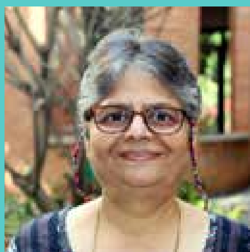
MUSINGS, ANECDOTES & EXPERIENCES

"Compilation of Articles - Personal Reflections."

Dr Annapoorna Ravichander



About the Author

I have over 34 years of work experience. In all my jobs what I learnt was communication is an important aspect in not only professional but also in one's personal life. I also gradually learnt and experienced knowing your audience and understand their needs is equally important for developing various communication materials. Ever since I have tried to adapt this approach of knowing and understanding your audience, giving them what they want (and not what you want) and make your communication simple with no jargons.

Please feel free to send your queries, feedback or just drop in a hello to ***annaravi.consultatnt@gmail.com***

I dedicate this book to my family

Ravi, Rohu and Vidhu

Thank you for being who you are

Why this Book?

I never ever thought that documentation is an important activity and that writing is the key to accomplish it. I have always been wanting to write but never knew how and where to start. Of course as a doctoral student I did a lot of writing for my thesis. So when I embarked on my first job in a University I made my first attempt to write a piece. I submitted my piece to my then boss and felt so proud of my achievement and dreamt that my boss would call me and say “Wow what a wonderful piece you have written”. She called me to her cabin and literally threw my article at me and said “what is this? Is this all you can do?” I ran out of her room and sobbed and said that she does not understand anything. It was a jolt, since I believed that my article was too good. But I am glad that I got that jolt (and thank you to my boss for the feedback). After a day or two I looked at my article and was appalled at what I had written. Even I could not understand half the things that I had written. This was way back in 1989.

Coming to the present time, writing has become an important factor in my life. I feel and believe that anything I see, learn and experience needs to be documented and shared and that’s exactly what I did over the years.

So what did I want to write? I started identifying areas where I would have wanted help and guidance. To add to this, I worked as a trainer (developing content and delivering training programmes), communicator (developing custom-made collaterals and helping young team mates to present information based on the needs of the audience) and policy engagement.

In my first job of working in a Think Tank, I tried to find simple sources to help me in my tasks. I found some but not too many. I learnt the ropes by doing and trying and this book now replicates “doing and showing”.
Most of the articles are my experiences, interactions and learnings. I believe that a lot of youngsters from a Policy Engagement and Communication genre would find it useful.

Acknowledgements

Achieving anything in life is never done alone and so is my experience with this book. There have been a lot of people who have silently worked backstage and many who have held my hands, guided me, discussed with me topics/issues and most important encouraged me.

I thank each one of the person who have been a part of this journey (which by the way has not ended). I will continue to write and add more experiences, anecdotes and thoughts-this book will remain a live "*document*". In no particular order I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to **Prof. Amita Verma** (ex-Vice Chancellor, Maharaja SayajiRao University, Baroda) who was my first boss and jolted me from my self-pity stance.

I would like to thank **Enrique Mendzibal** who accepted my initial articles and published it On Think Tanks (I have been a regular contributor to OTT, ever since). I also would like to thank **Erika Perez-Leon** and **Andrea Baertl** (who were with On Think Tank), **Louise Ball,** and **Syranno Baines**. Thank you to **Vanessa Weyrauch** and **Leandro Etch** who were instrumental in publishing my articles in Politics and Ideas (now Purpose and Ideas). My thank you also goes to **Megan Lloyd-Laney, Kimberly Clarke** and **Isobel Fisher** from Research to Action who always welcomrd my articles. Last but not the least thank you **Andrea Ordóñez** and **Gabriela Keseberg Dávalos** from Southern Voice.

I also would like to place on record my sincere thanks to ***Shri Gurucharan G IAS (Retd)*** who was my sounding board for several of my articles.

Thank you **Sheeba Das** for putting together and maintaining a record of all my articles regularly.

Thanks to **Neeta Krishna** who brought some systematic approach to the book by pocketing it into various sections.

The look and feel of this book would not have been complete without the visual effects provided by **Esha Daftari**. Esha is known to me for several years, worked with me as a colleague and continues to be a person who is "*dedicated, committed and creative*". Throughout this journey she showed patience, and without any complains put together this book for me.

Message 1

I am delighted that Annapoorna Ravichander has brought out this book of articles titled Musings, Anecdotes and Experiences. It was long awaited. As a policy engagement and communications professional, Annapoorna has been part of diverse public affairs initiatives and thus brings to bear considerable experience and expertise. What you will find in this book is not text book theory but expression of hands-on experience and reflections on how it might have been done better.

The realm of public affairs deals with identifying and addressing the drivers of social problems. Public policy research generates evidence that helps us better understand the society in which we live, the causes of social problems, and their consequences. The beauty of public policy research is that the conversation does not end with the analysis. It is but the beginning. The greater part of politics and policy making is mostly a matter of the art of persuasion. Decide, choose, legislate as they will, policy makers must carry people with them, if their decisions are to have the full force.

This book of short essays is about Policy engagement and communication by Annapoorna Ravichander, an expert in the field, serves as a communication toolkit for all those engaged in public affairs. With a wide array of subjects, it tells us how to create engaged citizens, how to raise awareness, undertake informed advocacy, *and give impetus to public policy praxis. Not only is the practice of public policy-making largely a matter of persuasion. So too is the discipline of studying policy affairs aptly described as itself being a 'persuasion.'*

Among the several policy engagement and communication professionals I have had the opportunity to work with, Annapoorna Ravichander ranks high. She is creative, enthusiastic, and focused. But what sets her apart is her discipline, methodological rigour, and her striving for best practices. Not all policy professionals strive to establish standards and processes, as Annapoorna does. This is a book for practitioners in public affairs. Rather than provide a theoretical framework, the book focuses on actionable knowledge. The author does well in making every article an actionable exercise that sets out step by step how to achieve that particular objective. From something as simple as how to compile an annual report to more complex functions like how to structure data management. It is a public affairs toolkit, if you will, that gives you the 'How to do it' of several aspects of public policy. Precisely because it is based on experiential learning, it has immense practical use.

I congratulate Annapoorna on this elegantly written book that documents best practices in the art of persuasion. The short pieces contained in this volume, some of which I have had the privilege of reading in the context in which she wrote them, are of substantive use for scholars, students, researchers, and public officials. In more ways than one, this book advances the knowledge base in policy research and its practice.

Gurucharan G IAS (Retd)
Director
School of Social Sciences
Ramaiah University of Applied Sciences

Message 2

I'm thrilled to recommend Annapoorna Ravichander's latest work. Drawing from her hands-on experience in policy engagement and communications, and her prolific contributions to the On Think Tanks blog over the years, this book offers rich practical insights. Annapoorna's contribution is rooted in real-world experiences, reflecting her passion for practice.

Annapoorna captures this essence of this field brilliantly, highlighting the art of persuasion and the science of technical master vital to effective policy communication. Each short article serves as a practical guide, from annual reports to complex data structuring. Annapoorna's commitment to actionable knowledge and her pursuit of establishing standards and processes make her stand out in her field.

The book is also a testament of Annapoorna's personal mission to nurture the next generation of research communication practitioners. A mission we have been lucky to support.

This book is a must-read for anyone immersed in research communication. Congratulations to Annapoorna on this exceptional contribution to the world of policy research and practice.

Enrique Mendizabal
Founder, On Think Tanks

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I have experienced that effective communication is important to help convey a message in a simple manner with no jargons. Using various tools to communicate research work has helped in an audience responding appropriately

“How well we communicate is not determined by how well we say things but how well we are understood.”

Andrew Grove,
Engineer, CEO

RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATION

Setting up a Communications Team for a Think Tank

I work as a Communication and Policy Engagement staff in Think Tanks. When I began this role I had a fairly limited idea of what my role would entail. However, I realised that the organisations where I worked in this capacity were fairly new to this vertical and only focused on research activities. In fact building a communication team to address the communications and visibility of the think tank was not at the top of agenda.

Think Tanks often realise the need for such a vertical when there are some tangible results. So how does this happen? Planning and strategizing helped in identifying the need and importance of stakeholder engagement which in a way brings visibility to a Think Tank/ organization. In essence:

- A good communications strategy allows you to exercise better control over your work and to frame the issues in a broader perspective beyond the research. A strategy helps in increasing the visibility of the research.
- When a research project has achieved good results, it becomes imperative to disseminate those results; otherwise, the work will remain under noticed.

So the first thing is to ensure that you understand the Mission and Vison statements of the and then study the needs of the staff (primary audience), key stakeholders (external audience) and based on this build a communication strategy. In addition refer to the Strategic Document of the organization and understand the objectives,

> *"Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is success."*
>
> Henry Ford

One of the main objectives was to establish a 'Brand' to reach new influential audiences. From here the word brand should be embedded in your thoughts and ideas. The following may be considered to achieve the objectives set forth:

- Enhance the 'look' of the website
- Customise research outputs for diverse audiences
- Peer Review of Research outputs on a 'global platform'
- Engage on social media platforms
- Maintain important information and documents to disseminate appropriately

So now that the basics are more or less sorted out identify tasks that would involve in fulfilling the objectives that are laid out by your team.

Competent Team Members

The urgency to identify and hire a team, who are competent in specific areas and with relevant experience, should be a priority. Develop appropriate job descriptions, identify roles and responsibilities and share it on various job portals. In my opinion the following three members are essential:

Media Coordinator who would primarily oversee all activities with electronic and print media and also build a rapport with existing contacts and identify new contacts and media outlets, review documents, update and use social media platforms as an important mode of dissemination platform. This post would be responsible for using the website to update information as and when required.

Graphic Designer who would primarily design logos, icons, and, most importantly, introduce infographics in the several outputs produced by the research teams. The post holder should also design banners, standees, brochures, and fliers for outreach events.

Database Manager who would take care of the Document Management System which stores all important documents produced by the Think Tank (proposals, articles, Op-eds, Reports, Event Updates to name a few).

As a team one should try to bring in some guidelines and processes to help all perform better and to also help the research teams to focus and articulate their findings. For example, you can develop Standards & Guidelines and templates for several outputs, conduct a training to familiarise the researchers with the importance and usefulness of using these in their writing. Based on the user interface (i.e researchers using the templates and Standards and Guidelines) improve the content, based on the feedback provided. Customise content and examples to understand the same better, if required.

Since quality of outputs becomes an important aspect introduce a robust Editorial process to include a technical review conducted by experienced people and an overall review for standards and structure before dissemination.

Support for the CPE Team

It may not be out of place to share that the Policy, Engagement and Communication (PEC) programme introduced by Think Tank Initiative was of great help to identify and strategise approaches to some of the activities that were planned. Today the CPE team and its activities have become an integral part of several Think Tanks in the area of planning communication strategies. For example, in the organization where I worked a decision was taken where that CPE team will be central to all its projects, right from the inception to the dissemination of its research.

Tips

1 conveyed to the different audience Team work is very important -invest in your teams and use them

2 Understand your audience needs, within and outside the organisation

3 Be flexible in the introduction of innovations in outputs and other communication products

Achievements

- Learned to customise research findings for various kinds of audiences.
- Developed our ability to write effective Press Releases.
- Embedded the notion that teamwork is necessary to ensure that all aspects of communication is

Editing in a Think Tank:

A challenge and a way out

Editing involves performing checks and corrections on various aspects of a document, ranging from grammar and spelling, construction, typography, readability, factual accuracy, etc. It entails taking a more detailed approach by restructuring content for a coherent logical flow. In other words, editing enriches the final deliverable for a lasting impact on the target audience.

***Editors in think tanks:** the next big thing in think tank communications.*

In the context of policy research/impact, editing evidently assumes a lot of importance. Policy research aims to influence an existing policy scenario by enriching it with scientific analysis and technological innovation. This involves persuading central, state, private agencies, etc., who have multilateral agendas for achieving ambitious targets in overlapping time frames and, hence, are sometimes unable to make a significant time commitment to reading and understanding written deliverables of varied lengths. In this context, the role of a think tank becomes important. Often they need to simplify useful research output which could be technical and hence, a round of diligent editing is pertinent. In fact, the goals of both the author(s) and editor(s) become identical at this point, which means both have to understand the purpose of a document and also the role of the target audience/reader.

Challenges and Possible Solutions for an Editor

Possibly the greatest challenge for an Editor is to explain the rationale behind every correctional edit that is made to a document. In a research scenario, this means to be doing a rather difficult tightrope walk of explaining the Editor;s perspective while maintaining harmony with the authors' viewpoint. While some authors may be appreciative of the Editor's approach, others might not be equally amenable to such symbiosis. In such times, it is important that the Editor assume a neutral stance and be rationally appreciative of, but not blindly accept, the author's perspective.

An example in this context is the varied approach of Editor(s) and author(s) towards the use of jargon and technical terminologies. While they may be allowed in reports and journal articles which are mostly meant for domain experts, scholars, etc., documents meant largely for public outreach such as press releases, blog posts are preferred jargon-free for easy understanding by a non-technical audience as well. While editing a document, an Editor should, therefore, consider this difference. The challenge, however, is to convince the author of this rationale. A deadlock could be averted by the Editor being a good listener first to understand the author's perspective. Following this, to address the author's viewpoint in a stepwise manner and offer suggestions that are implementable yet do not violate the authors' priority.

Documents authored by researchers in Think Tanks are founded on hard evidence, industry expertise and scholarly literature. While editing these documents, the Editor must understand, and not be too openly critical of, the authors' viewpoints. This opens the possibility to add value to the deliverable through discussion and informed feedback.

Providing Feedback

Every published document goes through a life cycle before it is made live for the target audience. Feedback is an indispensable part of this cycle. Editors use feedback when they are unsure of the meaning of a text, enforce a required change or suggest possible changes. This is usually done with the help of comments. The ideal way to phrase feedback is to keep them "short and sweet", and, importantly, pertinent to the context.

Editors don the hat of a reader and through close scrutiny help authors to produce documents that create the desired impact by being understandable and accurate. The end-to-end process of feedback contributes to the final deliverable through the incorporation of the informed opinions of both the author and Editor (or the reader), making the document truly complete.

Such issues, and more, can mostly be resolved by understanding each other's role in each stage of the process.

Lessons Learnt

Being an Editor often requires strategising how best to inform authors about inconsistencies in a written piece. These could involve:

- *Major omissions in a text*
- *Incomprehensible or poorly written portions*
- *Proofing language.*

In the end, both authors and Editors constitute the foundation for the quality of a written document. While the former produce original content, the latter enhance it from the reader's perspective. In a think tank scenario, where policy impact is imperative, a balanced combination of an Editor and an author makes for a lasting impact through deliverables that are not only technically sound, but also logically structured and firmly rooted in the principles of writing and communication: after all that is what the aim is precisely—communicate and inform.

Tips

1. Understand Purpose and Audience (What? And Who?)
2. Check for Clarity and Coherence (logical structure)
3. *Grammar and Style* - verb tense consistency and subject-verb agreement
4. *Standards and Guidelines* - adherence to prescribed S & G

5 Data Relevance-accurate, topical and meaningful

6 *Formatting and Layout* - Spacing, labelling Tables, images charts etc.

7 *Consistency* - use of terminology, capitalisation, and abbreviations

8 *Ethical Considerations* - proper acknowledgement of contributors etc.

9 *Engage with the Author/s* - provide clear and constructive feedback to the author

10 *Maintain Document Integrity* - use track changes to make edits and insert comments for transparency and accountability

11 *Final Proofreading* - catch typos or minor errors

12 *Adhere to Deadlines* - provide timely feedback to author/s

13 *Professionalism and Respect* - maintain a respectful and professional tone when providing feedback and comments

14 *Quality Assurance* - double-check your own work to ensure that your edits and comments are accurate and consistent.

15 *Follow Up* - post providing feedback be available for clarifications.

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13 Tips To Make A Field Visit Interesting

In one of the projects I worked tried to understand issues that impact Indian women and their decision to participate in the labour force. As a communicator I had the opportunity to accompany the research team on a field visit to Coimbatore, a major city in Tamil Nadu, India. My primary role was to gather Case Studies of women and the community. Though excited, I was also apprehensive.

Two things that came to mind were: will I be able to capture what I want? Will I be accepted? Most importantly, as a communicator, would I be able to truly apply my skills?

I armed myself with some notes based on our proposal, knowledge on the communities, the industry and the organisation we were visiting. The following 13 points helped me with my tasks.

C is for chatting
Any communication with the communities and people at grassroots level should be two-sided. One needs to converse with people, having a one-sided conversation may result in going off the track and prevent a focussed dialogue. As a communicator, one needs to make the scenario simple, be approachable and let the community know that you are their friend and are not there to probe.

O is for organised
In any communication, it is always good to be organised. Organise your visit to the community, your ideas, know who you are meeting, why you are meeting them and when you are meeting them. A basic understanding of this and a simple organised schedule will not only be fruitful but also help you reach your objectives.

M is for meaningful
Make your exchange meaningful to both you and the people you are meeting with. It is always good to know why your audience would like to meet you and what you want to hear from them.

M is for momentous
A significant amount of information can be gathered if one appreciates each and every discussion, however brief it may be.

U is for understanding
You need to understand the undercurrents, the message you are trying to convey, and what you are hearing. By being understanding, you not only gain the trust of the people you are interacting with, but are also able to elicit important and key information.

N is for natural
Communication should be natural and to the point. Not only should you make the community feel comfortable with your presence, you should also ensure that they are open to sharing information. This can be done only if you are honest and direct.

I is for interesting
Any communication can go quiet if it is boring and not interesting. You can make

it interesting by having prior knowledge of the people and the area, and also by wanting to learn and know more.

C is for colourful
A dry and boring approach to any topic can be dull and not help in continuing a conversation. Bringing in a bit of professionalism with some personal touches such as anecdotes can make the communication flow better and the people might be more receptive to you.

A is for appreciative
Appreciating even the simplest aspect makes the environment friendlier. A high-handed attitude or am 'I know-all' approach will never help. Being appreciative, supportive and positive are very important to gain the trust of a community.

T is for trusting
In any situation, especially when communicating, a trusting nature always help fill gaps and overcome hesitations of the community.

I is for initiate
An author can suffer writer's block, and a communicator can suffer a communication block when trying to talk with members of a closed community. As a communicator, you may have to initiate the conversation to break the ice. A simple question about the family or the area can be a good ice-breaker. Likewise, a brief introduction about yourself and your work in the local language can work wonders in breaking the ice.

O is for open
In most cases, being open to situations, ideas and diversity is a great way to communicate. We often go prepared with a particular approach, method or way to speak, but it is important to be willing and able to adapt to different situations.

N is for neutral
Having a neutral rather that a one-sided opinion is always conducive. Forming opinions can stunt a conversation and it is worse if one is opinionated about a topic or during a discussion.

If we follow a version of the described above, it is likely that communication will flow easier.

Tips

1. Plan Ahead
2. Outline and define objectives
3. Conduct research and gather background knowledge
4. Seek guidance from local people and experts
5. Secure required permissions
6. Prioritise safety precautions
7. Pack sufficient equipment and supplies
8. Take Notes and ensure clear documentation
9. Ask questions by engaging with experts and communities
10. Reflect and analyse data

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A Proposed Recipe For A Robust Research Programme

Introduction

For many think tanks, conducting research is a core activity. A well-thought out research project, if planned and designed well, often produces the expected results. So, what would the key elements that a robust research proposal should include be?

