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The present state of social science research in Asia

G.K. Lieten

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

Somewhere in the 1980s, it was predicted that the 21st century would be the Asian century, the time of Asian dominance. In terms of population figures, there is no shadow of a doubt that Asia is a giant. In terms of economic magnitude and significance, Asia has been catching up impressively, albeit restricted to specific regions. In terms of academic achievement, however, the track record in many areas is insipid. The pan-Asian conference in New Delhi illustrated the ascending and declining curves in the different areas. For social science research (SSR) to adequately support policy making, the organisers stated, the presence of support-independent research centres, but funding itself cannot be the panacea. Various speakers at the conference lamented the low qualifications of the research staff and the low quality of output, and hence the inefficiency of such research funding. Some even suggested that the quality and policy-relevance of output in the publicly-funded institutions is dismal and that public–private partnership with well-qualified professionals is doing a better job.

Knowledge societies

Whatever the outcome of the debate, one firm and incontrovertible given should remain, or should become, the bottom line of any discussion: the importance of SSR. Sukhadeo Thorat, Prime Minister of India, aptly stated in his opening remarks.

“...and the more a need for understanding, controlling, and making policies that address the multiple issues on which research ought to be done, the more opening and better-paid opportunities, of intellectual impoverishment, as some of the country reports have indicated, the private research establishment is flourishing. Since more openings, and better-paid opportunities, become available in private research foundations, the better qualified research staff, raised with taxpayers’ money, will be tempted to leave the publicly-funded and publicly functioning research establishment.”

The relevance of SSR has generated much discussion. Research funding, after all, is mostly financed by the so-called tax payers’ money, and answers to the question of concern. There basically is nothing wrong with demand-driven, policy-oriented research (even with policy-supporting research by those who wish to do so). At the level of applied research demands (by the funding agency basically) would normally be accepted as the guiding criteria, but it was felt as a disquieting factor that this is the logic of the ‘narrowly earmarked’ money, and answering to public demands would be a factor of intellectual impoverishment. As some of the country reports have indicated, the private research establishment is flourishing. Since more openings, and better-paid opportunities, become available in private research foundations, the better qualified research staff, raised with taxpayers’ money, will be tempted to leave the publicly-funded and publicly functioning research establishment.

In the second place, such research is inhibiting the spread of knowledge in the public domain. If the output of research, by contractual prohibition, does not enter the public arena, the narrowly earmarked funding does not allow for a spread effect and internal capital formation within research establishments, nor does it extend into university education and policy making.

Needs and demands

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

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

Relevance and impact
Even if it is readily accepted that SSR will never be in the driving seat of policy making, and that much of the research output is not directly useful (redundant, low-quality, not-in-tune with policy demands, etc.), social scientists would like to consider that they have an impact, and therefore need to be properly funded. Core SSR may have a low direct impact on policies. It is safe to suggest that impact remains a mystery, and that a cost-price analysis is nonsensical. Direct policy-oriented applied research may have some relevance, but even there reports, even if they are of good quality, may disappear or may get lost in the drawer in the office, may eventually land on the office desk for a while and then be forgotten, or may be ‘executively’ summarised by an assistant; it may eventually also be glanced through by the person in charge who may lift the less relevant points for action and then subsequently realise that finances are lacking and then leave it to the implementing agencies, who have their own agendas and betterother.

The overall conclusion could very well be, as some have argued, that relevance and impact are fairly limited. But one should also measure the other way round: not assessing the forward linkages but the backward linkages as well; feeding societal knowledge and contributing to the knowledge society. In one of the sessions, the role of the media was emotionally discussed. The media reproaching the academia that they were operating in an ivory tower and did not use the media as a tributary of their findings, and the academia reproaching the media that, given the commercialisation in all the platforms, there was no real interest in academic experts or research results. Intellectually in the past, also in Asian countries, have played an important role in critical analysis and in the spread of knowledge generally. It is something that in the past was referred to as the ‘upliftment’ and ‘conscientisation’ of the masses, but such enlightenment, still, on the policy agenda in the 1970s and 1980s, seems to have given way to entertainment and has narrowed the avenues for delivery of knowledge.

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

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

All funding has conditions attached and these conditions generally are the ownership of the funding agencies. The funding agencies by and large set the intellectual climate, concepts and parameters for research. This is where the shoe pinches. Not surprisingly, the modalities came up for discussion. Even allegations of western intellectual imperialism were thrown up by Shamshul Amri Baharuddin (Malaysia) and likhit (Bangkok). All (foreign) funding, Larry Strange (Cambodia Development Research Institute) argued “should be supportive of long-term commitment and to avoid the treadmill of reactive project opportunism”, which in his view is detrimental to institution and capacity building.

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

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

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

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