish in an environment of freedom of expression, which only a democratic system can ensure. In the last few years, business management and information sciences have attracted more recognition and funds. Private sector has joined in to support institutions in these areas. Zaidi (2002:3660) also points out that there is an agreement amongst social scientists regarding the depressingly decrepit condition of social sciences in Pakistan. The reasons for such a state of affairs are embedded in lack of independent inquiry and social scientists being dominated by politically motivated public themes.

Thus, policy research faces a challenging environment. There is lack of demand from government and also restricted public space for debate and contestation. Quality of social science research also, is not of high order. It does appear then, that most of the institutes mentioned above do more of training than policy research.

One other issue that has impacted the nature of policy research has been the role and influence of multilateral agencies in funding research. At a recent discussion, a concern was raised regarding the ability of these agencies to push research in directions that are of interest to them. Such directions may not reflect local conditions. As a participant pointed out, 'funding and donor agencies are determining the research agenda and in many cases, this is irrelevant to the local people.'<sup>11</sup> The extent of this influence depends on the involvement of the international community in the country's development. In Pakistan, security issues have now taken precedence over the social issues.

### **Sri Lanka**

The Chairperson, Social Science Research Committee (SSRC) of the National Science Foundation (NSF) speaking at a symposium on "The Potential Role of Social Sciences in National Development: Challenges and Opportunities", commented that "Sri Lanka, absorbed in the critical social issues of relief, reconstruction, and

11. IDRC Round Table on Policy Environment Khatmandu, March 5-6, 2009 invited social scientists from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal participated in this Round Table.

rehabilitation of internally displaced people and children deprived of education, requires the expertise of social sciences to fully achieve its objective of rebuilding.” There is a need to sensitise the government about the potential role of social science community. Chairman, NSF, added that social scientists could serve as a ‘think tank’ to the government and provide feedback of the effectiveness of these (policy) processes.<sup>12</sup>

The above remark was made in the context of the prevailing relationship between research and policy in Sri Lanka. Generally, the feeling is that ‘by and large, policymaking remains quite divorced from the inputs of research organisations; and there appears little interest on the part of ministries to get research organisations more involved in that process.’<sup>13</sup> Some research institutions focusing on peace and conflict have arisen in response to internal strife; these include International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Centre for Policy Alternatives.

In the earlier days, Marga Institute had attracted considerable attention from researchers and policymakers. Marga Institute was incorporated in April 1972. It started as a civil society initiative in the early seventies and developed over a span of three decades. The ideas leading to the establishment of the Marga Institute took shape in the late nineteen sixties, among a group of public officers, academics and professionals.<sup>14</sup> It has been recognised as a leading institute that has contributed to the formulation of development policy. However, this influence declined with the devaluation of planning as a strategy of development. During the tenure of President Jayawardene, there was a deliberate effort to push out the use of the word ‘plan’ and replace it by the word ‘programme’.<sup>15</sup>

The website of South Asian Research Network<sup>16</sup> mentions Institute of Policy Studies as one of the major policy research institutes in the country in its listing of social science research institutions. This institute was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 as a policy ‘think tank’ that engages in socio-economic research to supplement the research capacity of the Ministry of Finance and Planning, the Central Bank, and others. IPS is funded by the Royal Netherland’s Government and the Government of Sri Lanka. In the

12. <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2003/05/04/fea22.html>

13. Dushin Weerakon, Dy Director and Fellow Institute of Policy Studies in personal communication.

14. <http://www.margasrilanka.org/History.html>

15. Conversation with Godfrey Gunatilleke Emeritus Chairperson/Senior Advisor Marga Institute Jan.21, 2009

16. <http://southasia.ssrc.org/centers/srilanka/>

course of years, it has been able to develop its own endowment fund and claimed autonomy from foreign funding. In the early years, the institute’s programme focused on macroeconomic policy issues. More recently, the research portfolio has been extended to other areas i.e. social and economic infrastructure, health policy, gender, poverty alleviation, energy policy, and government reforms.