Ingredients

A clearly defined problem statement, one or two precise research questions, identified data sources, a rigorous methodology, and specific outputs. To make it special, a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and capacity building activities from a sustainability point of view can be added.

A research programme should be telling a story to hold the attention of the audience.

Ingredient 1: Problem statement

Provides a brief overview of an existing concern, a concise description of an issue to be addressed, or a situation that can be improved. Ideally, a problem statement should fill the gap between the existing problem and what is planned to be achieved through literature review, evidence analysis, desk research and observation.

The main purpose of the problem statement is to emphasise the importance of the research topic or issue presented, position it within a specific context, and stipulate the pathway on how this problem will be addressed.

Ingredient 2: Research question

Typically, this should indicate the direction of inquiry that your research proposes to take in the context of the problem being researched. A research question helps to determine the type of research and also identifies the key objectives that will be addressed. The research question also becomes the beacon that guides the methodology and data sources. In short, your research question should underline what it is you want to evaluate, why you think this is important, and if it is measurable.

Broadly, there are 3 types of research questions:

1. **Descriptive:** used to help a study that describes something. It includes various public opinions which are mainly descriptive. For example: what percentage of the Indian population believes in being healthy/exercising?

- *Variables:* being healthy/exercising
- *Group:* Indian population

2. **Comparative**: includes and analyses the differences between groups. For

example: what is the attitudinal difference between a rural boy and rural girl towards education?

Dependent variable: Attitude towards education

- *Group:* Rural boys and rural girls
- *Casual:* aims to establish cause and effect. For example-what is the relationship between age and attitudes towards fitness amongst teenagers.

3. **Dependent Variable:** Attitudes towards keeping fit

- *Independent Variable:* Age and attitude
- *Group:* Teenagers

Ingredient 3: Data analytics

Typically, data forms the backbone of any research programme. Both quantitative and qualitative data are important. Quantitative data will help understand the incidence of particular phenomena and the rate at which it might occur. It also helps establish co-relationships. Qualitative data helps understand why this the phenomena is occurring.

> *Data analysis is required to structure findings from research, is useful in breaking macro problems into micro units, clarifies useful insights from huge data sets and, most importantly, helps to eliminate subjectivity.*

Ingredient 4: Ideation

Any research proposal in its initial phase should undergo an ideation session. Ideation is usually associated with design thinking, and forms an important transitional step: it clearly defines the purpose, problem and solutions. If adapted well, an ideation session will help understand and ask the right questions, go beyond a typical solution, emphasise on innovation, and collate great ideas from different team members. Ideation challenges assumptions and breaks conventional approaches to research design by allowing new ideas to be formulated.

Ingredient 5: Outputs and timeline

Best practice includes documenting every aspect of a research to include challenges, research findings, etc. The narrative should tell a story. A realistic time line is important for two key reasons:

- if the research is too long-winded the data could become redundant; a realistic timeline with clear
- objectives, outcomes and schedule (hours and months) helps to keep track of major activities and, most importantly, allows the research to be relevant.

> ***Special ingredient***
> *A Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) typically includes policies, standards and procedures, and helps in systematising all processes and in documenting them. This is important for consistency. After all, each think tank must aspire to produce high quality research*

Awareness - Advocacy - Action : the PAC research strategy

Introduction

If a research programme wants to be successful it must ensure that it has impact. It should also ensure that all stakeholders take ownership of the action identified.

To achieve this, Public Affairs Centre (PAC) follows a three As strategy: Awareness – Advocacy – Action.

Advocacy broadly means creating awareness on an issue. Awareness refers to identifying the needs of a community. Action means promoting community engagement to enhance social change.

Awareness

In any project, generating awareness is an important element. To do this, we take a step back to identify what the problem is, what needs to be done and who should be addressing the problem. Broadly, awareness can be described:

- *Activity:* identify the past and existing problems and create dashboards to detect trends.
- *Cultural:* shared knowledge often brings in disparity and difference, one should be sensitive towards this, especially while interacting with the community.
- *Community:* acknowledging the existing patterns while identifying gaps by recommending workable solutions.
- *Geographic:* it is important to contextualise the problem based on the location to make it more relevant.

Advocacy

Advocacy can be defined as a movement by an individual or group intended to influence political, economic, social policy. By ensuring a sound path of advocacy an organisation can:

Mobilise communities

This effectively means inclusion of communities to identify, involve and take ownership of actions to arrive at a common goal. Collective thinking garners more pressure than a single person-approach. This can be done by including both direct and indirect beneficiaries through public awareness campaigns for social change.

Ensure accountability

Ideally, the public should be in a position to make informed decisions and be able to convey their views to stakeholders.

Improve public services

By advocating on certain issues, an organisation can improve social justice. This in turn can improve and change policies at some levels. This can be done through media campaigns, public speaking, or publishing research outputs.

Action

Action research referes to the systematic process of an inquiry conducted for and by those who require to take action. Action research is also important because of its relevance to diverse stakeholders. The key purpose of action research is to establish an insightful research, prioritise action and build roadmaps to ensure sustainability in a research project.

Action research includes:

- Identifying a problem
- Gathering data
- Analysing and interpreting data
- Planning action

Identifying a problem

Once a problem is identified, a research design needs to be developed to suit the problem. This includes research methodology.

Tips

1 Develop and revise

2 Know elements which will useful

3 Identify questions which will help you gather effective answers

Gathering data

Collect data based on your research questions. Ideally, the data includes best practice and challenges faced. While gathering data, ensure that you organise it in a way that is practical to analyse.

Tips

1 Consider using standardised test data and tested techniques

2 It can include surveys and interviews

3 Know when to stop gathering data

Analysing and interpreting data

Look at the entire data and identify any patterns or themes that emerge. In my own work I find it is helpful to lay out all of my data and the identified themes or patterns in an area that is easily visible while working. It is important to identify the what and the how of the key factors. Only after you a develop a hypothesis will the theory be developed.

Tips

1 Look for consistent patterns and themes

2 Ensure that the data is explained clearly and explicitly

3 Use the right lens to analyse and interpret data

Planning action

Once the results are analysed and documented it is important to make a decision on action. This can include continuing to address the problems with improvements, looking at the problems with a clean slate or a combination of both approaches.

Tips

1. Determine action by looking at a multitude of factors
2. Remember your research question
3. Focus on improving research

Conclusion

A well-planned research programme will ensure sustainability and leave behind an impact.

My Experience As A Community Radio Jockey - Bringing Local And Global Voices Together

Introduction

When I was asked to be a radio jockey for Radio Active – a community radio station in Bengaluru India – my first reaction was, can I? Should I? The diehard in me said, go ahead. And so, I met with the station's audience representatives to find out more.

I was to host a special series on COVID-19 and the impact it has had on how we work. The aim of the show was to bring awareness to how people from different walks of life are dealing with COVID-19 – from the local to the global, from sector experts to the common citizen. The show was aired once a week for around 30 minutes. We called it 'Talk it over'.

How did I organise myself?

Once I knew what I was doing and why, the how became easy.

First, I considered different formats and approaches. For example, a collective approach that brings together different stakeholders in one programme to discuss and debate problems and possible solutions. An individual approach, with each programme showcasing a different perspective or experience – one week a government representative, another a citizen, a religious leader, a school teacher and so on. There's also the 'call-in-radio' approach that brings the listeners into the conversation.

I decided to go with the individual approach to be able to give space to hear from people with diverse backgrounds and experiences – health workers, policymakers, researchers and fundraisers to name just a few.

Then, I listed out the names of the people I wanted to interview and reached out to them. I checked that I had a good diversity of perspectives and experiences. I read articles they had written to prepare for interviews, and I cross-referenced interview themes to ensure no repetition.

The format for each show was broadly the same, and I kept it simple: first an introduction to the person/organisation; then a question on how COVID-19 has changed the way they work, what challenges they've faced and how they tackled them and finally asked them for any other key takeaways they wanted to share.

What I learned about the community radio as a communication tool

When I became involved in the show, I started paying attention to the role of radio in our lives, I did some research, and I talked to people who *work at the station. I realised just how important it is as a communication tool. The radio is over a century old. And despite more recent 'competitors' – like TV and social media – it is still going strong.*

As a medium, radio is a '*voice without a face'* and it has the power to give the '*voiceless a voice*'. It promotes access to public information, keeps us entertained and is also a source of companionship for many. It's also become one of our favourite traveling companions – you can hear it coming from cars and public buses.

During the pandemic, the importance of radio as a communication tool came to the fore. It brought people and communities who did not have access to internet, together. It is useful in times of strife – like floods, famine, wars to relay important news and advice. It collects and shares voices and perspectives from across the globe. And, if used well, it can build awareness and fuels socio-political changes in communities.

Out of all the reading I did, two articles I found particularly striking and I would recommend for anyone interested in learning more about radio as a communication tool: 'Radio: one of the most powerful tools of the 21st Century' and 'Radio still a powerful worldwide tool for dialogue, tolerance and peace'.

Tips

1. *Develop a Unique Voice* - clear and pleasant
2. *Practice* - speak confidently, be enthusiastic, have a good diction, pronunciation and pace
3. *Develop a Radio Persona* - be authentic and relatable
4. *Write and Prepare* - create content
5. *Stay Informed* - allows you to engage in topical discussions
6. *Develop Interviewing Skills* - learn to ask open-ended questions, make your guests feel comfortable
7. *Be Adaptable* - be prepared to handle unexpected situations, technical glitches

You can listen to the weekly show on RadioActivecr90.4MHz 12-12.30 IST, and listen to previous episodes.

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Does Paying Attention To Framing Your Research Results Help You To Communicate Them Better?

Yes, it does, as an experienced research communicator, I can say this with confidence.

Over the years, there have been many occasions where I have not understood the research outcomes presented to me in reports by colleagues. You could say that I didn't have the technical knowledge to understand them, and in cases where an article is written for a very specialist or technical audience this could be true. But I am talking about research intended for a broader policy or practitioner audience. If I cannot understand them, how will external audiences?

This is partly about clarity inwriting, which is a skill that is not easy to master. It's important to keep your audience in mind, to avoid (or clearly explain) jargon and not to assume facts or knowledge by the reader. In this article, however, I would like to take this one step further to talk about framing of research.

Framing is about presenting your research outcomes to a specific audience so that they will understand it in the way that you intend them to. How you frame or communicate your research results can influence behavioural or attitudinal outcomes. Thus, framing is an important tool in any research communicator's tool box.

The first step to well-communicated research results is a clearly defined research and engagement objective. This objective goes beyond seeking to publish an academic paper or book, to think about how the knowledge can be applied and used in the real world.

To ensure relevant and useful research, research objectives should be concise, logical and realistic. Tips to do this include: developing your research questions based on a real-world problem or issue. Discussing and debating within your team the key questions or issues your research will address, and narrow down the problem statement or issue so that it is specific. Identify upfront research outputs for your different audiences. Module 2 in this toolkit is a useful tool for identifying an impact objective within a team.

Clearly and well-defined research objectives will actually help in all aspects of the research process. For example, in defining the boundaries of the research question, defining data required to address the research question, and identifying data sources to make the research meaningful to the intended audience.

When it comes to communicating research results, here are a few tips and techniques on framing and messaging:

- *Make it memorable:* To develop strong messages that stick, keeping it simple and catchy can be impactful. For example, Newton's theory of gravity is known by many through the simple sentence 'what goes up must come down'. Heath and Heath (2007)'s research identifies six basic traits for making messages stick, one of them is simplicity, other examples include unexpectedness (counterintuitive or unusual findings might generate interest and curiosity), or emotions (helping readers connect to the human implications of your research, rather than the abstract).

- *Use a narrative or story:* Facts and stories are not mutually exclusive. In fact, there's a lot of evidence that shows that stories help us to remember facts. Narratives and stories can help us to communicate complex research ideas and findings to lay audiences.

- *Use meaningful headings:* Headings and sub-headings are important signposts for readers (especially busy readers who may just quickly scan the headings). Rather than just writing 'Introduction' or 'Problem Statement', can you tell your reader something about the content? In other words, give them a reason to read, not ignore that section.

- *Include visuals:* Graphics and images can be really powerful communication tools. There are plenty of free data tools (like Canva) that researchers can use to convey key concepts or ideas. Where there is budget you can also work with a professional designer to make it even more impactful.

In conclusion, if you are clear about what you want to communicate to your audience for what purpose, then you can frame your results, and your research will be so much more meaningful.

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On Think Tanks | Does paying attention to framing your research results help you to communicate them better?

How to use Case Studies in Training Programmes?

As a trainer, I often think about how to make my training sessions more interesting and useful.

The purpose of a training course is to help trainees understand a concept that can be used in their field. For this, they require both theoretical and practical knowledge so they can apply the learning in real-life situations.

Using Case Studies in training sessions is a great way to achieve this. They're practical training tools, which actively engage trainees through descriptive, real-life and/or fictional situations. Crucially, they focus on how to solve a problem, rather than on the solution alone.

They also offer alternative experiences, approaches and solutions to help broaden trainees' knowledge and skills, e.g., teamwork, practical knowledge application and problem solving.

Types of Case Studies

Picking the right type of case study for your training programme is important. Here are some of the main types:

- Descriptive case studies focus on explaining a particular situation or action. For example, it could be used to help trainees learn effective strategies.
- Exploratory case studies explore the potential benefits and limitations of existing strategies or examine emerging trends or new phenomena.
- Instrumental case studies focus on understanding a particular problem and then provide insights into a broader issue or problem.
- Intrinsic case studies focus on a particular case and then generalise the findings to other scenarios.
- Collective case studies examine a group of related cases to gain insights into broader phenomena.

How to use pre-existing Case Studies?

All the Case Studies that you provide should include sufficient information so the trainees can develop solutions and apply them to similar scenarios. The length of the training course will affect how you integrate the case studies. Some effective ways to successfully use case studies in your training programmes include the following:

- Provide a brief, written scenario and include questions that trainees can evaluate themselves. This will enable them to apply their learning immediately and identify options for solving the problem.
- Show short videos that present specific problems/scenarios and ask the trainees to develop role-plays based on them to analyse the problems objectively.
- Provide a written scenario, e.g., addressing local climate change issues, and accompanying data and ask trainees to analyse and present

their understanding of the issues in groups.

- Make a presentation, supported by visual aids. Provide practical examples of the theory or techniques covered and follow up with a question-and-answer session (structured or unstructured).
- Ask trainees to read a case study independently and then have a whole-group discussion about the challenges and the possible solutions.
- Get the trainees to complete individual/group assignments on a case study. Provide a worksheet and get them to write/present their analysis, including their recommendations/solutions.
- Use several case studies so the trainees can the identify similarities and differences among them.
- Case studies can also be provided as reading materials for trainees to take home to test their knowledge and skills without worrying about marks.

Helping your trainees write their own case studies

In longer training courses you could even give the trainees a scenario and get them to develop their own case studies on it. To support them with this you could give them a list of steps as a framework, like the following:

- Read the scenario and highlight relevant facts and underline the key problems.
- Identify between two and five key problems. For each, answer the following questions: Why does the problem exist? What's its impact? Who's responsible for it?
- Review the source documents, have discussions or conduct more research to find possible solutions to each problem/the changes required.
- Choose the best solution, making sure it's realistic and that the supporting evidence is strong. Identify the pros and cons of your chosen solution.

You could also give them a more detailed template, providing a clear structure for developing their own case studies. This could provide guidance and prompts for writing the following sections: introduction, background, evaluation, recommendations and conclusions.

Conclusion

The training strategies outlined above would be beneficial and effective in any training context. Using case studies in a training programme can be an effective way to enhance the learning experience and promote practical application of knowledge and skills.

Tips

1. ***Set Clear Learning Objectives*** - what do you want trainees to achieve by analysing the Case Study?
2. Choose Relevant and Engaging Cases to the training module
3. Provide Background Information
4. Encourage Critical Thinking
5. Foster group discussions and collaboration among participants. This allows them to share perspectives and learn from each other.
6. Include Multimedia and Visuals
7. ***Provide Decision*** - Making Opportunities
8. Conduct a debriefing session to discuss their findings and insights.
9. Connect the Case Study to theoretical concepts
10. Use Case Studies as an assessment tool to evaluate participants' understanding and problem-solving skills.
11. Include success stories, failures, ethical dilemmas and complex challenges
12. Allocate an appropriate amount of time for trainees to review, analyse, and discuss the case

Remember that Case Studies should complement other training methods and materials. They are most effective when integrated into a well-rounded training program that includes lectures, hands-on exercises, and opportunities for skill development.

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Communicating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Introduction

The United Nations declared the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and was adopted by all the United Nations Member States in 2015. Primarily it provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. There are 17 SDGs, which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership. It recognises that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality and spur economic growth-all while tackling climate change and working to preserve oceans and forests.

Communicating the SDGs and while interacting with the communities Government Officers need to consider the following:

- **Have a clear understanding** of the SDGs and their targets. Be familiar with 17 goals and the specific targets associated with each goal. This understanding will help guide policy decisions and ensure alignment with the global agenda.

- **Recognise that the SDGs** are a global framework, but their implementation needs to be tailored to local context. Formulate strategies and action plans keeping in mind the unique socio-economic, cultural and environmental aspects of a State.

- **Prioritise key aspects**, since there may be resource constraints. To do this identify the most pressing issues and prioritise actions accordingly. Determine which goals and targets are most relevant in the concerned State and focus efforts on those areas.

- **Encourage intersectoral collaboration** across different government departments, agencies and stakeholders. Foster intersectoral cooperation and coordination to ensure a comprehensive approach. Engage relevant ministries, local governments, civil society organisations, academia, and the private sector to leverage their expertise, resources and networks.

- **Establish robust data collection and monitoring mechanisms** to track progress towards the SDGs. Develop indicators, baseline data and monitor frameworks to assess the impact of policies and interventions. Evaluate the effectiveness of programmes and make data-driven adjustments as needed regularly.

- **Integrate the SDGs into State policies**, plans and budgets. Ensure that development plans and budgets align with the SDGs and prioritise their implementation. Mainstreaming the SDGs into existing frameworks will help institutionalise sustainable development practices.

- **Develop a communication strategy** to create awareness on the SDGs among the general public, civil society organisations and local communities. Encourage active participation and engagement of citizens in achieving the goals. Promote transparency and accountability in the implementation of SDG-related initiatives.

- **Explore innovative approaches** and partnerships to address complex challenges. Encourage innovation in technology, governance models, financing mechanisms, and sustainable practices.

The SDGs are an ambitious agenda to be achieved by 2030. While short-term goals are important also consider long-term sustainability and resilience of development initiatives. **Strive for sustainable outcomes** that will have a lasting positive impact beyond the target year.

By keeping the above in mind government officers can effectively contribute to the implementation of the SDGs and advance sustainable development in the state.

Tips

1 ***Simplify communication/message:*** Break down complex concepts and goals into simple and relatable language. Avoid technical jargon and use terms that resonate with the community members. Present the information in a clear and concise manner to ensure easy understanding.

2 ***Tailor information keeping in mind the audience:*** Understand the specific needs, concerns and priorities of the community you are addressing. Customise communication approach accordingly. Consider factors such as literacy levels, cultural sensitivities and local languages to effectively convey the message.

