The present state of social science research in Asia

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Any industrial house has an in-house R&D department, where day-to-day problems and processes are investigated. Ministerial departments, political parties and NGOs (and maybe even some consultants) (should) have an investigation wing or consultants to rely on when dealing with nitty gritty issues of social science phenomena. In many cases, where need has been felt, there is in-house research, investigative journalism, action research, rapid appraisal, etc. These activities, however, could not possibly be sustained by the SSR as it is done in the universities and research institutes.

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

The third place, such research is inhibiting the spread of knowledge in the public domain. If the output of research, by contractual project or otherwise, does not enter the public arena, the research thrust is not being realised. The SSRC will be at risk. That mission was cursorily summarised by the chairman of the ICSSR, stated in his opening speech: “It enables us to empirically understand reality and it helps to throw light on the causes of mal-development, which will allow us to develop policies, reduce inequalities and tension and develop national goals”. This deserves repetition. We live in a world in which ‘knowledge’ is regarded as the driver of change and growth. Technological knowledge particularly has spread at an exponential rate, also in a number of Asian countries, and public and private funding testify to its importance. In that process, various research fields and sub-fields of research need to be developed. The conference was a checklist of the multiple issues on which research ought to be done, but aspects of funding were almost non-existent, or at the corner.

Some, particularly those who work in private research institutes (think tanks, consultancy firms, etc.), with enough research grants and projects to tap, have argued that money is not the problem. It was contended that actually much of the funding is pure social wastage: it is distributed among various non-profit-making public centres that excel in bad research and non-dissemination. In various countries in Asia, even in various institutions in countries with a better track record, inefficiency and incompentence may very well be the rule rather than the exception. Despondency and a further cut in already dismal low finances, however, has the wrong impact. It is rather a matter of heavily investing in a low quality product so as to lift it to a higher level, or, in economic terms, from a low equilibrium to a high equilibrium. The emergence of a critical mass of well-equipped research institutes and qualified researchers is a sine qua non. This requires much more than the scaps presently available for SSR in most Asian countries.

Research as different concepts

The presentations and discussions at the conference were fascinating, but it could be said the wrong impacts were somehow speaking different languages. When delegates argued that enough funds were available, that research should be policy-oriented and should involve commercial partners, by-passing the universities, that foreign project funding was a helpful mechanism, in difficult times, etc., they were indeed talking about research, but could not help but become conceptually confused. Semantically, “research” has at least two different meanings: applied research and core research, or, problem-solving research and problem-oriented research.

Below: Professor Subhadra Thorat, chairman ICSSR.

“In enhance the importance of social sciences in informed policy making”.

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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 impovishment. That point was also taken up by Lük Dhiraveen (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 if the research output is not directly useful (redundant, low-quality, not-in-tune with policy demands, etc.), social scientists would like to consider that they have an impact, and therefore need to be properly funded.

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

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 discussed. The media reproaching the academia that they were operating in an ivory tower and did not use the media as a tributary of their findings, and the academia reproaching the media that, given the commercialisation in all the platforms, there was no real interest in academic experts or research results. Intellectuals in the past, also in Asian countries, have played an important role in critical analysis and in the spread of knowledge generally. It is something that in the past was referred to as the ‘upliftment’ and ‘conscientisation’ of the masses, but such enlightenment, still on the policy agenda in the 1970s and 1980s, seems to have given way to entertainment and has narrowed the avenues for delivery of knowledge.

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

Funding

A number of international funding agencies – the International Development Research Centre (Canada), CNRS (France), the German Research Foundation (DFG) and International Development Research United Kingdom – dwelt on the various ways in which funding is available and the technicalities of the selection procedures. All funding has conditions attached and these conditions generally are the ownership of the funding agencies. The funding agencies by and large set the intellectual climate, concepts and parameters for research. This is where the shoe pinches. Not surprisingly, the modalities came up for discussion. Even allegations of western intellectual imperialism were thrown up by Shamsul Amri Bahardin (Malaysia) and Lük Lükten (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 all the platforms, there was no real interest in academic experts or research results.

Summing-up

For various reasons, as stressed during the conference, many more funds will have to be made available for core SSR. It will ultimately help to lift the research capacity and relevance to a higher equilibrium. Reducing research to its instrumental function, namely applied research on topics and issues to be decided by policy, would be detrimental to the core SSR. SSR essentially provides the breeding ground for knowledge enlargement and enlightenment. The backward linkages of research, feeding into education and in to society at large, are imperative. 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 accessible 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 noted that the conference, SSR is still at a low level of setting. The upping up of a Council of Asian Research Institutes may help to mutually reinforce institution building and orientation.

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