Another prominent policy research organisation is the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES). This Centre was established in 1982 on the initiative of Sri Lankan scholars, supported by the Ford Foundation. Its website mentions that ‘it functions as an international centre of excellence located in the global south to conduct research and develop policies and mechanisms to address issues of ethnicity, pluralism, and the prevention and management of conflict. ICES has played two roles, one of research and one of policy advocacy. Following extensive academic, legal and political involvement in the constitutional process and policy formulation in Sri Lanka, and strong advocacy in the areas of gender and human and minority rights, ICES has been well established among the international community for its capacity to generate high quality research which is politically relevant nationally, regionally and globally. It has also always provided space for and encouraged creative expression as a vehicle for political and social change.’

The Centre is actively supported by international scholars and funded by several multilateral agencies like CIDA, IDRC, etc. It has a culture of working collaboratively and conducts its projects with partners in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America drawn from academic institutions, policy institutes, women’s organisations, and community based groups, among others. Since its establishment in 1982, ICES has undertaken a series of research and policy formulation programmes and projects in areas such as ethnicity, minority protection and multiculturalism.

Commenting on the kind of social science research conducted for policy in Sri Lanka, Wikramasinghe (2008:6) comments that one overarching theme in the expansion of social science research in Sri Lanka since 1982 is related to ‘ethnic conflict’. In the last twenty years, focus of social science research has been on finding the roots of ethnic conflict, studying its various manifestations, and trying to find solutions. The result is that even new areas of research like devolution, comparative federalism, minority rights, etc have emerged in response to these queries.

However, the policy environment after the intensification of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, has not been very conducive to the

development of social sciences per se, and to acceptability of research findings as policy inputs. At a recent Round Table,<sup>17</sup> a group of social scientists pointed out that public space for debate and contestation of policies is increasingly getting constricted. Security concerns dominate policymaking which has created a situation in which the larger policy framework cannot be questioned. What can be brought to public domain for debate and discussion has got to pass the test of what has come to be known as 'sensitive issue'. A participant pointed out that the dictum among academics of 'publish or perish' has been replaced by 'publish *and* perish'. Both the government as well as the militants resent dissent and the fear of reprisals is very high. The long period of violence and conflict has taken its toll on public opinion, and divisions in society have become deeper and sharper than ever before.

A view was also expressed, that pan - country research was not possible as data of at least two provinces in the country was not available since the conflict started in 1982. For other provinces, data is not wholly reliable, and interviewing is usually out of bounds. So if there is research-policy space, it is increasingly getting limited to the domain of hard or medical sciences.

### **Bangladesh**

The Bangladesh Planning Commission had its roots in pre-independence Bangladesh. In the mid 1950s, a Provincial Planning Board was established under the United Front Government of the then East Pakistan (present Bangladesh). It was an important agency for formulating investment programmes, and negotiating with the Central Government of Pakistan for an adequate share of the financial resources for the development of East Pakistan. After liberation, Planning Commission was established in 1972. However, from the start, it got into conflict with the ministers and this could not be resolved through negotiations. Gradually, the Planning Commission lost its authority and by the time of the collapse of government after assassinations of its leaders, it had completely lost its influence and authority (Kochanek 2004).

The Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies was established as a successor to Pakistan Institute of Development Economics in 1972. As mentioned earlier in the section on Pakistan, this institute had been shifted officially to Dhaka in what was then East Pakistan. Through an Act of Parliament, the institute was

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17. IDRC Round Table Discussions on Policy Environment in Sri Lanka, Galle, Jan 21, 2009. Invited social scientists from Sri Lanka participated in this Round Table.

renamed as Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. Initially, it was fully funded by the government; but in 1983, government created an endowment fund making it functionally autonomous and eligible for donor funding.