3 ***Use multiple channels of communication to reach a wider audience.*** This can include town hall meetings, community radio, social media platforms, pamphlets, posters, and local newspapers. Employ a combination of traditional and digital media to ensure broad accessibility.

4 ***Encourage active participation and create opportunities for dialogue with community members.*** Listen to their perspectives, concerns and suggestions. Emphasise a participatory approach that values community input, empowering them to be partners in the SDG implementation process.

5 ***Highlight local success stories and best practices related to the SDGs.*** Showcase examples of how the goals have been achieved in similar communities or regions. This can inspire and motivate community members to take action and contribute to the SDGs.

6 ***Offer practical guidance and actionable steps that individuals and communities can take to contribute to the SDGs.*** Provide information on local resources, programmes and initiatives that support sustainable development. Make it clear how community members can actively participate and make a difference.

7 ***Encourage community members to collaborate with government agencies, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders.*** Highlight the importance of partnerships in achieving the SDGs. Facilitate networking opportunities and provide information on relevant organisations and initiatives that individuals can join or support.

8 ***Communicate the government's commitment to transparency and accountability in SDG implementation.*** Provide information on the progress made, challenges faced, and future plans. Address any concerns or criticisms raised by the community and demonstrate a willingness to listen and improve.

9 ***Maintain ongoing engagement with the community to keep them informed and involved.*** Regularly update them on progress, involve them in decision-making processes, and seek their feedback. Build trust and establish long-term relationships with the community.

Conclusion

Positive and continuous engagement with communities, mobilising action towards SDGs will ensure that the path to achieving the SDGs will be smooth and easy.

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Does Research Methodology Matter to a Communicator?

I have worked in research organisations for the past few years, and working with researchers has become mainstream to me as a communicator, and research projects and outputs have become an important component of my work. Conducting research and analysing data follow well established protocols and processes to produce data and results, but what happens to the information? Sometimes it is left unread on someone's hard drive, stacked on a shelf in a library, or otherwise not shared.

It is my conviction that this is where communicators can really make a difference, and where our talents and skills can help make a project shine. These are some thoughts based on my experiences.

Getting inside the research process

Interpreting information shows the effectiveness of communication and the capabilities of a communicator. Conveying complex information to diverse audiences based on their needs and level of understanding is an important part of this process.

I try to follow this process to ensure that the right message is conveyed at the right time to the right audience:

Ideation Stage:

A research team often begins by conceptualising an idea (either based on a request from a funder or independently), and it's important for the communicator to be part of the team. For example, in some of our projects a stakeholder might provide a list of deliverables that will be required during the course of the project, these include an Inception Report or report on results. If the communicator is on-board right from the start to learn, understand and develop appropriate communication outputs, it will result in higher quality case studies, interviews and photographs (to assess the before and after situations, based on the research issue).

Tip: *Being involved in research conceptualisation has helped me to 'read' the mind of the researchers and team to better understand the 'so what?' of the research.*

Preparation Stage:

Reading, conducting a literature review and designing research methodology are the bases of any research. For a communicator it is important to know the nuances of each of these steps, as it will help them to understand the basic approach, the need for and sometimes the type of research that will be embarked. Knowing all of this background and context will help the communicator to customise outputs and to write accurate and meaningful opinion pieces, commentaries and policy briefs.

Tip: *It is also good to know and understand the techniques that the research team will use, such as questionnaires, interviews, or observations.*

Interpreting Data Stage: A crucial stage for a communicator. While the research team analyses and interprets data, a communicator is required to convert the often complex and technical data into clear and simple visuals and language to make the data easier to understand for a wider variety of audiences, including those with little or no technical knowledge of the subject. Once a report is completed, there will often be an opportunity to (re)interpret the data, unpacking the information to suit different audiences and stakeholders in the media, government, academic institutions, etc. A communicator can also play a crucial role by editing the document, checking that appropriate language is used, and ensuring clarity (for complicated and technical data) by adding helpful visuals.

Tip: *It is said that 'a picture is worth a thousand words'; I would like to add that it is worth much less than a word, if it is superfluous and not related to the content under discussion.*

Conclusion

Since the main purpose of research is to inform action, the role of a communicator can be crucial to ensuring that research does indeed lead to action. We should always remember to focus on why rather than what, and make an effort to encourage the whole team to answer and agree the 'so what?' and 'who cares?' questions. In short, a communicator typically helps to effectively share the research work with a wider audience, including the general public, which can generate a spinoff effect with funders and other stakeholders when they see their agenda rise in importance.

In short, a communicator can help create appropriate presentations, provide training on best practices in communication, and, most importantly, influence and guide/work with researchers through all the stages to ensure that quality outputs are developed and disseminated 'at the right time to the right audience'.

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What A Research Project Taught Us About Swachh Bharat Mission

The findings of a research-to-action project to assess the Swachh Bharat Mission underline the importance of using an extremely contextual, localised approach in implementation.

The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) launched on October 2, 2014 aims to end open defecation in India by October 2019. The SBM aims to construct 11 crore toilets in 5 years, to be able to achieve its goal.

Some have argued that the SBM policy framework is merely a continuation of the shortcomings of the NBA, and that ending open defecation by constructing toilets cannot fully realise the fundamental right to sanitation. Our field visits across different districts showed that households despite having toilets built, were not being used. A 2015 CAG report on the NBA echoed this in their five year audit of the programme, stating that ***"more than 30% of Individual Household Latrines (IHHLs) were defunct/non-functional for reasons like poor quality of construction, incomplete structure, non-maintenance, etc."***

It is in this context that Public Affairs Centre (PAC), engaged in a research-to-action project to assess and advocate for community-led participation in the SBM-G (G-Gramin) in two diametrically opposite administrative spectrums in terms of implementation: the states of Odisha and Tamil Nadu. According to government data, the former was a worse-performing state and the latter a better-performing one; we focused on six districts in each state.

Our Approach

With the help of Social Accountability Tools (SATs) we got a more nuanced understanding of what beneficiaries experienced during the earlier rural sanitation programmes. The first Citizen Report Card exercise carried out in 2014 highlighted the following critical shortcomings:

- Non-consultation with end-users (resulting in lack of 'ownership')
- Faulty construction of the toilets
- Lack of awareness on the health risks of open defecation

Specifically, we used –

Citizen Report Cards (CRCs), a simple yet powerful tool to provide public agencies with systematic feedback from users of public services. By collecting feedback on the quality and adequacy of public services from actual users, CRCs provide a rigorous basis and a proactive agenda for communities, civil society organisations and/or local governments to engage in a dialogue with service providers to improve the delivery of public services. We used CRCs to collect user and provider feedback at the beginning of the project as well as after two years of the SBM-G programme being launched. We carried out CRC+ exercises to understand any discrepancies in internal fund flows and functional responsibilities within the system.

We also used Community Score Cards (CSCs), which like CRCs, are an instrument to exact social and public accountability and responsiveness from service providers. The CSC process includes an interface meeting between service providers and the community, so that there is a dialogue as well as immediate joint action.

During the course of our work PAC used the meetings specific to the Community Score Card (CSC) exercises–sharing of entitlements, scoring by communities of users–to discuss perceptions on toilet usage and challenges connected with toilet construction to voice their feedback directly to the government officials. The CSC exercises created a platform for the communities and providers to work out Joint Action Plans (JAPs) to immediately improve efficiency in toilet construction with household buy-in.
Our partners in Tamil Nadu were at two levels–Community Based Organisations (CBOs, such as SCOPE and Annai Trust) working in sanitation in each of the selected districts, and the foot-soldiers, particularly the women volunteers who were empowered to understand the process of toilet construction and understand lapses if any. Our lessons from both Tamil Nadu and Orissa underlined the importance of an extremely contextual, localised approach when operationalising the SBM-G, in order to enable meaningful universal sanitation coverage. Our belief is simple–community empowerment leads to change which then leads to informed demands.

What we learned

Across the six districts in which we worked in Tamil Nadu, we found that while there was considerable awareness on the construction of the toilets, people were not aware of the subsidies allotted under the SBM-G scheme, as well as how to maintain the toilets. Communities wanted ground-level motivators in each of the GPs to be the agents of change, and wanted them to be knowledge-empowered, to be able to help potential SBM-G beneficiaries access the subsidies under the SBM. Therefore, we trained members from the Village Poverty Reduction Committees/Panchayat Level Federation/Self Help Groups to become Sanitation Ambassadors or Motivators (as we call them). These were predominantly women, who participated in a two-day training programme–on understanding how a toilet should be constructed, what it should look like, how to avail of subsidies, how to build awareness on the importance of a toilet–that was carried out in each of the 18 Gram Panchayats in the six selected districts.

Anecdotal evidence pointed to women using toilets more than men. Sanitation Ambassadors thus carried out door-to-door campaigns to create awareness on the importance of a toilet for all members of the family. Over time, men began using toilets for defecation as well. In Odisha, PAC learnt that unlike in TN, communities were unaware of the technical elements of toilets and were often not included in the construction of toilets. This lack of involvement often resulted in toilets not being used and then relegated as storage spaces.

The state also does not currently have a cadre of Ambassadors to carry out awareness building and capacity building activities. Therefore, our efforts here were markedly different from those in Tamil Nadu. We emphasised on providing information directly to the communities using various types of focused Information Education Communication (IEC) related exercises. We shared information with communities on relatively simple tasks, such as what forms they would need to fill to avail of the subsidies, how to fill those forms, the technical aspects of building a toilet, and so on. This was done through wall paintings in public spaces through an interactive demo exercise followed by a 'consumption evaluation' to understand their level of internalisation of the messages in the wall paintings.

Engaging with the communities of users, apart from creating awareness can go a long way in sustaining community ownership post programmes like Swachh Bharat Mission. Given the vast diversity that exists in a country like India, cognizance of ground realities, followed by community engagement and advocacy can be an integral step leading to successful development programmes.

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Proposed Recipe for a Robust Research Programme

Introduction

For many think tanks, conducting research is a core activity. A well-thought out research project, if planned and designed well, often produces the expected results. So, what are the key elements that a robust research proposal should include be?

Ingredients

A clearly defined problem statement, one or two precise research questions, identified data sources, a rigorous methodology, and specific outputs. To make it special, a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and capacity building activities from a sustainability point of view can be added.

A research programme should be telling a story to hold the attention of the audience.

Ingredient 1: Problem statement

Provides a brief overview of an existing concern, a concise description of an issue to be addressed, or a situation that can be improved. Ideally, a problem statement should fill the gap between the existing problem and what is planned to be achieved through literature review, evidence analysis, desk research and observation. The main purpose of the problem statement is to emphasise the importance of the research topic or issue presented, position it within a specific context, and stipulate the pathway on how this problem will be addressed.

Ingredient 2: Research question
Typically, this indicates the direction of inquiry that a research proposes to address in the context of the problem being researched. A research question helps to determine the type of research and also identifies the key objectives that will be addressed. The research question also becomes a beacon that guides the methodology and data sources. In short, your research question should underline what it is you want to evaluate, why you think this is important, and if it is measurable.

Broadly, there are 3 types of research questions:

Descriptive: used to help a study that describes something. It includes various public opinions which are mainly descriptive. For example: what percentage of the Indian population believes in being healthy/exercising?
Variables: being healthy/exercising
Group: Indian population

Comparative: includes and analyses the differences between groups. For example: what is the attitudinal difference between a rural boy and rural girl towards education?

Variable: Attitude towards education

Group: Rural boys and rural girls

Casual: aims to establish cause and effect. For example: what is the relationship between age and attitudes towards fitness amongst teenagers.

Dependent Variable: Attitudes towards keeping fit

Independent Variable: Age and attitude

Group: Teenagers

Ingredient 3: Data Analytics

Typically, data forms the backbone of any research programme. Both quantitative and qualitative data are important. Quantitative data will help understand the incidence of particular phenomena and the rate at which it might occur. It also helps establish co-relationships. Qualitative data helps understand why this the phenomena is occurring.

> *Data analysis is required to structure findings from research, is useful in breaking macro problems into micro units, clarifies useful insights from huge data sets and, most importantly, helps to eliminate subjectivity.*

Ingredient 4: Ideation

Any research proposal in its initial phase should undergo an ideation session. Ideation is usually associated with design thinking, and forms an important transitional step: it clearly defines the purpose, problem and solutions. If adapted well, an ideation session will help understand and ask the right questions, go beyond a typical solution, emphasise on innovation, and collate great ideas from different team members. Ideation challenges assumptions and breaks conventional approaches to research design by allowing new ideas to be formulated.

Ingredient 5: Outputs and timeline

Best practice includes documenting every aspect of a research to include challenges, research findings, etc. The narrative should tell a story. A realistic time line is important for two key reasons:

(i) if the research is too long-winded the data could become redundant;

(ii) a realistic timeline with clear objectives, outcomes and schedule (hours and months) helps to keep track of major activities and, most importantly, allows the research to be relevant.

> ***Special ingredient***
>
> *A Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) typically includes policies, standards and procedures, and helps in systematising all processes and in documenting them. This is important for consistency. After all, each think tank must aspire to produce high quality research.*

Tips

1 Define Clear Research Goals and Objectives

2 Conduct Literature Review

3 Build a Strong and Relevant Research Team

4 Develop a Research Plan Include Ethical Considerations

5 Manage Data and Ensure Clear Documentation

6 Ensure a Peer Review and Feedback Cycle

7 Be flexible and Adaptable with New information

8 Publish and Disseminate Results

9 Pursue Interdisciplinary Research:

10 Most Important-Stay Patient and Persistent

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Recipe for Writing a Winning Funding Proposal

Introduction

In several organisations writing proposals has become imperative and important. This articles takes a simple approach to writing a winning proposal.

Ingredients

- *Strong idea* - is required to ensure that you are in a position to convince the funder and also to showcase your expertise in the area
- *Evidence* - based information - funders ideally like to look at information that is factual and not fictional
- *Feasible activities* - ensure that the activities are completed and not just making commitments which may not be possible to achieve/complete
- *Knowing and understanding the audience* - study your donor/funder expectations well, since most of them have a well-planned agenda on who, what and why to support
- *Effective graphics* - numerical data, photographs, sometimes Tables can be introduced as additional information to further explain concepts

Now that you have your ingredients in place, you need to start putting them together. A well-thought out idea will help you ideate and focus on the key facts and bring out an effective and winning proposal.

Method

- Identify a strong requirement of your organisation-choose information carefully
- *Identify a probable/right donor or donors* - do not write to each and every funding agency
- *Understand their requirements and start writing* - personalise and customise the proposal
- Plan graphics/images
- Write an introductory letter to capture the essence of what you are applying for
- Prepare a Concept Note to
- Highlight the main ideas in a nutshell
- Convey a specific message or idea
- Educate and influence a donor

Note: *A Concept Paper is often considered as a better tool than a detailed project proposal for marketing.*

Tips

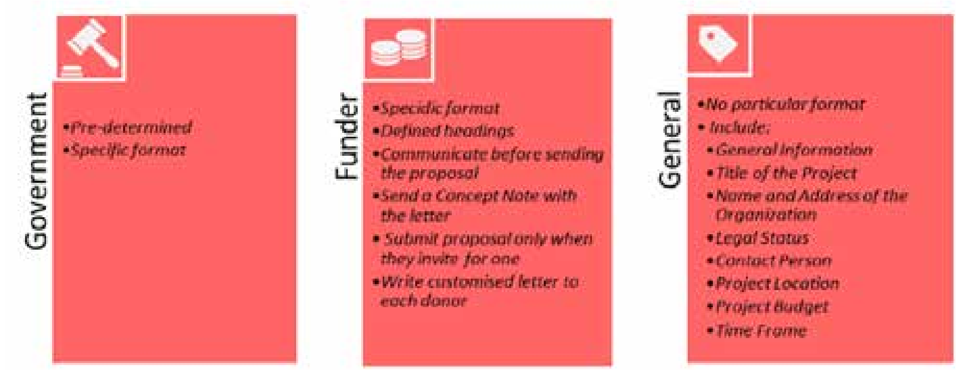
Write a Concept Note

1. Not more than 3-4 pages
2. Main objectives
3. Contextual information
4. Financial implications
5. Include problem/rationale
6. Avoid giving elaborate narratives

Proposal Writing is	A Proposal is a:
• Making a commitment • Sending it one donor at a time • Checking the donor formats • Keeping information brief and to the point • Including all information required	• Piece of document • Communication material • Tool for raising fund • Record of information

Types of Proposals:

Broadly speaking there are three types of proposals:



Importance of Graphics

Proposals can include graphics as additional information or included in the format. Often a donor has very little time to look at a proposal, hence a good presentation not only make document easy to understand but also gives an impression of quality.

The three important factors that proposal writing needs to bring quality are Graphics, Images & Colour. Graphics in the form of tables & flow charts helps to make statistical data more understandable and catch attention. They are also useful whenever there is page limitation and the data is tremendous to share. Use of simple graphs and flowcharts can simplify complex data.

A proposal with a combination of text and strong visual design increases reading probability. Today technology has potential that these graphics can easily be found or created. Follow the ABCC Principles:

- **Accurate** - no personal opinions, readers should be able to draw conclusions
- **Brief** - to the point
- **Clear** - short and simple sentences
- **Complete** - holistic

Conclusion

If you follow most of the points/ ingredients mentioned in the method, you are bound to have a winning proposal.

Policy Impact :
A think tank's perspective

The term Think Tank was first used during World War II to describe a safe space to plan and discuss military strategies. Over the years, the meaning of think tanks including their role has changed. Today, think tanks are considered Public Policy Research, Analysis and Engagement Organisations in most countries. They play a critical role in political and policy arenas, not only at domestic levels, but also on an international scale.

For more on think tank definitions check-out the On Think Tanks Series on Think Tanks: Definition and Terminology

But how do we determine what a successful think tank is? How does one measure the performance of a think tank?

Since the main objective of a think tank is to provide decision makers with high quality and objective policy research on policy relevant subjects, then, one important element of success should "*policy impact*".

Defining Policy Impact

Different organisations have defined policy impact in their own ways.

One way to think about it is from the perspective of funders and their projects. For instance, the World Health Organization defines impact as *"improved health outcomes achieved"*. The Department for International Development (DFID) defines it as "*the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy*". This definition has now been adapted by several organisations in the UK. Finally, the European Commission describes impact as "*all the changes which are expected to happen due to the implementation and application of a given policy option/intervention*".

Several organisations/institutes have defined policy impact based on their own missions or goals and then specified appropriate methods to measure it.

Types of Policy Impact

Popular studies classify impact as academic or non-academic, intended or unintended, foreseen or unforeseen. Most researchers focus on the extent of the policy benefits – broad or narrow, and the cost for its implementation. Some are classified based on time. It could be short-term individual impact or long-term collective impact.

Types of Impact

Policy Impact Parameters

Organisations and think tanks often debate on what could be defined as or label as policy impact. Think tanks are usually supported by grants from donors who naturally like to see visible impacts of their investments. Similarly, the research staff of these organisations are keen to ensure that policymakers take note of the research conducted by them. This has led to acknowledging the need to measure policy impact.

However, as there is a large diversity in the nature of think tanks, it is difficult to have one single metric of impact. Some of the broad plausible parameters are summarised as follows. We emphasise that this is not an exhaustive list and there could be more metrics as well.