The link between research and policy is sometimes tenuous. Although, it is not necessarily so in Bangladesh where researchers from the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic and Adjustment Policies (MIMAP) programme have been working closely with government since the project's inception in 1992. Dr. Mujeri of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, who has been the leader of this research team, emphasises that the close relationship between research and policy has been a recent development. He claims that the Planning Commission has based its policy on poverty primarily on the findings of this research. Exchanges are facilitated in Bangladesh because the research community is small. "We know what others are doing and what the scope of their work and policy influence is," says Dr Mujeri. "I think it is important that, at the end of the day, it is not whose research has got to the policymakers, but whether policies have been developed or not and if they are the right policies. As researchers we feel that if our research has been used, we have done something that is at least useful."<sup>18</sup>

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) was established in 1978. It undertakes, encourages and promotes independent research to advance objective understanding of all aspects of international relations and strategic studies. The institute carries out policy research on how developing nations, like Bangladesh, can survive in the complex international system and strengthen regional and international cooperation.

There appear to be many other institutions that have some role in providing inputs into policy. Usually such institutions have been established by military or civil bureaucrats who have access to decision makers in the country.<sup>19</sup> These institutions tend to become more influential in influencing policy and also in determining the directions of policy research. However, a participant referring to them at the Round Table (op.cit.) pointed out that the advice from them was not necessarily based on quality research.

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18. [http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-26053-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-26053-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)

19. IDRC Round Table in Kathmandu, March 5-6, 2009

## Nepal

Nepal has seen rapid political changes in the last two decades. Around 1990, political reforms began to be introduced and some form of parliamentary system began to take shape. The succeeding democratically elected governments had short tenures and the king continued to play a key role in the politics and administration of the country. However, there was a revolutionary Maoist movement brewing, and in 2006, the king was made to give up his powers and an interim constitution was promulgated. This however, was followed by a quick progression of events during 2006-08, with the Prime Minister declaring himself Head of State and the king abdicating and being forced to leave the country.

This political environment has not been conducive to establishing firm foundations of social science research in the country. Tribhuvan University was the prominent university where several centres were created to pursue teaching and research.

The Centre for Economic Development and Administration (CEDA) was established in 1969 under a tripartite agreement between His Majesty's Government of Nepal, Tribhuvan University and the Ford Foundation. Started as an autonomous institution, the Centre was integrated into Tribhuvan University and given the status of research centre in 1975 after the National Education System Plan (NESP) was implemented. CEDA has been serving as a policy-research centre contributing towards the national development policies and strategies. The Centre's activities are basically confined to research, consultancy and training programmes. The Centre, to its credit, has publications that are well received by both national and international agencies. Its basic goal is to contribute to nation building through analytical and problem-solving works in the areas of socioeconomic and administrative development.<sup>20</sup>

Another institution that came up around the same time was the Institute of Nepal Studies. It was established in 1969 and was renamed as the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies in 1972, with the responsibility of both teaching and research activities. In 1977, the institute was converted into a purely research centre, and renamed Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS). CNAS is a statutory and multidisciplinary research centre under Tribhuvan University with a team of about 19 full-time researchers for conducting independent research and deliberation on issues and studies in social sciences.<sup>21</sup>

20. <http://www.tribhuvan-university.edu.np/faculty/ceda.htm>

21. <http://www.tribhuvan-university.edu.np/faculty/ccnas.htm>

Subsequently, large number of NGOs established advocacy groups that were registered as Trusts. Institute for Policy Research and Development (IPRAD) is a non-profit organisation established in 1995, composed of economists, management experts, engineers, social and political scientists, and lawyers. The specific objectives of the organisation are:

- to undertake research on economic, social, management, institutional, legal and environmental issues
- to conduct training and workshops in areas which directly enhance the skills and awareness of low income and disadvantaged groups
- to evolve and draw up policy alternatives for ensuring a sustainable development process