If the answer to one or more of the questions mentioned above is "*Yes*", then it could be said that the organisation has indeed made an impact. This is perhaps can be a simple method of measuring impact but it is important to highlight that in a healthy democracy, the policymaking process involves inputs from a large number of stakeholders, and think tanks are just one of them. Ideally a think tank can set goals with reference to their work/research and also ensure that these goals are relevant for decision makers.

Indian Scenario

India is among the countries with most think tanks in the world. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the number of Indian think tanks and also a gradual increase in their engagement with the government. For a long time, policymaking was confined within the Ministries and the Civil Service. However, this is now changing. Several ministries actively engage with think tanks for their expertise and solicit inputs for framing and implementing policy. The government relies on these think tanks for both quick, short-term analyses and long-term studies. Indian businesses have also begun investing in and establishing such institutions.

There are several illustrations of the important role played by Indian think tanks in shaping policy in various disciplines -which can be described as impact. These include India's nuclear policy, foreign policy, climate and low carbon policy, etc.

Conclusion

As the think tank ecosystem in India continues to flourish, it is imperative to measure the efficacy of these organisations based on their work and interest. Most Indian think tanks have begun to realise the usefulness of measuring policy impact and there needs to be more clarity on tangible policy impact measurement indices.

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Later printed in

https://onthinktanks.org/articles/awareness-advocacy-action-the-pac-research-strategy/

Responding to COVID-19 and its spill over effects

COVID-19 has changed the world, transforming the way we look at ourselves, and the ways in which we relate to our work, communities and societies. In sum, it has also compelled us to reassess organisational priorities. Those that are nimble footed will recalibrate their strategies and cope better with stress, others will find the new normal daunting. Simply put, these are times when organisations need to re-strategise rapidly. And so that's what we did at [Public Affairs Centre (PAC)](), Bangalore.

Organisational response

PAC engages with diverse stakeholders in its action research, partnering with governments and engaging the communities. The near total and prolonged lockdown made this process challenging.

Containing the spread of COVID-19 was a priority, so we went into an early lockdown with the entire team working from home. The experience of virtual reality – of communicating online and coordinating across digital platforms – was both challenging and interesting. We needed to make work productive, yet fun. We did it in substantial measure, without compromising on project outcomes.

As with other organisations, the first big challenge was the accumulation of receivables, creating considerable stress on financial liquidity. In consultation with the Board, a series of short-term austerity measures were initiated. The PAC team rose as one and volunteered to take a pay cut. The importance of esprit de corps, in times of crisis was amply demonstrated by each member of the PAC team.

Once the lockdown became official, some of the staff went back to their hometowns, while some who were staying as Paying Guests had to shift to other available accommodations. The rest of the staff worked from home.

Most processes and modes of engagement were rendered digital. And over the last 10 weeks, as an organisation, through a hard process of crystallisation, we have redefined our priorities. We now understand better what matters and what matters less so. In practice, this has transformed us. Looking ahead, we will do half the things we did but twice as well.

Strategic shifts

Re-strategising PAC's activities was important, since COVID-19 is looming large and no one is able to predict when it will be over or what other shape it will take.

The strategic shift is best described as redefining themes, streams, teams and functions that circumscribe work at PAC.

Some of the key points considered included looking at the on-going projects, revisiting the domain/research areas, examining the staff structure, enhancing arrangements and the manner of engaging with key stakeholders. This exercise takes on greater relevance as we are in our Silver Jubilee year and the strategic changes we make will determine the pace and direction of our journey in the future.

Engagement with stakeholders

As a think tank, engaging diverse stakeholders – senior policymakers, community-based institutions, development agencies, and citizens – we realised how important it was, especially in times of crisis and in matters relating to the pandemic, to communicate in the local idiom.

To ensure that the communities we work with are also our biggest stakeholders, we created short videos (in Kannada, the local language). The messages were on how individuals and households must respond to the pandemic, what safety measures need to be practiced and what symptoms to look out for. These simple but effective videos were disseminated widely through our field-level partner organisations. The video titled '*Coronavirus-Don't Panic Be Aware*' conveyed in a simple manner the what, why and how to protect oneself against the virus.

Data Science

If there is just one lesson that we might draw from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is the importance of data analytics in addressing real world problems.

The Centre for Open Data Research (the analytics arm of PAC) developed data analytics based periodic reports, to serve as evidence-based guidance for the Karnataka State Government.

Four predictive analysis reports – three predicting the temporal and spatial spread of the virus and one on the predicted fiscal impact of the prolonged lockdown – were submitted with specific recommendations for action. The reports were well received and some of the recommendations implemented by the Government.

Post-COVID-19

Following the State Government directives, we decided that 33% of staff would resume work in the office, this includes senior staff (who had access to transport), some researchers and support staff. Staff who have gone home will continue to work from home until the end of June.

In essence crises test leadership decision-making. What might be good for the institution, society, or the country can and does sometimes turn into a negative sum game for individuals. Balancing outcomes needs clarity of vision. This perhaps is the biggest test that COVID-19 has presented to all organisations.

How Can We Improve Feedback?

According to a web definition feedback is a *"Process in which the effect or output of an action is 'returned' (fed-back) to modify the next action".*

Typically, feedback is to provide an opinion, evaluate and help improve a task. It can either be positive or scope for improvement.

In the work of researchers in think tanks and research organisations it is important to establish a feedback mechanism during the course of a research and in the process of creating a publication. However, often many organisations find it difficult to include this act of providing feedback, this could be either, that they are not simply interested or perhaps because they do not have an appropriate person/system in place. Feedback should and can be received from diverse stakeholders, including decision makers, other research organisations anyone who means well for an organisation.

In today's world of continuing change, including the need to grow professionally and to improve existing skills, it is important to receive and give feedback. Several studies indicate that feedback is effective and meaningful when it is timed well. For example, an editor requires to provide appropriate feedback to an author, during the course of writing an article or report; or a manager to a team member at the right time and at the right place. The effect of a feedback (positive or scope for improvement) will not have any meaning if it is provided way after an event has occurred. (see here and here)

What makes feedback a good one?

There are certain factors to be borne in mind while providing effective feedback:

Relevance & Timely:

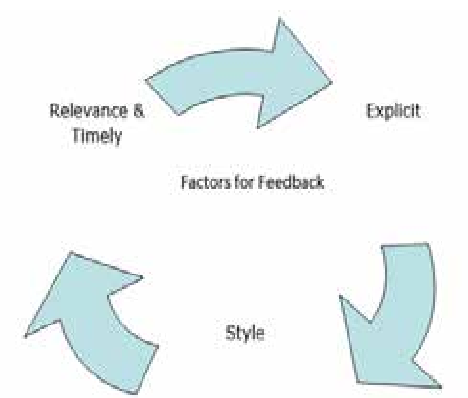
A feedback becomes relevant when it is provided/received at the right time. If a feedback is provided instantly then it has a value and is taken in the right spirit. For example, when a report/article submitted does not meet the expectations then it is better to say so immediately. Try to do this in a private manner, the recipient may then focus on what you are saying, rather than worry about what others are thinking. On the other hand, when a person makes a good presentation it will be relevant to mention the same (especially in front of an audience). Remember to provide feedback when events are still fresh in the recipient's mind.

Explicit:

A feedback is useful when it specifies/relates to a particular activity or goal. For example, it is useful when a feedback states that "*you have done exceedingly well*" rather than "*you have done a good job*". This is especially important because it is accepted well. For example, avoid saying, you always do it wrong or all your documents are not good and interesting. Instead focus on an event and say the document you submitted this morning needs to be improved, or your presentation would have been more relevant if you had included xxx facts.

Style:

A feedback provided in a positive manner is always welcomed. For example, ensure that the feedback is based on facts (agreed on), relevant, accurate and complete. Avoid using you could have done better; instead it is useful to say the report does not meet the expectations agreed by us, some information is not relevant and inaccurate. A positive feedback boosts the confidence of the recipients and there is a high chance that will continue to perform well, knowing very well that they are on the right track. Feedback can either be given orally or written. Sometimes body language also becomes an effective way of providing feedback. For example, a clap or a pat on the back can be a sign of appreciation, knitting of eyebrows, standing with folded hands can depict disagreement.



Barriers

Sometimes a feedback session can go wrong and may not achieve the said target. The possible barriers could be:

- Inappropriate mode of communication
- Stereotypes
- Lack of confidence (especially a person who is giving feedback)
- Non-verbal communication - does not allow the seeing/ observing reactions.

How can effective feedback lead to better results?

As defined earlier an effective feedback encourages a person to do better or helps a person identify flaws in their work, attitude, deliverables etc. There are several ways to ensure feedback is appropriate and effective:

- Focusing on the act rather than the person is important because no one should be judgemental. This approach helps in improving the quality of a task rather than deteorating the situation. For example, if a researcher submits a shoddy research paper, then focus on the paper by stating that the paper requires more information or is not accurate, rather than stating that you have not done a good job or your paper is shoddy.
- Clearly state the effect the act had on you rather than beating round the bush. Use the blame-free approach. For example, your feedback should be easy

to understand and useful for the recipient.

- Be cautious while using words, especially, when feedback is given for scope for improvement. Often a feedback provided, leads to misunderstanding rather than addressing a situation. Clarity and brevity plays an important part in providing feedback. For example, "*your attitude towards the guests was not appropriate*" or *"the conclusion drawn in your paper brought out some good points"*.
- One of the most important aspects is to pick the right time. Ideally no one is ready to receive feedback. For example, a person who is angry will not accept a feedback even if it conveyed professionally and is important.

Receiving Feedback

Some key points to keep in mind when receiving feedback:

- Keep an open mind: This is where your listening skills come to the core. Don't be in a hurry to respond or be defensive. (http://baird-group.com/articles/10-tips-for-giving-and-receiving-feedback-effectively)
- Use feedback provided as an act of self-improvement. Sometimes feedback becomes a part of a process in an organisation. It is only people who mean well, take the trouble and time to provide feedback.
- Understand why a feedback was given by a particular person. Most important listen to what is being said rather than just hearing it. Since feedback has been included in several processes in an organisation, it sometimes becomes an act of meaningless and monotonous routine/cycle that is followed, without any effect or meaning.
- Ensure that you also request for positive feedback, since it will certainly help you to understand feedback provided as scope for improvement.

Several research organisations/think tanks interact and work with different audiences. In the project management cycle stakeholder consultations or debriefing sessions are included as intervention platforms. This is a good opportunity, especially for organisations to share the progress of a project, key challenges etc. This is also probably a good opportunity to receive feedback/ suggested solutions from key stakeholders, ranging from policy makers, to funders and consortium partners to name a few.

Conclusion

It is always good to understand that feedback (both receiving and giving) should be taken in the right spirit. It helps us to grow professionally and also makes us recognise areas of strength and areas for improvement.

In short, a good process of establishing a conducive feedback system is used as an effective tool in an organisation it will help researchers to:

- ***Remain motivated***
- ***Improve performance***
- ***Helps people to be on track***
- ***Assists people in knowing how people perceive their performance***

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http://www.politicsandideas.org/?p=3582

Management Skills for a Researcher in a Think Tank

Introduction

In today's world of fast tracking, building expertise has become one of the biggest challenges for a researcher. Several studies say that the future of think tanks may require an all-rounder. What does this mean? What does one have to do to understand this and make it happen?

Ideally a researcher has several required skills that are inherent and valued but most of this is not always well presented. Some of the key functional skills include developing a professional working relationship with stakeholders and peers, meeting deadlines and ensuring that escalations are made when expectations are not met. Due to the nature of work that a researcher undertakes, often, they work in isolation and need to manage their work well and on their own. This in turn ensures a strong work ethic and personal effectiveness that helps them to handle a wide range of challenging possibilities.

However, in today's world most Think Tanks have begun to encourage and nominate researchers to engage with stakeholders, policy makers and funders and often also to address the media and are given the responsibility to manage key projects. While most researchers have excellent knowledge of their research and domain, many of them lack several basic skills which include professional effective communication and management skills.

Researchers as Managers

Perhaps to start with, researchers require some basic management skills. Historically, researchers working in a Think Tank were expected to primarily:

- Know the implications of the research being conducted on policy making processes
- Suggest recommendations/solutions
- Understand the importance of using media effectively
- Keep abreast of new findings, especially with reference to policy making
- Understand the cutting edge debates to provide implications for policy making
- Know how to respond to media call-keep information organised

In addition researchers also require to be:

- Independent in that they should be able to work without supervision and in a position to manage their projects and time
- Critical thinkers to help evaluate their work and that of others. This involves being fair in their judgement of the information analysed and the conclusions drawn from the analysis
- Capable of solving problems without having "a right answer" and also employing strategies to arrive at a suggested solution
- Able of presenting findings in a pro-

fessional way by defending their ideas/findings with evidence-based back up

Responsible and have ownership in executing projects and taking wise decisions

- Excellent time managers, able to prioritise tasks based on the need and be self-motivated

In addition to the above, several schools of thought and researches have also claimed that a typical manager also requires some soft skills. Some of the key ones include being:

- Introspective and ensuring that appreciation is conveyed at the right time and with the right measure. Something said at the wrong time and overdone may not be well-received. A well-timed appreciation will go a long way.
- Impartial and keep personal emotions in check and avoiding unfair differentiations between team members. Some tend to be good while others tend to be difficult.
- Perseverant as often a manager is flooded with deadlines, meetings, impromptu requests, grinding pressure and above all the regular day-to-day activities. A constant control and follow up will help in overcoming stress. Sometimes even delegating responsibilities helps in focusing on more serious matters.
- Enterprising to ensure that the tasks and deliverables are on time. While micromanagement is important, understanding and acknowledging the larger picture is an imperative skill.
- Available and supportive offering help rather than waiting to be asked.
- Clear in communication by setting expectations, identify grey areas and discussing the same in an interactive manner.
- Keeping to deadlines and targets, taking a reality check to ensure that tasks are handled smoothly. Keeping a contingency plan in place, if required.

Researchers as Communicators

Traditionally, it has been assumed that scientists are not good communicators. However, this is wrong, since in several Think Tanks, it is scientists who head the organisations and also are often the interface with stakeholders. However, slowly several Think Tanks have resigned themselves to the idea of engaging professionals to manage the communication and outreach activities and also often to engage with stakeholders.

The reason that scientists may not be good communicators could be because they are involved in their research very deeply and fail to see the need and importance for communicating the same to the required audience. They are wrapped in their work and are often unable to share and disseminate their ideas effectively.

By bringing in communicators to support them, researchers can focus more time on what they know best and communicators can help them maximise their impact.

This lacuna could be fulfilled by adapting/adding a few additional skills:

- Avoiding jargons and acronyms and keeping information easy and simple to understand while communicating
- Employing the Elevator Pitch style to convey brilliant ideas
- Learning to choose appropriate medium of communication, for example, face-to-face, written, presentations, online, etc.
- Networking

Conclusion

To be a successful researcher requires that certain pertinent qualities need to be enhanced as part of a daily routine.
A researcher as manager should be a good team player, who works with the team and not for the team. Many researchers find it difficult to transit from being a solo player to a team player in a research project. They also require understanding the strength of team members and using it to the full potential. For example, some team member may be technically strong and may not be able to make effective presentations, while others may be vice versa.

A researcher as communicator must recognise that it all begins and ends with effective communication. Lay all your cards on a desk and encourage others to provide their view points. Value other people's opinion

Tips

1 *Understand Research Process* - familiarise methodologies, tools and timelines

2 *Set Clear Expectations* - ensure that your researchers understand what's expected of them

3 *Effective Communication* - discuss progress, challenges, and goals

4 *Mentoring and Development* - offer guidance, mentorship, and opportunities for skill-building

5 *Support Collaboration* - encourage collaboration within and outside the team. Researchers often benefit from interdisciplinary cooperation and networking with peers in their field.

6 *Time Management* - help team manage their time effectively. Research projects often have tight deadlines, and time management is crucial to meet them without undue stress.

7 *Stay Informed* - stay up-to-date with the latest developments in your field.

8 *Adaptability* - be flexible and open to adapting the team's goals and strategies as new information or challenges arise.

9 *Ethical Considerations* - maintain a strong commitment to research ethics and ensure your team adheres to ethical guidelines in their work.

What Does An Audience Want From A Research Organisation/Project?

Any research organisation aims to work for an audience, hence are required to ensure that their research caters to the need of an audience/s. So who could be the audience-past, existing or potential, in some cases it could be a combination of all the 3 options?

This article attempts to understand what audience want from a research project, rather than what a research project wants to do. While there is always a wide spectrum of audience who are important some visible/prominent, there are some invisible (though important). A comprehensive list of audience could ideally include policy makers, community, corporate (CSR), media (human interest aspects), academics to name a few.

To start with what is a research project? Ideally a research project tries to answer/investigates scientifically, using a systematic and appropriate methodology to achieve defined objectives. Keeping this in mind how does an audience relate to a research project? What is it that they want through evidence-based research?

In the context of India, the set of audience mentioned above more or less have the same roles that their counterparts play in the other parts of the world. However, to further explain:

Policy makers *are decision makers who make determine important aspects with reference to introducing policies in the country.*

The process involves in introducing an Act which is considered as a policy instrument or framework. It includes how the Government will address an issue and prescribe how it will be done. To ensure this a rule is introduced to define the why and what of the Act. This gives an idea of the importance and need for an Act. This is followed by introducing Regulations. This identifies the who aspect of the policy making process. For example, a Chief Health Officer is responsible for health related aspects in a given geographic area.

Community

Since most policies are aimed at a community (mostly at the grass root level), it is important to involve them. So what does it entail?

A community ideally likes to know what is it that they are going to benefit from a research project done in their geographical area. From their perspective they just don't want to be people who want to respond to questionnaires and surveys.

In contrast, they often like to be a part of such endeavours to perhaps bring in ownership. Often community engagement does not stop with just asking people what they want, but perhaps arouses them to look into issues with new ideas and do things in a new way. Thus the functional capabilities of the community can be developed to enable their participation in a complete manner. For example, several schools in the rural areas in India have Mid-day Meal Schemes (once in a day) supported by the respective governments. This is anchored by the Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Human Resource and Development, Government of India. While the scheme is a good initiative, but if a family is encouraged to give small amount of vegetables from their gardens/field then the nutrient element can be increased, or children can be given meals twice a day.

Most **Corporate** in India are bound to support activities/contribute to the well-being of the society under the Corporate Social Responsibility Act (CSR). This was introduced by the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Government of India. In many cases in order to fulfil the obligations of the CSR duties several corporate have supported in the broad areas of education, health, sustainable initiatives to name a few. Conducting health check-ups of children/community, enhancing infrastructure in school by painting walls, providing furniture, supporting sport initiatives have become passé

Today several CSR initiatives want to go beyond this and are looking towards research organisations to improve their contributions, raise the bar in their philanthropic approach, conduct impact assessments to know the impact of their initiatives

As a first step some CSR initiatives are looking at research organisations to look at data, analyse them and provide recommendations on what went well and what could have gone better.

Academia several learning institutions believe that conducting research on local issues and developing interesting solutions is needed and important in an academic curriculum. They believe that this type of experiential education stimulates the minds of the students due to the exposure to practicality and immediate application of knowledge. Students get an opportunity to understand deeply what are the prevailing challenges faced by a community, apart from what is working out well. In this endeavour many academic institutions have made it a requirement for students to do their internships in research organisations.

Several research organisations have a well-defined structure to engage with interns, they broadly include a process for application, including researchers in projects to conduct base line studies, desk research, participate in field visits, conferences/workshops.

Some even have the opportunity of being in meetings where key stakeholders like senior government officials are present. This brief video provides some glimpses of an interns experience.

Media become an important player since as a stakeholder they become the voice to engage with audience who are perhaps not immediately visible to research organisations. Often media relies on research organistions to provide data/analysis intense knowledge when they are representing/sharing information to the general public, on topical issues. Their views sometimes influence the thought process/minds of the general masses. In other words, many a time they play a vital role in informing the general public on issues that are there, but the general public do not have any complete knowledge. Print, electronic and web media serve their purposes and for a research organisation this is useful.

Media becomes important stakeholders since their dissemination power and platform is very huge and wide.

Conclusion

Involving or engaging with stakeholders and audience helps research project in making informed decision making effective, bring in increased satisfaction and have a common understanding of a complexed situation, in some cases, encourage good governance and transparency which in turn will encourage good practices and most important ownership is inculcated automatically

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https://pafglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/rpb02.pdf

I strongly believe that communication and data analytics often are like two sides of coin. Research communication can be enhanced by using data effectively, this includes data driven insights, optimising strategies, measuring impact and engaging with audience. The value and relevance of a research work is achieved by using data.

"Data are just summaries of thousands of stories-tell a few of those stories to help make the data meaningful"

Dan Heath
Best Selling Author

COMMUNICATION AND DATA ANALYTICS

What Are Data Analytics To A Communicator?

I have always been wary of numbers and data. But as I started engaging with stakeholders, as part of my role as a communicator, I realised that numbers always add value and play an important role when disseminating information. So, I began to seek, learn and understand what data is and how it can be used efficiently by a communicator. I believe that the COVID-19 pandemic makes this even more pertinent.

I began by examining various documents and reports where data analytics and data science were central to the policymaking or programme design process. I realised that '*data analysis*' simply means understanding and looking for meaning through numbers and discerning patterns in information relationships.

Based on my learning/observations, I've identified four main types of data analytics. Here I outline what they are and what they can mean for a communicator.

- **Descriptive analytics**

Descriptive analytics answer the what question of any content. It is often considered as the preliminary step in a process where one is referring to historical data to understand what has happened. Descriptive analysis becomes important in helping to track trends and identify patterns of behaviour of certain phenomena.

From a communicator's perspective, information from all sources is important if you want to dig deep and draw insights based on the evidence. However, this data merely provides answers to the question what happened and when; it does not provide answers to the question of why it happened in the way it did.

For a communicator of evidence, descriptive analysis becomes useful when dealing with case studies. A case study is an important output that is often used to tell a story, including a detailed description and analyses of people or events. Descriptive analysis helps in identifying different options to the narrative one wants to build.

In addition to the above, descriptive analysis is useful for a communication team/communication professional in not only monitoring but also learning what was useful and what could have been better. For example, descriptive analysis can help unpack information from social media platforms: to better understand information trends, their transmission, how information/a communication is performing, who the audiences are and their preferences to make better sense of the information. The analytics interface helps a communicator to view the number of followers, their demographic profile, their reactions (tweets, likes, clicks etc.), which help in improving the quality of the communication and/or narrative analysis you wish to undertake.

- **Diagnostic analytics**

Diagnostic analytics identify why something happened and seeks to establish co-relationships, or better still, causal relationships between events and their underlying causes. Typically, it helps situate your communication in the temporal, spatial and contextual frame that enables your audience to gain a more nuanced understanding of the historical data against other types of data.

Simply put, diagnostic analytics seeks to answer questions like why and how something happens. Broadly speaking, it involves trend analysis and statistical analysis.

On the one hand, from a communicator's perspective, trend analysis helps in predicting the future using past events/behaviour. For example, if an event is being organised by a communicator/communications team then trend analysis becomes an important tool to measure and learn. Care can be taken to plan better, based on events and instances that may have occurred in previous (similar) situations. This may include what worked well, what are the areas and scope for improvement, did the event meet the expectations set forth? Were there any hindrances? As a statistical technique, trend analysis helps to decide future actions.

On the other hand, statistical analysis involves collecting, studying and presenting data to understand underlying patterns and trends. For a communicator this technique becomes useful when one seeks to optimise and improve events, situations or actions. For example, pie charts can be used to represent the number and types of staff in an Annual Report.

In short, diagnostic analysis builds on the facts from descriptive analysis and helps to draw correlations.

- **Predictive analytics**

Predictive analytics help explain what may happen. It acts as a tool for forecasting. It deduces data and helps in identifying the '*best option*' by combining experiences from past performance.

The algorithms help generate insights to predict future outcomes. In other words, predictive analysis uses information gathered from descriptive analysis and predicts results based on this.

- **Prescriptive analytics**

Prescriptive analytics explains what action is needed to be taken, especially to avoid problems in the future. It helps in optimising the future course of action, based on the availability of different options.

Prescriptive analytics includes descriptive, diagnostic and predictive analytics but has a different purpose: it seeks to determine the best course of action among various choices, taking into consideration the known alternatives and variables that could affect the desired strategic outcome. In short, prescriptive analytics unearths historical data to provide a foundation for understanding past performance and what is currently happening.

For example, in a training programme, prescriptive analysis technique can be used to identify the required skill sets and experiences required to undergo a particular training. If a trainee is not eligible for the programme, they can be advised to undertake some additional programmes to qualify for said training programme. This trend may have to be customised for different situations/individuals.

Often both predictive and prescriptive analytics are denoted as proactive analytics data and can be used to move forward and identify probable trends/problems so that they can be addressed, when identified.

Conclusion

Communicators can use data effectively by:

- Becoming comfortable with numbers.
- Using and understanding descriptive analysis by interpreting historical data through statistical analysis.
- Using automated information for quick answers.
- Using data analytics as inputs to understand trends for increased effectiveness.
- Of course, as a communicator never forget that tactical planning and innovative thinking also plays an important role.

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https://onthinktanks.org/articles/what-are-data-analytics-to-a-communicator/

Using Dashboard as a Communication Tool

A dashboard is an information management tool that tracks, visualises, and demonstrates metrics and Key Performance Indicators (KPI). It can be customised for and shared with a specific audience to provide an overview of an activity/project.

A dashboard is usually a graphic presentation that typically provides a snapshot of various activities in a project.

Advantages

A well-designed dashboard graphic can help to ensure quick understanding, a quick response, and quick action by providing:

- Tailor-made information to suit an audience
- Details for different levels and sections of a project and allow audience to view the goals of a project goals clearly
- An overview information in one location and where appropriate, hotlinks to further detailed information
- Easy navigation around complex information using good design; and
- Important information that is accessible to anyone online.

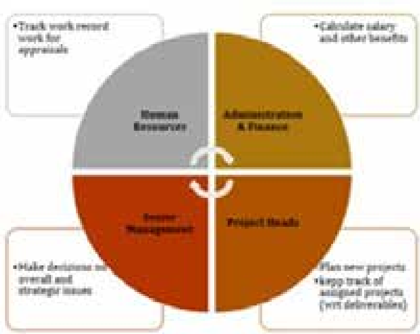
What does a dashboard do?

A dashboard can be an important decision-making tool by providing quick insights, analyses, and action points, which can streamline workflows.

For example, during COVID-19 vaccine rollouts were fast approaching in India and it was important to understand the intersection between the three tiers of the government. The involvement of central, state, and local government bodies in different stages of the rollout necessitated co-ordination and efficient action-plan formulation for a smooth rollout. A Dashboard developed was useful to handle this task

How does a dashboard work as a communication tool?

Like any other communication tool, the dashboard helps to engage effectively with an audience or different stakeholder. For example, a Think Tank or organisation might create a simple and well-designed dashboard to understand and capture aspects of staff workflow to enable better planning and deployment. A simple timesheet that includes staff names, designation, assignments, and attendance and non-attendance dates will help different teams to plan.



Benefits

- *Boosts visibility:* Helps an organisation to know and understand what is working and what is not working. For example, during a campaign a dashboard will show how many people received an email/poster/information.
- *Saves time:* Provides information on time spent overall and individually, creating a reference to help make better decisions.
- *Manage inventories:* Helps to measure activities or boost an activity, and historic data helps to arrest challenges and plan accordingly.
- *Help in predictions:* The insights provided help to predict and plan activities, manage audiences, and help to make engagement effective in future.
- *Provide real time information:* In today's environment, a sound analysis of activities helps to make decisions. Tracing the needs of an audience becomes easier with real time data.
- *Help in decision making:* Quick turnover has become the norm. Especially where people are working remotely, providing key information to take quick decisions can also help reduce stress and increase productivity.

Challenges

- A badly designed graphic will tend to confuse rather than help the user.
- An appropriate and common technology needs to be used, that everyone involved is trained to use properly. If not, information may not be presented accurately.
- It's important to date any graphic to ensure the information is used accurately. Ideally the graphic needs to be updated and refreshed with more up to date information where possible.
- There are no universal rules about how data is presented, and users may end up using the data in different manner than intended. It is up to those creating the graphic to ensure that the parameters and any limitations to the data are clear.

Originally published in https://www.researchtoaction.org/2021/03/dashboard-communicating-complex-data-clearly/

Creativity in Data Science

The myth that data & creativity can't go together must be addressed by finding ways to integrate viable solutions in areas of public policy

Introduction

In recent times, the importance of data science in its application in public governance and policy-making has become increasingly relevant. In most countries, think tanks and civil society organisations have become aware of why data must feed into the recommendations provided to governments. They do face a challenge, though.

Often one does not get the data that is required but creativity can fill this gap. For example, in Bengaluru during the first wave of COVID-19, the use of data played an important role. Organisations like the Public Affairs Centre (PAC) used data effectively to identify areas where the pandemic was severe and not so severe. We used data to demarcate areas into red, green and yellow zones to help the government restrict movements and also to help people plan their travel outside their homes for daily chores.

In recent times, the Government of India and governments from all over the world have stressed the use of data, especially in the context of T20. Hence, using data creatively, we were able to ease some of the larger issues to tackle the pandemic.

Context

Often the use of data becomes skewed if the objectives are not defined well and clearly. For example, if one were to say that the objective of the research is to identify the key reasons for school dropouts then it becomes imperative to choose appropriate data points.

In other words, in the context of India in the research being done on Sustainable Development Goal 4, which is Quality Education, one of the reasons for education to be affected is due to school dropouts (children not attending schools or leaving schools). This is especially so in a lot of rural India. This finding cannot be just backed by saying that parents could not afford the fee, but other factors are no transport available, an unhygienic environment, lack of clean drinking water, etc.

To elaborate, the following steps need to be considered:

- Define data requirements
- Identify data sources
- If data is not available, find alternatives — proxy or surrogate data. Data should be scientific to analyse gaps and outliers.

*Research projects must first have a clear idea of the policy problem they are seeking to inform, and the question they want to answer to help do so. From there they can identify the best available data and methodology to do so. '**Best available**' data is the key here.*

What is feasible? Sometimes you might have to get creative, think outside the box, and look for alternative sources or methodologies to meet the knowledge need. But be careful: *getting creative does not mean foregoing reliability and robustness of the data.*

Stages of Using Data Creatively

Research projects have defined stages to follow that help in understanding, analysing and representing information in a manner that will be useful to an audience. In each of the stages, creativity plays an important part to ensure novelty, simplicity and most important ensuring complex data is conveyed/unpacked in a manner that can be understood by relevant stakeholders. To elaborate:

Stage 1: Planning
This stage involves generating ideas and gathering information to initiate a viable research project. It serves as a platform to prepare and generate ideas. It allows the teams to brainstorm and "*think out of the box*".

Creativity is brought in by allowing one's mind to wander, look at general issues in a new light and bring in new perspectives. Creativity also helps nurture different approaches and thoughts which in turn helps in building ideas, which may not have been foreseen.

Stage 2: Evolution
This stage helps one in taking two steps back and rest the idea. One can focus on other tasks/projects. Typically, in a research project putting away your analysis/writing for a couple of days is good. This becomes very important since when one revisits the same, a lot of thoughts, new perspectives and new readings add new information.

Similarly, creativity becomes part of this stage when ideas are visually seen and initiated. Content can be selected and communicated/showcased in the best way, based on the needs of the audience.

Stage 3: Clarification
This is also called the insight stage where ideas pop up and new insights appear. The wow factor appears in this stage where free and open-ended thoughts and ideas flow based on the material/information that was gathered.

Since answers to your research appear, the creativity juice also plays an important part, where you plan to present your information/data (especially numeric and statistical) needs to be used to convey complex ideas to ensure simple understanding. Your document starts generating Tables, Figures and Photographs to illustrate concepts more effectively.

Stage 4: Validation
In this stage, you validate the information and also consider alternative approaches. You consider and relook at information through comparison, validate it with evidences, and most importantly, reflect if your analysis matches your initial concept/idea.

Your creativity appears when you go back to the drawing board and try and connect the dots, relook at initial assumptions to ensure a viable research.

Stage 5: Confirmation

In this final stage, the actual creative process is built. One needs to now wear a tough think cap to see how best should information be presented, especially looking at the needs of the audience.

Like a research phase, the creativity phase also includes conceptualisation, designing, planning, analysing and publishing stage. The myth that data and creativity cannot go together needs to be addressed by finding ways to integrate viable solutions, especially in the areas of public policy. Creativity in data science can be seen in anything from innovative modelling, thinking up original ways to collect data, developing new tools and being able to visualise data processes.

Conclusion

Using data analytics effectively spices up the content of a report, especially in the space of public policy process. Evidence-based reports are always useful for better understanding, validity and most important for implementation of programmes.

Originally published in

https://meghalayamonitor.com/creativity-in-data-science/

Data Science in Governance: A Tool

Introduction

In an age where science and technology have become an integral part of everyday life, data science and data analytics has also come to the forefront, especially in the area of governance. Data analytics and data science helps in not only mining useful information from humungous data available, but also helps in improving government decision making activities. As a Government officer it becomes important to understand the use of data and see the importance for providing insights in making data driven decisions. In short, Data analytics is the science of analysing raw data in order to arrive at a conclusion based on the information. It also helps optimise performance through the insights it presents.

Importance of Data Science

Data science is important since it answers some basic questions which are relevant. In addition, it also:

- Supports successful policy decisions and to a large extent enactment of a policy
- Understands and identify the needs of the community
- Identifies gaps/lacunae for better implementation of policies
- Helps in prioritising important aspects in policy making process.

Data science also becomes a tool for validation to create informed policy decisions. Typically, this leads to accuracy and also becomes a centralised system for easy access. All sectors are assured of empowerment by digital growth and use of technologies. This becomes an important factor since, a move towards digital technologies presents better opportunities.

Advantages

Understanding and using data analytics effectively has the following benefits:

- Defines government actions by identifying outliers of exclusion
- Constructs increased assured decisions
- Identifies barriers and challenges prior to making a policy decision
- Correlates between different data points to find a pattern
- Helps in drawing insights and conclusions.

Context

Several studies have shown that data analytics have become game changers to improve decision making activities in the government. Government policies are impacted to a great extent by using data science to the maximum, where gaps and similarities in implementation are addressed and most important the identified audience benefit from policies and programmes. In short, data science and analytics enables curating efficient solutions for users and beneficiaries.

Several initiatives launched by a Government gain a lot from use of data science and analysis. For example, education, agriculture, health, some of the government services become more useful and relevant. Key areas include:

Increases Efficiency

The efficiency of a programme is typically impacted by the data analysed. A good example for this would be, during the time of the pandemic (when it shook all of us the first time) the Government relied largely on data science. They identified the intensity of the pandemic in different pockets and developed the red, green and amber zones for handing the situation better and efficiently. This created less confusion and largely helped control the situation. The creation of the Co-WIN platform is a good example.

Distribution of Resource

Data collection and data analytics helps in bringing in transparency, which in turn helps a Government increase resource efficiency. For example, if data was collected to identify Public Health Centres in Karnataka and identify the types of illness mapped to the availability of concerned doctors and medicine the data analysed will help the Government to optimise human resources and allocations of medicines, based on the analysis.

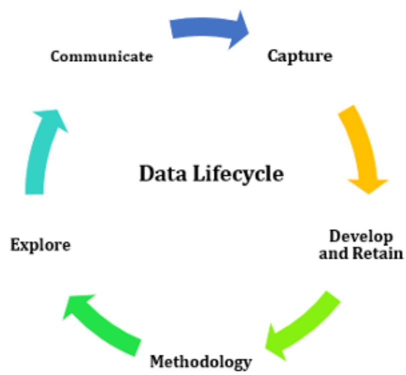
Plan for Future Projects

One of the biggest challenges faced by the Government is in the areas of education, poverty, health and nutrition, infrastructure to name a few. However, data analytics can become a game changer if used well. For example, useful insights and knowledge retrieved from the data gathered can help in improving the government decision making process for projects that are planned.

What You Should Know as a Government Officer?

In a general sense many people often think data analytics/data science is equivalent to rocket science, not it is not. A simple and logical understanding of a data lifecycle will help you in using it efficiently. So here is the lifecycle:

- Capture-raw data (structured and unstructured data)
- Develop and Retain-clean, organise and integrate
- Method-Observe similarities and regulate patterns
- Explore-Conduct the following analysis-statistical, predictive and regression analyses
- Communicate-develop reports, charts, data visualisation to include insights.



Conclusion

If used well and intelligently data science can prove to be a boon. New insights and acumen always helps in growth and improvement in policy making decisions. Data science is about data-driven decision-making and service delivery. From a policy making perspective data science and data analytics can increase economy and set new standards for decision making.

Thus data analytics can be used to identify challenges/disasters in advance and help develop a strategic approach to address the same.

Often one tends to forget that there are several communication collaterals things that we use regularly in our professional life. As a communicator I often wondered how do I reach out to people, how do I engage with them? How do I start a conversation? How do I get an audience perspective on the work my organisation is doing? It struck me at some point of time that an Annual Report serves as an excellent communication tool and like other collaterals-newsletter, websites etc.

"How well we communicate is not determined by how well we say things but how well we are understood."

Andrew Grove,
Engineer, CEO

COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Press Release and Press Note
Powerful Communications Tools

Introduction

Most think tanks organise events around the publication of a book or report or run workshops, seminars and round tables to exchange and disseminate information. Ideally, a policy engagement and communication team within a think tank explores different ways to bring visibility to its products and how to reach the right audience by unpacking and sharing key information.

Typically, more so during the pandemic events organised by Think Tanks and organisations have had to change the formats. Most of the events are conducted virtually, there is no physical contact or approach.

> *Communication teams in all thinks tanks and organisations always attempt to focus on how to disseminate/communicate information. Using media as a mode is not only important but useful, since you are able to reach out to people who you may not be acquainted with and maybe a niche audience.*

So what should you do?

- Develop a database of all media houses (print and electronic)
- Draft a Press release which succinctly capture the key aspects of the event planned

Key Elements of a Press Release and Press Note

Heading - a meaningful and eye-catching headline, where key words need to be included to help bring better visibility in search engines

Content - A brief body copy that encapsulates all aspects of the event.