The Institute for Social and Environmental Research (ISER) is another prominent non-governmental, non-profit, research and development organisation registered under the Non-Government Organisation Registration Act 1977 of Nepal. Established in 2001, ISER is the successor to the Population and Ecology Research Laboratory (PERL), Nepal, founded in 1995. ISER is governed by a General Council composed of individual and institutional members. An Executive Committee is elected by the General Council and it is the apex body of the organisation, responsible for the overall management and conduct of ISER. ISER aims at contributing towards instituting high quality research, human resource development to conduct such research, implementation of programme interventions and policy advocacy in major social, environmental and development challenges facing Nepal.<sup>22</sup>

One other such institution is Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIDS) established in 1990 as the successor organisation to Integrated Development System (which was established in 1979). It is a non-government organisation with a vision to become Nepal's leading private, independent, non-partisan research institute committed to holistic and sustainable development based on human values. The mission of the institute is to contribute to the identification, analysis, and understanding of major development policy issues facing the country and provide responses to them.

Another feature of recent developments in the field of policy research has been the rise of research-based consultancy firms. They

22. <http://iser-nepal.org/>

conduct research on contract for government as well as international agencies. Many of the non-profit organisations as well as the consultancy firms have been initiated by bureaucrats. They have access to decision-making bodies in governments and are acquainted with processes of decision-making. The result is that large amount of research funds from multilateral agencies and government gets directed towards them. In this way, donors and multilateral agencies play a more significant role in influencing policy than the university-based research institutions.

#### IV Concluding Discussion

Traditionally, governments in South Asia have sought inputs into policy decisions from the bureaucrats in their line ministries. Whether these inputs are based on research or on their personal experience has not mattered much. Thus, an administrator working in the ministry of civil aviation or in education becomes the resource for any change in policy in those sectors. The critical element is that of reliability and it is for this reason too, that when a specialist is needed, he tends to be incorporated in the government bureaucracy.

Strategy of planned economic development began to change this relationship when the demand for expertise, not necessarily available in bureaucrats, grew. The first effort was to incorporate experts within government hierarchy. It was only later that outside experts began to be recognised as resources for policymaking. Policy research organisations began to develop after the governments accepted this kind of a relationship.

However, South Asian countries do not present a common model for the growth of such institutions. Democracy, strategy of economic development and an open socio-political system have greatly influenced the way policy research organisations emerged in these countries. In Pakistan, democratic regimes were interspersed with long spells of military rule. The strategy of economic development adopted at independence, did not endure for long. Regional politics was a factor in eroding the idea of rationality in planning. Economic neglect, among many other factors, led to the movement of separation, and Bangladesh was born. Here too, democracy was unable to sustain itself and spells of military rule became part of its political history. A political environment of uncertainty was not conducive to the emergence of alternative sources of policy research. However,

what must be emphasised, is that the nature of military rule in Pakistan differed from regime to regime. This meant freedom to articulate alternatives varied among regimes, allowing for diverse policy research organisations to emerge. Areas of strategic studies and international relations were of interest in all the regimes, and research institutions working on these themes found easy recognition. Another reason for their recognition, was the interest that bureaucrats – civil or military took in them, and initiatives they took to establish institutions to promote policies.

Sri Lanka has been mired in violent ethnic conflict since 1982. Since then, the agenda of national consolidation and integration has superseded any other; the result being inability of policy research institutions that surfaced, to get out of the constraints of what are known as 'ethnic studies'. In Nepal, the king has played a critical role in all appointments, and powers were concentrated in the office of the Prime Minister for a long time. Opportunities of articulating alternatives were few and far between. Democratic regime has taken over only recently and therefore growth of policy organisations has been stunted.

India has been fortunate in this regard. The persistence of strategy of planning and orderly democratic change led to a conducive political environment for the growth of policy research in institutions outside the government. In the early years of planning, the need for data, information, and analysis was so great that the Planning Commission encouraged new institutions to take on this job. As dominance of the idea of planning declined in the seventies, opportunities for presenting alternatives emerged. Policy research institutions multiplied, and the existing ones responded by adding more policy relevant sectors of research to their portfolio. Due to the size of the country and its diversity, policy research institutions delved into multiple areas of public concern.