Often some journalists are overwhelmed with story pitches but are too busy to write what we want them to. They depend on a good press release to provide all the information they need. Hence include the following aspects to ensure that the message is clear and complete:

- Time and day
- Venue (in the time of the pandemic –links and passwords)
- Brief Agenda
- Simply put include the “5 Ws” and the H
- Keep it short and Simple.

Disseminating the Press Release and Press Note

An event requires more than just creating a Press Release and sharing it with the press. What one needs to keep in mind is:

- Which media will like the topic for example, environment, science, technology etc.
- Is there a particular journalist who writes on a said topic/issue? If so, get in touch with the reporter
- These days the Press likes receiving information via WhatsApp (at least in India)
- Use the social media to disseminate the information and tag the right press/journalist

Other Engagements with Media

Press Conference

Organising a Press Conference to disseminate/share a Press Release also becomes an important factor. Ideally this should be done 2-3 days before the event. Do not forget to give a media kit which typically includes:

- Press Release
- Brochure
- Agenda
- Any recent Publication - Annual Report, Newsletter/bulletin
- Contact Details-For example, Communication Manager

One-to-one Interviews

This is especially relevant when you have key people as invitees/speakers/ panellists. Sometimes this works well when you have a good rapport with the said person, who can speak about your organisation, the work you do, which brings in credibility

Activities Post an Event

- Post an event ensure that you send a Press Note to all the relevant media and journalist via an email
- Include a couple of photographs (high resolution and clear)
- Follow it up with a telephonic call

Conclusion

Careful planning with clear objectives for communications outreach activities can never go wrong. A Press Release/ Press Note (customised message) should elicit interest from the media who connect with the story and can unpack and quote/write larger articles for their audience.

Having well-thought action points with a cohesive media communication strategy always helps in a successful outreach activity.

Community Engagement:

Choosing the Right Tools

Introduction

The community is a key stakeholder in most research, especially action research, because government policies aim to benefit communities. So how is community engagement woven into a research project, and who is responsible for ensuring that it done appropriately? I would say the responsibility falls to both the researcher and the communicator, and in many cases a data analyst as well. Ideally the researcher manages the research programme: designing research questions, conducting a literature review, identifying a problem statement, and choosing which geographic areas to cover, amongst other tasks. The data analyst analyses the data gathered and provides evidence to corroborate the researcher. The communicator typically unpacks the research, and relays it based on the needs of the audience.
To succeed a research programme needs to choose an appropriate tool to communicate with the community. Action research aims to engage communities in the research itself, to 'give a voice to the voiceless'. A few of the most effectives tools for action research include Key Informant Interviews (KII), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), questionnaires, and ethnographic research.

Key Informant Interview

Key Informant Interviews (KII) are qualitative, in-depth interviews with a community who have first-hand knowledge of the issue. It is important to understand what you hope to achieve by using a KII:

Define this Option

Why have you chosen this option?

- To receive a deep insight on a specific or related topic?

Review existing information

- Conduct preliminary research to identify existing information.
- Identify if your audience have al ready been asked your questions.
- Check existing data to further focus your interview.

Select key informants

- Plan the selection of individuals.
- Include interviewees from diverse backgrounds and sectors; they should be knowledgeable about the issue.
- This option is time-consuming, so ensure that it is the right choice.

Develop the interview process

- Choose the interviewer: someone who is a good organiser, has proven communication skills (written and spoken), and is a good listener.
- Outline the number and types of questions.
- Structure the interview, remembering to use the audience's limited time

wisely, and choose the most appropriate medium (telephone, video, or face-to-face).

Formulate the interview questions

- Create a script to guide the interviewer.
- Write step-by-step instructions.
- Include an introduction to the research: background, purpose, and activities.
- Describe how the information will be used.

Benefits	Barriers
Information from knowledgeable people	Not useful for quantitative data
Window to explore new ideas	Biased if audience not selected appropriately
Simple and inexpensive	Vulnerable to interviewer's bias

Focus Group Discussion

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) brings together people who have similar experiences or background and are in a position to discuss a specific topic. It solicits qualitative research such as ideas, points of view, and opinions. It is crucial that it be moderated and remain focused. It attempts to link research and policy by providing useful insights from varied opinions. Sometimes it is useful to host a focus group before designing a questionnaire (see below).

Benefits	Barriers
Gauge reaction of audience in real time	Does not always provide in-depth information
Saves time, as opinions and feedback can be recorded from many people during one event	May be expensive, as participants may expect compensation for their time
Dynamic environment can produce new ideas	Could be influenced by moderator bias

Questionnaires

A questionnaire or survey can include both closed and open-ended questions. Closed questions can provide data for analysis (quantitative information), while open-ended questions provide more qualitative information. The data could then be presented using bar charts, pie charts, and percentages, for example. The qualitative data can lead to further discussions.

Benefits	Barriers
Increases speed of data collection	Poorly designed questionnaires often use stock questions that are not sufficiently targeted
Sometimes low or no cost	No scope for respondents to record additional thoughts
Impartial compared to other options	

Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research is a qualitative method and includes observation and interaction in a real-life environment. It provides a detailed description of the relevant aspects of a community. It involves fieldwork and the context and research objectives define the situation. The data-collection activities include observing participants and conducting formal, informal, structured, and semi-structured interviews.

Benefits	Barriers
Depth of understanding	Time consuming, since building trust is important
Helps identify and analyse unexpected issues	Requires a well-trained researcher
Provides a rich source of visual data and helps to reveal unarticulated needs	Not useful for short-term studies

Conclusion

Choosing the right tool will help significantly in achieving research objectives. A researcher should always bear in mind the sentiments of a community and this includes their privacy, time, and reason to participate, and most importantly researchers need to take the time to win the trust and confidence of a community, especially when 'listening to the voice of the community'. It is equally important to 'ground truth' research findings – that is to test assumptions against the reality in the community – to ensure robust policy recommendations.

Tips

1 Identify the Right Tools-understand your community's needs and preferences

2 Encourage Feedback-actively listen to feedback and queries

3 Foster Two-Way Communication-be open and transparent while communicating

4 Segment and Target-Tailor your engagement efforts by segmenting your community based on demographics, interests, or location.

5 Respect Privacy and Security-ensure ethical considerations with data collected

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How do You Measure the Impact of a Policy?

Introduction

As a Government Officer one often wonders and thinks has a policy made an impact on the community/people? It is not a new thing to understand and know that the success of a policy speaks volumes of its importance and also usability. So how can one measure policy?

Context

Measuring a policy is an intense and complex activity and requires the use of pre-defined indicators and most important data. It helps policy makers to make informed decisions and as a result they are also able to relate to real life issues. To do this an impact measurement strategy needs to be developed to track the social and environmental developments.

So what should be determined to assess the success of a policy? The following pointers provides a fair idea on how to measure policies:

- Identify goals of a policy-for example, is the policy expected to reduce poverty, increase awareness on importance of education or improve health of people?
- Use data (quantitative and qualitative)- Collect and analyse data collected through surveys, available statistics, interviews and case studies to understand how a policy has affected individuals and communities.
- Develop relevant indicators-that will help measure a policy. For example, if the policy is aimed at improving the health of people indicators such as reduction in death rate, disbursement of appropriate medicines and assigning appropriate doctors can be considered.
- Compare before and after situations-if the purpose of the policy is to reduce crime then one needs to study the crime rates before and after introducing a policy which will help determine the success or failure
- Encourage feedback from people/communities-valuable insights can be gathered if feedback is collected from various stakeholders-implementers, affected communities, experts to name a few.

Key Benefits of Measuring Policies

Conducting an impact assessment and measuring policies has its affect, both within and outside a department/Government. Broadly they include the following:

Internal	External
Helps in enhancing decision-making- what to do and what not to do, based on what's proven to be impactful.	Establish that the policy is developed keeping in mind the community and also to bring about a positive change.
Demonstrates commitment and show cases the need to bring about societal improvements	Community is convinced and will have appreciate and be more proactive in appreciating policies
Identifies what is effective and what is not.	Encourage communities, individuals and relevant stakeholders in aligning with your policies
Aids in focussing on results and not just on activities	Increases reputation and honesty through ,

Challenges to Measure Policies

Measuring the success of a policy can be an intricate task that requires careful consideration of several factors. It is important to not only have a clear knowhow of what does success means but also data that is reliable to help have an objective approach. The following could be the key barriers:

- Clarity in understanding what is to be achieved-success may mean different things for different stakeholders/audience. One needs to know the specific objective.
- Long-term perspectives are very crucial since a short time frame often hinders the performance of a policy
- In many cases collecting data or non-availability of data requires planning and understanding of type of data required to be collected
- Other factors not related to the relevant can also be a barrier in measuring a policy. For example, changes in economic and demographic areas could hamper a policy on migration
- Bias from political pressures can also quell some facts to project a positive picture.

How to Overcome Barriers

Formulating a policy based on a problem identified-to ensure a simple and logical flow of thought and action policy makers should make programmatic decisions, which will clearly impact the efficiency and effectiveness of the policy.

Adequate and appropriate measurement of programme and policy goals needs to be understood. Ample measurement and statistical data does not in and of itself prove anything by, if the measurement instruments are evaluating indicators that are not directly related to the problem at hand.

The target audience who will be affected by the policy need to be kept in mind to ensure that the desired effects is achieved. The remedial intent of the initial policy is diffused amongst a larger group of recipients diluting the ultimate impact of the policy, and making evaluation more complicated.
In the political context it should not be an obstacle for fair and unbiased evaluation. For example, due to political interests a Government may oppose or be supportive regardless of the data.

Conclusion

A good policy measurement can contribute to a sound and useful policy development, strategic planning and enactment of a policy through evidence-based practices. If taken in the right perspective measuring a policy can be a logical exercise which will reap in excellent benefits.

Governments should look at the process broadly and not as an ad hoc activity. Standards and guidelines can be established to ensure timeliness and completeness.

Communicating Using Social Media and Media Platforms for Effective Governance

Context

Media or the Fourth Estate is an extremely important Pillar in democracy. It is a medium where the common man comes to know what is happening in the Government at the Local, District, State, National and International levels. It is also a medium where the Government communicates with the common man.

Given the importance of the Fourth Estate it is necessary to know the broad Principles that govern to engage with media.

First Principle is to disseminate correct, accurate and legitimate information. This is important because in today's world the mass of information that is generated is so that people find it difficult to know what is correct, accurate and legitimate.

Coming from the Government it should be authentic and most important legitimate. It cannot be done at the whim and fancy of a person or a group of people. Hence dissemination is the first principle.

The second principle of media management from an Officer's perspective is prevent the spread fake news or incorrect news because that can result in misuse of information or result in conflict and rumour mongering. So preventing wrong information is the second principle.

The third principle is that nobody from outside the government should use news or information as impostors and try and cheat people.

Hence it is important when a young Officer goes to a subdivision or training division that the Fourth Estate is your friend and not an enemy. There will be occasions when media may be critical of you or critical of the government and this should not be taken personally.

Finally, there will be yellow rags what is also known as small newspapers which tend to be aggressive, negative, single out individuals by names and write scurrilous news which one should ignore.

Engaging through Social Media Platforms

In recent time various social media platforms have become powerful platforms to share, disseminate information and also to be proactive with audience/readers.

Several people have stopped reading newspapers since they get information by reading it on twitter or Instagram. Both have negative and positive powers. One can use it positively by disseminating information instantly. For example, if one is inaugurating a new facility or hospital they can instantly disseminate the information quickly and widely-that is the positive side. One also needs to understand and acknowledge that fake news has become very prevalent and hence cyber security systems have been put in place.

In India social media has been widely accepted. The Government of India and State Governments have made great initiatives in ensuring that key social media platforms serve them as “loud speakers” to reach out to the masses. Be it appreciating a person, a movement or thanking several Chief Ministers are engaging with social media platforms. Some examples are Shri Conrad Sangma, Chief Minister, Meghalaya, Shri Mannivannan P, I.A.S, Secretary to Government Ministry Welfare Department, Government of Karnataka who use social media platforms effectively.

Tips for Young Government Officer

1 Don’t be defensive if a media asks questions

2 Use social media to communicate policy, introduce new legislation and various other functions

3 Encourage engagement for public participation and collaboration

4 Understand that social media platform makes informed citizen and strengthens public relations.

Conclusion

Is used correctly both, social media platforms and electronic and print media, cane be persuasive and alter opinions. In fact, it can be used to encourage inclusiveness by governments to recruit workers and garner volunteers, promote activities and most important communicate to the general public directly.

Proof of Concept

A Marketing Tool for Research Projects

"A proof is a proof. What kind of a proof? It's a proof. A proof is a proof. And when you have a good proof, it's because it's proven".

Jean Chretien

Research organisations and think tanks often find a barrier when justifying the relevance and utility of a research project to other stakeholders. Stakeholders (be them Government/funder/corporate/partner/community) often look forward to solutions to address specific problems. Hence a Proof of Concept become an important instrument while managing/designing a research project.

A Proof of Concept (PoC), simply put, tries to demonstrate a method or idea to prove the potential practicality of an issue/concern in research areas/topics. It is developed to demonstrate the functionality of a concept or theory that can be achieved. The benefits of having a PoC is to:

- Engage with stakeholders to show the importance of a research idea/concept
- Inform stakeholders the details of how or where a research project can be implemented
- Clarify roles and responsibilities
- Use it as a proven idea to take it forward

In short, a PoC is a design which tests an idea or an assumption. The difference between a PoC and a prototype is that a PoC depicts how an idea can be developed while a prototype tries to demonstrate/simulate a project and a pilot study tests an idea/concept. In a research project a PoC provides insights, data, and ways to develop and improve it. It could typically include qualitative and quantitative research, provide solutions and propose a strategy.

Key factors to keep in mind while seeking to establish a PoC

One of the most important aspect is to have a timeline, as often a stakeholder audience want to see results and hence a well thought out log frame which includes all of the above helps a stakeholder to not only see the whole picture.

Writing a PoC involves a systematic approach to ensure its validity. To start with one needs to ideally identify the uniqueness of one's idea. It should elicit the wow factor to enable a reader/audience to immediately accept the same. A PoC should also provide a realistic budget which should match the periodicity and list of activities. A focussed target group identified enables an intensive programme and ends up being purposeful. By factoring all these elements, a well-presented and designed PoC reflects the capabilities and credibility of an organisation. It also helps a stakeholder in making decisions about the project in question – either take it forward or reject it.

5 Steps to Follow for Writing a Winning PoC

It is important to understand that the main objective of creating a PoC is to present the practicality of what is being addressed. Based on several tested approaches the following steps can be adopted to create a successful PoC

Step 1: Statement of the problem/issue

In this stage it is important to understand the requirement of a stakeholder/audience and their interest in a specific policy issue. One this is clear, the research organisation/think tank can step in to address this problem/issue. This stage includes:

- Establish a basis to understand the evidence around the problem
- Describe the concept/project and its intended impact
- Describe the uniqueness of the methodology to be followed
- Compare and demonstrate your experience

Step 2: Stakeholders

It is a well-known fact that any research project is, in most cases, catered to an audience. Most organisations work for and in communities. For instance, some orgnisations adapt the bottom-top approach in our research areas. Also one should bear in mind that there are different types/levels of audience in any research project. They broadly include communities, policy makers, media, partner organisations to name a few. Hence ensure that you:

- Establish the target audience
- Identify potential partners

Step 3: PoC as a "solution" document

A PoC should serve are as "solution" providers to specific policy problems. Hence always ensure to:

- Include information on earlier studies
- Describe and introduce intervention strategies
- Describe the desired outcomes and how they will be measured
- Provide an outline of the pilot study

Step 4: Key details to include

To make a PoC more robust and clearer ensure that:

- Concepts are clearly defined to garner interest
- Required resources are explained
- Funding Sources are presented

Step 5: Measuring Success

An integral part of a PoC is to ensure that indicators to measure the success of a project is defined and included. It is important to:

- Identify the expected outcomes (realistic)
- Introduced the indicators that will measure these outcomes
- Acknowledge potential unintended outcomes
- Ensure that appropriate procedures and processes are in place to evaluate and assess the project

Conclusion

A viable and successful PoC helps any government to scale up a research project and saves the burden of identifying something that is doable, requires by a target audience and most important achieving expected objectives.

Research Case Study

A Powerful Communications Tool

This article explains why the Public Affairs Centre's (PAC) case study on women in the workforce served as an ideal tool for communicating research to a broader audience.

*A case study is an empirical research method. It seeks to answer the "**how**"- and "**why**"- questions that are often missed in quantitative approaches. That is why it is ideal for field research. I decided to use the case study as a tool to investigate trends and situations on the various aspects we were addressing in the project.*

Research organisations like PAC are often in a dilemma on what sort of communications tool to use to reach their target audience. As a communicator, I explore, suggest and discuss with the researchers what the best way will be to communicate their research findings effectively. For Southern Voice's "State of the Sustainable Development Goals" (SVSS) project, we did field research in various regions of India. Our SVSS project is titled *"Will Women be a part of India's future Workforce?"*. The core objectives of the research project were:

- to understand the challenges that Indian women face
- and their reasons to join the labour force

PAC wanted to examine whether there is a synergy (meaning a positive correlation) or a trade-off (a negative effect) between achieving the twin objectives of economic growth and decent work for all, which is Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8. We wanted to develop an understanding of the relationships between the demand and supply-side factors of the labour market. And finally, we sought to identify how skilling programmes can become more inclusive, especially for women.

Importance of using a case study

Keeping the above in mind, the research team narrowed down the scope to three prominent geographic areas in India. The focus of the research was to understand the structure and agency issues that affect the female labour force participation rate. The other was to review the skill development programme Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY). It is a flagship scheme of the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship (MSDE), Government of India.

We agreed that a case study captures the essence of what the research is about. It is a great tool to tell a human story, based on the uniqueness of the findings. I began by understanding what a case study is, and I learnt that a case study:

- Provides information which may not have been conveyed through research analysis, for example, the emotional aspects, feelings, perceptions of the persons interviewed.

- Provides a story about the reality of persons affected by the issue.
- Allows the presentation of data in a visual manner.

However, I felt that I had to remember to:

- Avoid lengthy presentations, otherwise, I would lose the interest of my audience.
- Ensure that there were validity and evidence, by providing names, faces and stories of the people involved.
- Capture critical aspects, identify the problem, convey what the problem is and what it meant in a larger context.

Based on the above, I planned a basic outline (around 4-5 bullet points) to help focus on what I wanted to convey. In building the case study, I realised that the main benefits were:

- Being comprehensive, as it helps establish a deeper understanding of a research topic.
- That interviews always help gain a better understanding of the topic and what an interviewee is trying to convey.
- Exploring common problems in greater detail.

In short, I believe that using case studies for communications help the audience of a research study gain qualitative insights and a more nuanced, unbiased understanding of a complicated situation. In addition to this, it can be used as a tool for cases with a unique or interesting story to be conveyed. There is no substitute for real ground knowledge.

Originally published in *http://southernvoice.org/research-case-study-a-powerful-communications-tool/*

Using Digital Knowledge Management Platforms For Effective Communication

Introduction

Information is gold, and most organisations want to store and retrieve it quickly and efficiently. Information needs not only to be disseminated, but also tailored, updated where appropriate, and securely stored and indexed for future use and reference.

The best electronic libraries are built on long-established principles, but today there are platforms that allow organisations to take knowledge management to a new level.

The three platforms that I've found most useful in my role as a communicator are Learning Management Systems (LMS), Document Management Systems (DMS), and Dashboards.