Even though there is diversity in the growth pattern of policy research organisations in South Asia due to unique political and economic history of each country, it appears that the challenges that they face are not too dissimilar.

Initially, policy research institutions in all these countries were promoted and funded by government. At this time, Ford Foundation was very active in supplementing government funds. Gradual decline in government funding affected most institutions but many succeeded because they were able to find alternative sources of funding. Other sources not only meant multiple ministries but also

included funding from multilateral agencies. Most of such funding was project based. In all the three Round Tables, there was little acknowledgment of any large endowments that helped establish institutions or supported their revenues. Funds have come in for financing such things as buildings or a library, etc.; but these were one time grants. Large project based funds have raised some serious concerns among the social scientists in South Asia. It was pointed out in all the discussions that project funds tend to determine priorities and these priorities do not necessarily reflect local concerns. Such a tendency also diminishes the capacity of an institution to choose its own research directions.

With liberalisation and increased interest of international agencies in policy research, civil society and advocacy groups have also taken the initiative to form their own institutions. In all the countries of South Asia, such institutions have multiplied, and those that reflect donor interests have attracted greater amount of funds. Many of these institutions have also taken the form of consulting firms/corporate bodies. Governments have often turned to them for quick results and for the reliability of adhering to a contracted time schedule due to their corporate culture.<sup>23</sup> A consequence of this diversity and dispersal of policy research in varied types of institutions is that of uneven development of capability of research institutions. Government funded institutions, most of the time, are unable to face the competitive challenge of remuneration and facilities offered by some of these agencies and begin to suffer from paucity of talent.

Bureaucrats – civil and military - have found this new space amenable to float their own policy research institutions. Thus, another breed of institutions has emerged. These institutions are based on the influence commanded by a single bureaucrat or a group of bureaucrats on the government. Because of that influence they are able to get donor support for their activities. Many social scientists across South Asian countries feel that such institutions neither reflect local social needs nor high standards of social science research.

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23. The review Committee Report of the Indian Council of Social Science Research points out: 'Government departments and public sector organisations and more recently; UN agencies, aid agencies of foreign governments, international financial agencies, and private foundations also have shown increasing interest in funding research on socio-economic development and policy issues. This has led to a mushrooming of non-governmental 'research' institutes and an increasing presence of private consulting firms and NGOs in surveys and 'research'. This trend has gathered momentum with the progressive liberalisation and globalisation of the economy' (p.12)

It should also be mentioned here that the bureaucrats in the South Asian countries, emerging from colonial tradition, have continued to play significant role in advising government. This role has often been to restrict opportunities to outsiders in giving policy advice. In Bangladesh, however, the government was very open to international experiments; to the extent that 'it stifled local ways of thinking.' The bureaucrats probably had to accept opening up to external advice due to peculiar politico-economic conditions prevailing in the country.

With concerns about diminishing autonomy to determine research priorities, social scientists across South Asia lamented the deterioration in quality of social science research. The standards of policy research are embedded in the general quality of social science research in the country. Policy research organisations were established independent of the universities because it was felt that universities were so involved in teaching, that research was neglected. Thus, the argument was that if academics devoted all their time on research, the quantum of research would increase and so would its quality. In the process, talent moved to these institutions from the universities. Universities became even more vulnerable to the same charge. The process does not seem to have stopped at the level of institutes. With liberalisation and globalisation and increased funding from multilateral institutions, opportunities have expanded and the research institutes, facing resource crunch, are grappling with issues of retaining talented faculty.

The fact that there is diversity in the way policy research organisations have been established and later multiplied, needs to be emphasised. This diversity is embedded in the unique political and economic history of each country. However, some of the challenges these institutions face are not too dissimilar across countries. There is some amount of commonality though the details may be different. Therefore, in looking at the future of these organisations, we need to understand the historical context in which they have evolved, the capability of social scientists to do quality research, and how global factors have come about to influence their vision and performance.

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