LMS, DMS, and dashboards can all enhance organisational efficiency, but the decision to use them should be based on the specific needs of the organisation, available resources, and the features and limitations of each tool. Ultimately, successful implementation and adoption of these tools depends on careful planning, effective communication, and ongoing maintenance and support. There are dozens of each of these tools on the market, at many different price levels, from the relatively simple and straightforward to very sophisticated systems that use artificial intelligence to enhance users' experience.

These platforms each fulfil different needs. A dashboard provides a real-time overview of data and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). An LMS is a virtual hub that not only hosts all of an organisation's training and learning content, but also enables it to support onsite and remote learners and track and support their progress over time. A DMS manages documents and files (though today 'content' might be a more appropriate description), making it easier for organisations to store, catalogue, update, retrieve, and share them.

Learning Management System (LMS)

An LMS is a centralised hub that:

- Disseminates knowledge and monitors learning
- Enables admins to track and manage learners
- Provides reporting and analytics to identify areas of improvement
- Allows discussions between the user and their peers and teachers or trainers.

An LMS can be used to create courses that include text, documents, multimedia, and quizzes to enable self-paced learning. Many students of all ages who used remote learning during the recent COVID lockdowns will have used a basic LMS to access and submit assignments, as well as join their teacher and classmates for live lessons. But an LMS can also be a much more sophisticated system, with some using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in different ways, for example to understand users' behaviour and guide them through choices in content and format (much the same way streaming services suggest other programmes you might like to listen to or watch), or to run 'chatbots' that interface directly with users and generate natural language text. For example, if an organisation PAC is working with a State department in Karnataka. The department conducts training programmes for officers from the district levels. Most of the trainees are not formally educated but have rich work experience in the community. Their work in the Panchayats (village councils) requires them to develop their skills, both practical and theoretical. When a training module on Solid Waste Management was developed it offered case studies not only via standard PowerPoint presentations, but also lively and culturally meaningful animated videos. The LMS stores all these training materials, and allows the trainee/participant to access them freely and at the most convenient time (within the course timeline).

Benefits

The initial creation of an LMS hub is a big effort, but the long-term benefits include:

- Trainee's learning journeys are managed, ensuring that they are offered and complete appropriate and required content.
- The organisation now has a training platform for new employees.
- Each trainee's progress is tracked and visible to both trainee and trainers.
- Resources can be accessed remotely at any time of day.
- It can be very cost-effective, as much of the admin is automated and users manage their own access.
- A large number of learners can be accommodated.
- Trainees who may require additional support are identified.
- User data is analysed to improve training based on proven needs.
- Most importantly, when done well an LMS provides an engaging user experience.

Challenges

Although there are many benefits, there is no doubt that investing in an LMS also presents challenges, including:

- Creating and implementing a new LMS can be expensive and requires substantial technical expertise to both set up and maintain.
- Introducing an LMS requires that both trainers and trainees change their work habits and learning behaviours.
- Sensitive user data can be susceptible to hacking if not secured properly.

In short, an LMS is a centralised hub that meaningfully disseminates knowledge resources and monitors learning. It enables administrators to track and manage learners, provides reporting and analytics to identify areas that need improvement, and allows discussions with peers and teachers. LMS can also be used to create courses that include text, documents, multimedia, and quizzes, among other options, and to enable self-paced learning.

Document Management Systems

Electronic Document Management Systems (DMS) have overtaken most manual document management. A DMS enables the electronic storage, rapid retrieval, and management of documents and other content; provides secure storage and access, version control, and organisation; and enables multiple users to collaborate on the same file. A good DMS improves efficiency, reduces costs, enhances security, and provides better disaster recovery and customer service.

At an organisational level, a DMS becomes a centralised storage system for myriad documents and other types of files necessary for, for example, research, project management, financial management and reporting, and personnel. Each DMS is tailored to the organisation, and indexed by years, projects, or funders, among other categories. At PAC our documents, proposals, and outputs are housed in our DMS, ensuring that they are available to whichever staff members need them at any time. Content is protected by passwords at different levels, in order to maintain confidentiality.

Dashboard

A dashboard presents accurate and coherent data in a visual and interactive format. Good data visualisation makes complex information easy to understand. Key indicators are monitored in real time, and this data analysis enables better evidence-driven decision-making. Dashboards help to clearly communicate insights to stakeholders, can be customised and accessed through any compatible device, and can integrate data from multiple sources.

However, creating and implementing a meaningful and secure dashboard can be challenging and time-consuming, requires technical expertise, and options to customise may be limited or expensive. Dashboards must also comply with data privacy laws, which can be cumbersome, especially if your data is international. A dashboard has different views that can be adapted or programmed based on need, and the most common views include:

- *A centralised view* – all the key data in one place
- *Real-time insights* – monitors information so staff can make quick decisions in response to trends and changes
- *Improved decision-making* – data visuals identify patterns, trends, and outliers that help to identify and solve challenges
- *More effective communication* – with stakeholders of all types, presenting them with information that they can grasp quickly and understand easily

Conclusion

In summary, LMS, DMS, and dashboards are all multi-faceted tools that can enhance efficiency and effectiveness. Using any of them means investing in software, training, and content creation, but also spending considerable time up front to really consider and understand your information needs. It is very easy to pay for appealing extras that you won't ever need or use, so plan and budget carefully.

Tips

1 *Choose the Right Tool* - consider factors like data volume, type, security and scalability.

2 *Establish Data Governance* - a well governed data environment promotes trust and reliability in communication.

3 *Centralise Data* - reduces data silos, making it easier for teams to access and share information

4 *Ensure Version Control* - ensures that everyone is working with the most up-to-date information

5 *Catalogue Data* - makes it easier for users to discover and understand available data

6 *Integrate Data* - consolidate data from different departments or systems, to improve cross-functional communication

7 *Data Visualisation* - visual representations of data are often more effective in conveying information than raw data

8 *Role-Based Access* - helps maintain data security and privacy while facilitating communication among teams

9 Keep the data management tool up-to-date to maintain performance and security.

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Stakeholder Engagement a Tool to Measure Public Policy

Introduction

The Public Affairs Foundation (PAF) recently organised an awareness programme on the importance of the role of stakeholders in making a policy effective. While participating in the course I realised why stakeholder engagement is important not only during the policymaking process, but also in the implementation and monitoring stages. Briefly,

stakeholder engagement includes identifying, analysing, planning, and implementing activities/ policies systematically.

To do this it is important to identify, engage with, and understand the requirements of stakeholders.

Ideally the tools and techniques include:

- Analysing data
- Representing data
- Communicating ideas

In addition to the above, it is important to map the stakeholders through different engagements events, such as face-to-face meetings, emails, phone calls, etc. Their response to the above also serves as an indication to measure stakeholder engagement.

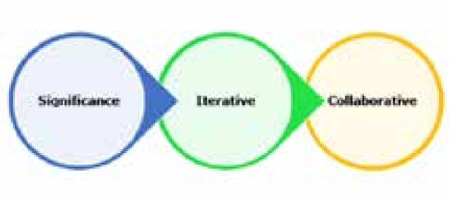
Public policy stakeholder engagement is a process where information is gathered systematically and analysed to define the interests and involvement of various actors in a public policy or programme.

Typically, stakeholder engagement is particularly important during these stages:

- *Agenda setting:* The government identifies the need for a policy
- *Analysis:* Information is gathered and analysed to determines the importance of and urgency for a new policy
- *Formulation:* Policies are designed/created based on the analysis
- *Evaluation:* The value of the policy is assessed
- *Implementation:* Where actual 'action' occurs.

Characteristics of stakeholder engagement

- *Significance*: Understand the objective clearly
- *Iterative:* Recognise interrelationships between the different stakeholders
- *Collaborative:*Understand everyone's needs before translating them into a policy



Principles that guide stakeholder engagement

- Encourage inclusiveness and representation
- Encourage broad involvement and representation from diverse stakeholders
- Understand and create a conducive environment to allow stakeholders to participate in all the stages

Develop relationships to include mutual learning and understanding

- Establish clear and transparent information and feedback processes to acknowledge mistakes and misunderstandings
- Share feedback constructively for accountability
- Build strong collaborative relationships with stakeholders whose involvement is valued and respected.

Tips

1. *Identify and prioritise stakeholders* - create a list
2. *Understand their needs and interests* - conduct surveys
3. *Customise the communication approach* - language and frequency
4. *Develop trust and credibility* - transparency and reliability
5. *Define clear objectives and outcomes* - measurable, achievable and relevant - use SMART goals
6. *Build a strategic stakeholder engagement plan* - activities, roles and responsibilities
7. *Encourage two-way communication* - feedback mechanism
8. *Document and archive* - maintain records.

Conclusion

An effective stakeholder engagement is an ongoing process that requires dedication and attention to detail. The said event did a lot to convince me and other participants to ensure that stakeholder engagement becomes an essential aspect of all policymaking processes.

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Using Questionnaires as a Research Tool

Introduction

Think tanks routinely engage with stakeholders to gather information which is then analysed to develop evidence-based reports and policy recommendations. Identifying appropriate research tools and methodologies is important because it leads to robust fact-gathering and ensures the collection of sound and logical data.

As a communicator it is important for me to understand these tools and methodologies, and one that we often use is a questionnaire. A questionnaire is a tool to collect data, asking a given subject a set of questions and recording either oral or written responses.

Advantages and disadvantages

Like any other tool, questionnaires have advantages and disadvantages. For me, some of the key advantages include:

- It can be inexpensive way to gather information – it can be shared on a website, social media platform, or as an email.
- It's flexible, as you can include open-ended or closed questions, and you can send it only to a select audience or target a wider audience for scalability by sharing via email or social media channels.
- It's easy to analyse your data and to visualise that analysis through graphics.
- Respondent's anonymity can be preserved when a digital questionnaire is used online.

I also recognised these disadvantages:

- If completed online comprehension and understanding cannot be guaranteed, which can skew results.
- It doesn't capture emotional responses as well as interviews do.
- Respondents aren't necessarily meticulous in answering – some questions may be skipped, and hence a complete analysis and understanding may not be achieved.

Tips

1. *Define research objectives* - articulate research questions
2. *Select an appropriate questionnaire type* - structured/ unstructured/semi structured
3. *Develop clear and concise questions* - easy to understand and not ambiguous

4 *Use different types of questions* - multiple choice, Likert scales, open-ended

5 *Conduct a pilot test* - use a small sample size of participants

6 *Format* - Arrange questions in a logical sequence that makes sense to respondents and provide clear instructions

7 *Ethical considerations* - anonymity and confidentiality

8 *Data Analytics* - plan, validate and report

Conclusion

An effective questionnaire should include information required by the research project end-users, be designed in a way that can be easily used by the respondents, and structured to ensure that data analysis is simple and easy. Co-create the questionnaire with the stakeholder to ensure that the right information is generated.

Ensure you use the C principles:

Concise,
Courteous,
Crisp and
Complete.

Finally, ensure that you have tested the questionnaire and chosen your respondents appropriately.

Originally published in

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Annual Report

A Powerful Communicating Tool

An Annual Report in today's context has become an important communication material. Some organisations use it for fund raising activities, some as a need and request from funders, some to showcase key activities and achievements of an organisation and some present it as a technical report. It is called as a technical report, since it projects/states different types of information, either domain-wise or project-wise. A typical Annual Report often contains financial information, to include Income and Expenditures. Whatever the reason, one should see the story board of an Annual Report with a visual layout of pictures, images, photographs and also include the required text.

In many organisations an Annual Report is designed to share with audience from various backgrounds and experiences events, mile stones achieved, impact studies made, innovations, new projects to name a few.

The production of an Annual Report should go through a systematic and rigorous process to ensure that nothing is missed out. The process should begin with identifying the primary audience. While it is generally accepted that the primary audience would be the members in the organisation the exterior audience would be any one from – policy/decision makers both from the State and National levels, to funders, consortium partners, ex- employees and acquaintances and new visitors. For any communication material to go out to the public, it is believed that the immediate audience (inner/organisation) need to understand and accept what is going out to the public. There are 2 primary reasons for this, one, by accepting what is being showcased in an Annual Report, one primarily admits to having ownership, secondly, in most cases all the employees become the spokespersons of an organisation. Since an Annual Report is used as a communication tool, it is very important to understand and accept the contents of the same.

In any organisation/Think Tanks the primary responsibility of ideating, collecting information and putting together the same, becomes the task of a team, ideally a Communication team.

An interesting approach to do this is to ask each Team lead/Heads of Verticals/Principal Investigators to identify what according to them was a key achievement in their domain/research area. For example, it could be an innovative approach to the research that they are conducting, a new funder, an award/recognition received, to name a few. This actually could bring up some interesting insights and these could also be used as quotes in the Annual Report.

The team should analyse the different types of information available, discussed what could be included, how best it could be presented and finally how so much valuable information (of a mammoth size) could be captured in a few pages. Initially it could be a mammoth task to identify what can be included and what needs to be emphasised. Having brief discussions with the concerned teams helps in addressing this to an extent.

Once this exercise is done, a brief research could be conducted by viewing some of the previous Annual Reports to learn from mistakes and emphasise/ include on what was good.

A-accurate
N-new
N -navigable
U-unusual
A -acceptable
L-liked
R-readable
E-edited
P-presented well
O-organised
R-referable
T-textualised

The jigsaw puzzle will start falling into place when all the information is identified, collected and sorted in a systematic manner. Since large sections are identified, information can be grouped accordingly. To give an essence of what the organisation does. The next important thing is to design the Annual Report. One needs to decide if it is going to be disseminated as a hard copy or as a soft copy. One needs to decide if it is going to be disseminated as a hard copy or as a soft copy. Based on this decision the design elements will fall into place. This is important for navigation and clarity of presenting information, especially when it is a soft copy (perhaps uploaded on a website).

Designs can be included to logically present information, ensure that information could be referred to, at a future date, by any of the stakeholders/ audiences.

To bring in readability and consistency, colour schemes can be identified, types of fonts decided, types of information planned to be placed in boxes to highlight the same.

Consistency should be applied in font styles and types, type of information and visuals.

Once the 1st cut is developed share with senior staff in the organisation. Incorporate feedback/comments appropriately, where required. This is important since the primary audience is the staff in the organisation/Think Tank and they should be in a position to understand and identify the activities, highlights and achievements of the organisation. If this can be achieved, then it is not difficult to meet expectations of an external audience (known and new).

Once done, you are convinced that you have done a fairly good job, when you get instant feedback and reactions, so this gives an impetus to be better prepared for the next time. Once the production is completed and shared with the audience, you may receive feedback. Learn from mistakes and adapt *"want went well"*.

Tips

1. Start collecting information at the beginning of the year
2. Segment it in appropriate folders
3. Create subfolders if required, to retrieve information quickly
4. Don’t wait till the last moment to gather information

Key Points to Remember

- Identify types of information and audience
- Define purpose
- Decide on mode of communication/dissemination -online, printed, as an attachment in an email
- Create a Story Board
- Start Working!!

Standards & Guidelines

An Effective Tool for Researchers and Think Tanks

Raise your standards to create an impact

Background

In most Think Tanks and research organisations, researchers generally focus on conducting research, analysing data and writing reports. Researchers create technical data which is rich and based on evidences, however, they face a setback when they need to address issues like consistency, readability, presentation, use of effective images to name a few.

In most organisations there are established processes and systems to aid researchers to write effectively. It is well-known that for a research organisation results need to be communicated effectively to various stakeholders and intended audience. These outputs could be reports, Policy Briefs, and Opinion article to name a few.

As a result, these outputs serve as a medium of communicating important information, which may provide suggested solutions for policy makers on matters of great importance.

Audience Perspective

Every researcher requires to understand the expectation of an audience. This involves the need for the document, background of the audience, what does the audience want to read etc. Most important, the researcher has to ensure that the audience should be able to read the output without faltering, reading it twice for a better understanding, stopping to recollect information-reading should be made smooth and easy. How does one tackle this?

To address the above, several organisations have introduced Standards & Guidelines, Templates, glossaries to help bring in consistency, address inaccuracies in grammar and readability issues and most important present information in simple and well-structured manner.

Standards & Guidelines

There are many popular Standards and Guidelines (S&G) like the APA Manual, Oxford Manual of Style, Microsoft Manual of Style, Chicago Manual of Style to name a few.

An S&G is created to ensure that consistency in style and formatting within a document and across multiple documents is maintained. It also serves as a reference point for multiple authors creating a report.

For example, in case of report writing pertinent to a particular project, the S&G has a set of instructions which allows the author to design their reports and make them more readable and presentable. It concludes the key elements of a report to include the structure of a report, headings, sub-headings, font size, figures, tables, grammar, bibliography etc.

To ensure that it is used well, we conducted a brief workshop to convey the Importance of using *"Standards & Guidelines as a Tool"*.

A Style Guide

- *Helps authors to focus on research and writing*
- *Explains information in a clear and concise manner*
- *Helps authors to reflect, review and write*
- *Serves as a reference source for multiple authors*
- *Saves a lot of time which goes into formatting, e.g. the way a citation should be presented*
- *Streamlines the process of writing*
- *Brings in consistency, e.g. format, heading style, bullets*
- *Most importantly, ensures professionalism by enhancing the image of your organisation*

Conclusion

An S&G provides a strategy for writing a variety of research outputs like reports, technical research papers, articles etc. for various disciplines and applications. These guidelines take care that the information compiled after a quality research is worth reading. For a research organisation, good and effective communication through written subject can only improve the research quality and status of the organisation. Therefore, an S&G is an important factor, which improves the readability and presentation of the work done by a research organisation.

Theatre, A Strategy To Raise Awareness About Public Policy Challenges

Introduction

Communication to a public always requires approaches, novelty clarity and simplicity. In the area of policy making this is important since the audience include a wide spectrum of people.

So how can one garner the attention of stakeholders to understand, implement, react to a policy? For example, if Climate Change is of great concern to all governments addressing the issue also becomes complex. The task can be achieved only by concerted action by all key stakeholders, including government, academia, private sector, and most importantly the citizens. Given the participatory nature of such actions, it becomes extremely crucial to engage citizens in order to have an informed discussion and debate. Several organisations/Think Tanks have already been working toward creating awareness and sharing information in this endeavour.

One effective mode of communication could be theatre, to simplifictically communicate complex issues, which involves the country and citizens. As a result, several organisations and initiatives have used theatre as a development tool to propagate, educate and communicate.

Theatre as a developmental tool

Some of the major usages of theatre are:

As a powerful communication tool, theatre cuts across literacy skills, reaches to a wide audience (both young and old), includes dance, songs, mime and also appeals to the emotions of people

Delivering/sharing information

- Encourage participation of people, who may have not had the opportunity to share their opinions otherwise
- Challenge people to respond
- Provide several alternatives rather than recommending one definite solution.
- Simplistically communicate complex social and scientific messages

In India, theatre is relevant due to the variety of forms which include songs, folk lore, music, dance and drama. It not only touches the emotional aspect of a human being but also is a form of entertainment where the masses respond emotionally and are also open to receiving serious messages in an experiential manner.

One such example where the medium of theatre was used widely to inform rural masses in the country was during the Kargil conflict, where the masses in several states were informed about the war. Despite other powerful channels of communication using technology, theatre became an important medium for disseminating information. According to a study conducted by Kapil Kumar Bhattacharyya and Debastuti Das Gupta (2006), in India the need to reach and communicate to people was emphasised several times in successive five year plans.

An example theatre production on global warming

Our experience shows that theatre can become an interesting tool to raise awareness on complex issues such as climate change research, where given the technical nature of the subject and the wide set of stakeholder involved, the message has to be easily communicable, both in terms of language and the mode of communication.

*"**Carbon Cake**" is a production which revolves round the crucial subject of '**Global Warming**'. This production is an initiative of Kriyative Theatre, in partnership with Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) and Center for Study of Science, technology and Policy (CSTEP). The play has been written after conducting extensive research on the phenomenon and also interfacing and dialoguing with several experts. It attempts to communicate the causes and devastating impacts of global warming, and the responsibility and ownership of masses towards mitigating it. This is done through the story of a man who tries to fight the menace of carbon emissions through an invention of his own, called '**carbon cake**' – after which the play is also named.*

Conclusion

Theatre as a tool, over the years, helps masses understand problems faced by a society. It helps people understand problems affecting their lives and find effective solutions. It acts as a forum to communicate as a process and also educate people.

Originally published in

https://www.purposeandideas.org/post/theatre-a-strategy-to-raise-awareness-about-public-policy-challenges

Interpreting Data

A Compelling Communication Tool

As a think tank communicator, I often wonder what are the best ways to share evidence-based research with a diverse audience. At some point I realised the usefulness of including a data analytics component in all the research that is undertaken. For instance, in a study that was conducted by a Think Tank that I work we tried to understand why stunting in children occurs (despite the government's considerable effort to address this problem) interesting findings emerged: Through the anganwadis (rural child care centres in India- the literal translation is *'courtyard shelter')* the government provides iron tablets to pregnant women.

Despite this, many children are underweight at birth. A brief research study was conducted, and the data analysis revealed that women were not actually taking the iron tablets – they would collect them but not use them- due to superstitious beliefs around the side effects. This insight guided an IEC campaign strategy.

Data analysis is the backbone of any research. Researchers often collect a huge amount of data. However, the process of cleaning, transforming, and modelling the data with the objective of drawing useful insights is the key- otherwise the data is useless. Data analysis breaks down complex information into a simple definition and provides evidence and an increased understanding of conducted research. Ideally, a good data analysis ensures a process to scrutinise, sift change and perhaps transform and amend information to arrive at a realistic conclusion.

Importance of analysing data

In recent times many research organisations have realized the utility and importance of including data analytics in research programmes because it:

- Provides credibility to research
- Interprets information in a very clear manner to ensure that a diverse audience understands information clearly
- Backs up data and provides a theoretical base
- Provides a clear insight and interpretation

What is data interpretation?

Data interpretation typically means adhering to a process where data is examined and analysed to ensure a logical interpretation. The most common interpretation is the combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis.

While quantitative data tells you what is happening, the rate at which it is happening and the patterns of incidence, it is qualitative data, if garnered and used intelligently, that explains **why** it is happening. To know what the data is trying to tell you, it helps to draw on qualitative data. Qualitative data is the analysis of non-numerical data, like text or oral communication, and includes greater depth and breadth of information. On the other hand, quantitative analysis focuses on the measurement using statistics to identify results.

Tips

1 **Gather** data to reflect completeness and genuiness

2 **Select** qualitative or quantitative analysis or both

3 **Reflect** and evaluate if the data meets the stakeholder's requirement

4 **Identify gaps** – inaccuracy in data, bias arising from being subjective, correlation versus causation.

Originally published in

https://onthinktanks.org/articles/interpreting-data-a-compelling-communication-tool/#:~:text=As%20a%20think%20tank%20communicator,the%20research%20that%20we%20undertake.

What Makes A Policy Work And How Can Think Tanks Support This?

Introduction

This is an important question given that policymaking is a critical activity of governments and impacts the lives of all people across the globe. Think tanks play an important role in supporting policymaking processes to be informed by the best available scientific evidence.

What is policy?

Typically, policy is a measured set of guidelines to benchmark decisions and help achieve outcomes in a coherent and reasonable manner. A policy is a statement of intent, and is implemented as a procedure or protocol.

Ideally, policies provide guidance/a roadmap to solve a problem, bring in a systematic approach to activities and proposed plans, ensure accountability, and make systems more efficient by bringing in clarity and robustness. They are decision-making frameworks designed to achieve a desired effect or change.

One should not be in doubt that policies are different from procedures and processes. Ideally, policies are broad guidelines with a set direction. They are guided by principles to achieve stated and intended outcomes.

Types of Policies

There are four main types of policy: distributive, redistributive, regulatory and constituent.

- *Distributive policies:* target a specific segment of society or community. They aim at improving uniformity of goods, services opportunities. The areas of education, public welfare, safety and utilities align with this type of policy.
- *Redistributive policies:* refers to the redistribution of resources. Policies should not be static; they need to be regularly re-evaluated and rearranged to achieve the desired outcomes.
- *Regulatory policies*: deal with the regulation of trade, business, safety measures and so on, and safeguarding constitutional rights.
- *Constituent policies:* involve the establishment of government structures, or of rules or procedures for the conduct of government. Typically, these rules include distribution or division of power and jurisdiction within present and future government policy.

Policymaking Cycle

The policymaking cycle typically involves the following stages:

- *Setting an agenda:* identify challenges, encourage and invite solutions from government agencies, research organisations, and think tanks.

- *Formulate policies:* develop policy options based on the possible choices; invite and discuss inputs.
- *Decision-making:* identify the course of action.
- *Implement policies:* put into effect the chosen public policy, ensure that the changes implemented help the community and affected parties.
- *Evaluating:* monitor the impact of the policy and determine whether it is achieving the intended goal.

Although it should be noted that in practice, policymaking cycles are not always linear and not always informed by the best available evidence.

How think tanks in India can support policymaking?

In India the central government develops and implements policies nationwide. Think tanks contribute to the policymaking process using their evidence-based research experiences and providing actionable recommendations. They engage with policymakers to advocate solutions by producing policy briefs and opinion pieces (both print and online).

Recommendations become useful if they are presented in such a way that a government can understand and take action immediately. Broadly, they should include findings and recommendations that are:

- *Focused* – make it relevant for policymakers; of possible involve key stakeholders in formulating the recommendations to increase the relevance and increase chances of uptake.
- *Actionable and specific* – avoid sweeping statement like 'Poverty should be addressed' and instead present granular recommendations.
- *Be clear who the recommendations are targeting* – for example, does it address only one department or several?
- *Rigorous* – comprehensive and not biased, using data to evidence the theory/findings and recommendations.
- *Clear* – communicate complexities in a simple manner, showcase limitations and challenges, and be accessible and easy to understand.

Originally published in

https://onthinktanks.org/.../what-makes-a-policy-work.../

Researchers and Policy Implementation

Introduction

The research is completed, report is submitted, and recommendations have been made. So what does implementation mean to a researcher? In my stint of working with researchers on the one hand and engaging and understanding government on the other, I am beginning to delve deeper into policy engagement and communication and its importance.

Context

In policymaking, implementation refers to turning theory into practice. Ideally it includes both formal and informal pathways, with defined roles played by stakeholders or actors such as pressure groups, bureaucrats, lawmakers, organisations, and individuals.

Implementation could involve prolonging a planning and decision-making process to choose the most effective policies. It should also be a collaborative process, where stakeholders help shape policies, even where outcomes could be uncertain. In short,

> *policy implementation often involves negotiation between stakeholders with common interests. In some cases, implementation becomes a process of complex ideas and counter ideas from different stakeholders/political groups.*

There are three likely scenarios:

- Business as usual In this scenario, typically, a researcher evaluates and describes the current situation, and if existing policies are working there is no need to change anything.
- Implement all recommendations but modest intervention In this scenario the researcher evaluates the situation and prioritises the most necessary changes for short-term outcomes and result-oriented activities.
- Aggressive intervention model if major changes are needed. The researcher has to prioritise the urgent recommendations, which may have to happen in parallel. Targets need to be met without delay, so the researcher needs to create a realistic timeline and roadmap to prioritise activities to achieve short- and long-term goals.

Implementation should also focus on the people involved, perhaps by applying the 4 Ws:

- Who will be affected if a policy is implemented?
- What are the milestones planned, and are they clear and feasible?
- Who is responsible for each of the activities/actions?
- What are the best optimistic solutions?

Enablers of a sound policy implementation

To ensure a winning implementation strategy the following needs to be kept in mind:

Direction

All levels of implementation need a good leader who focuses on building and sustaining relationships, managing complexities, and managing multiple challenges.

> *Appropriate leadership helps to plan the directives, resources, and structures of a programme.*

Continuity in leadership ensures the focus is on building and maintaining relationships, managing complex situations and, most importantly, addressing conflicts and adverse suggestions which could hamper implementation.

Researchers not only provide the key objectives, but also assign roles and responsibilities to different government departments.

Interaction and consultation

A communication strategy needs to be systematic to to succeed. Right from the introduction, through to action and feedback, a productive and meaningful dialogue must be maintained.

A researcher needs to ensure that there are opportunities for both sides to interact and deliberate throughout the process.

Feedback technique

A robust and viable feedback mechanism is required, accessible to all stakeholders. This will monitor implementation, and highlight the challenges and gaps, enabling a gap analysis. The feedback mechanism can include regular updates, a standardised reporting system, and periodic reviews at key stages of the policy cycle.

Policy lifecycle

Policy development and implementation are intimately linked, but not exactly the same at different stages. While poor policy design inevitably leads to poor implementation, well-designed policy can also be poorly implemented. To make the lifecycle effective it is important to include the five key elements of Plan, Develop, Review, Implement, and Final Review. If this is not defined well then there can be distortion between policy development and policy implementation.

Tips

1 Ensure that there is a scientific rigour and theory when planning and implementing a policy. For example, there should be a strong link between what the target group wants and what the policy is intending to do.

2 Focus on clear objectives that lays a roadmap for the implementation plan to ensure that target groups are receptive of the policies.

3 Ensure that there is active involvement from all stakeholders.

4 Choose leaders who have the required skills and believe in the objectives.

Conclusion

Policy implementation is very important as it affects how policies are accepted, not only by adhering to mandates but also adapting to changes. Finally, implementation is an evolving process, and needs to react to change.

The researcher's role doesn't end with the research and recommendations. Researchers need to work hand-in-hand with stakeholders to ensure that policy implementation is both successful and useful.

Originally published in

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Structuring Data Management

According to the Wikipedia, *"…as a general-purpose DBMS is designed to allow the definition, creation, querying, update, and administration of databases."*

Introduction

A good database management system ensures accessibility, reliability, and timeliness of procuring data. It is a process by which the required data is acquired, validated, stored, protected, and processed.

Often many organisations find it difficult to provide responses or react to information that has been cited by a policy maker. This is more so relevant for a Think Tank, who are often engaged with policy decision making processes or with a policy maker to try and suggest feasible solutions for complicated matters. Database management should be necessarily become an integral part of a communication strategy of an organisation/Think Tank. This is required because often research scientist are unable to convey important (complicated) matters into a simple language, to help policy makers use this rich information effectively. In many organisations, there is often a person or a communication team who are primarily employed to engage with policy makers. Since they have focused tasks and relevant experience, they are able to unpack information to suit an audience.

Most research organisations produce several types of documents which are required by various audiences/stakeholders. Many times some of the data/information is required for reference or for expanding a research study. Also, several organisations have different audience who require information for various reasons. For example, a senior researcher may want to refer to a document, the Head of an organisation/Think Tank may want a particular type of information. However, this task takes longer since information may not be stored appropriately. Something as simple as assigning an appropriate folder and file name, helps retrieve information quickly.

Method to Store Data

A simple approach to store information includes:

Assemble and Plan Data
Plan for data management as per the research requisite/ organisational standards:

- Gather the data
- Plan for data management as per the research requisite
- Keep in mind the various users
- How will data be organised within a file?
- How will it be accessed?

Collect and Check Data

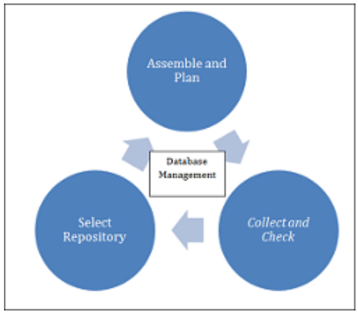
Collect data to ensure its usability later. Methods and documentation should be considered carefully:

- A template can be created for use during data collection. For example we have a template which primarily captures the various Events attended by a staff member.
- Perform basic quality assurance and quality control on the data during data collection, entry, and analysis
- Check the format of the data to maintain a consistency across the data set for example type of document, file name etc.
- Identify missing information

Select an appropriate repository to store data

Identify a data repository that is most appropriate for the data you will generate and for the group of people that will make use of the data. For example an internal system which provides access to different groups for a particular type of information can be useful.

As files are created, a data preservation plan is implemented that ensures that data can be recovered in the event of file loss (e.g. storing data routinely in different locations).



Importance of Data Management:

A good-quality data management is good for a research organisation, as it facilitates an efficient research process, evasion of data loss and benefits of data reuse.

Data management for a research organization will help:

- Meet the requirements of funding agencies or stakeholders
  Accelerate the scientific process; saving time and resources in the long run
- Use or re-use the value, the uniqueness, and the importance of data
- Ensure that research data and records are accurate, complete, authentic and reliable
- Ensure research integrity and replication
- Increase research efficiency
- Enhance data security and minimize the risk of data loss
- Prevent duplication of effort by enabling others to use your data
- Comply with practices conducted in industry and commerce

In short, key benefits of a good data base management will

- *Improve Efficiency:* If data is managed well, it will save a lot of time spent on corrective activity.
- *Protect from data-related risks:* Backup and recovery procedures and data-handling procedures ensure that data, a major asset for any research project, is never permanently lost.
- *Accessible with easy navigation:* By preserving data in appropriate folders, ensures easy access

Challenges

While there are benefits, one needs to overcome challenges too.

- Time consuming
- Involves regular follow - up
- Establishing an organisation - level system for data management
- Documenting the process of data management
- Categorisation of folders and files for easy navigation

Conclusion

For a research organisation, research data is important and expensive because, they are the output of intellectual research processes. Research data are the crucial part of the evidence which is needed to assess the research results, and sometimes to restructure the proceedings and processes used to generate them.

Data should be gathered and compiled into groups, so that can easily be accessible for re-use and also address new and challenging research questions. Moreover, this will increase their value as well. Lack of proper organisation of data, greatly diminishes their value. To enhance the value of data management, new approaches are required to manage and provide access to research data.

As can be seen, managing and structuring data needs to become an important aspect of a communication strategy of all organisations/Think Tanks. A strong and well-structured document management system will always serve the purpose of being the first one to react to an issue or to respond to a query from a policy maker.

At some point of time in my professional career I used meet a lot of people during various events, reading their articles, visiting websites. I realised that this knowledge was rich and had a wide spectrum of topics to learn, hear and understand. So I decided that that the best way to capture this was to interview some leaders and people who matter. I tried to capture their opinions, views succinctly and would like to thank each one of them from the bottom of my heart for being patient with me.

"Effective interviewing is not just about asking the right questions; it's about listening to the answers and asking follow-up questions"

Diane Sawyer

INTERVIEWS

Interview with Uma Mahadevan, IAS. Additional Chief Secretary, Government of Karnataka

JUNE 23, 2023

Revitalising rural libraries in India

Welcome to our interview series featuring changemakers across Asia, where we delve into policy and change processes that are shaping the region. In this edition, Annapoorna Ravichander, Executive Director of the Public Affairs Foundation in Bangalore, India, engages in a conversation with Uma Mahadevan, a distinguished civil servant from the Karnataka Government.

In this insightful interview, Uma Mahadevan sheds light on the inspiring journey of designing and implementing a rural library initiative, emphasising its evidence-based approach and impact on local communities.
Twitter: @readingkafka

Q: *Kindly introduce yourself*
A: I am a civil servant in India with over thirty years' experience of working in the Indian Administrative Service.

I have worked in diverse sectors in the state and central government, including rural development, decentralisation and local governance; women and child development; disability; agriculture; planning; education; and health.

I serve in an honorary capacity on several committees and non-profit boards. I have recently served as a member of the Taskforce on Early Childhood Care and Education.

Q: *Can you walk us through the process of designing and implementing your rural library initiative? How did you ensure that it was evidence-based and responsive to the needs of local communities?*
A: The State has a network of around 7,000 libraries, of which over 5,600 are rural libraries. In 2019, these were handed over to the Department of Rural Development and Panchayat Raj to be operated by rural local bodies as a further step in decentralisation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020, we saw the readiness with which rural local bodies came forward to lead the COVID response in their communities. We decided to revive the libraries as part of these efforts, to help rural children stay connected to reading and learning.

A children's section was set up in each library, the buildings were renovated and made child-friendly, and all rural children were enrolled free. In two years, over 3.4 million children have been enrolled; over 1.1 million books collected as donations; and 4900 rural libraries have been renovated. The library hours have been extended to six hours daily. Comprehensive training programs have been taken up for the librarians.

Revitalisation of rural public libraries is now an important initiative of the state. Through the revitalisation project, our department is energising the rural libraries and expanding their role as local information Centres, making them spaces for socially inclusive, multi-disciplinary and multi-generational learning.

Q: *Did you face any challenges in mobilising resources and securing political support for the initiative? If so, how did you overcome these challenges?*
A: One of the challenges we faced was that we were taking up this initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, that turned out to be an important reason for its success, especially providing the initial momentum. Due to school and college closures, rural children and young people needed a way to stay connected to learning. Girls and children from marginalised communities, especially, needed a safe space to read and study. Rural libraries stayed open, following COVID precautions, and thus became an important space where rural children could continue learning.

Another challenge was to get the involvement of rural local bodies. To achieve this, we kept the guidelines for library renovation very open and flexible, allowing the space for local ownership of the project.

The response was tremendous. Rural local governments started designing their library renovation in different ways: not only the design of the buildings and furniture, but also adding child-sized sofas, bean bags, indoor plants, murals with inspirational quotes, and altogether making the libraries attractive places to visit.

Q: *How do you measure the impact of your rural library initiative? How do you use evidence to refine and improve the initiative over time?*
A: At present we have created active networks of librarians and users on social media, including WhatsApp and Telegram, to share information about library activities and suggestions. We have also developed partnerships with several civil society organisations who are regularly working with libraries and providing regular updates on the work.

As the scale of the response has been tremendous and unprecedented, we are now developing a distributed e-library management platform which will track collections, membership, and usage.

Q: *What advice would you give to other policymakers and practitioners who are interested in implementing evidence-based policies and initiatives at the grassroots level? What are some key lessons you have learned from your experience?*
A: The first lesson that I learned from this initiative was that local governments have considerable capacities and imagination! Their involvement and ownership of decentralised institutions can transform service delivery.

So, the first things I would say is that we need to trust our rural local bodies.

Along with trust, we need to provide support in the form of enabling guidelines, action-oriented training, and regular experience-sharing. The best learning is from their own peers. Exposure visits are crucial in showing how much good work is possible.

We also need to start with large pilots: small pilots can fizzle out, but a large pilot can give useful information on what works, so that it can quickly be taken to scale.

We need to be patient, because not all local bodies will respond with the same degree of alertness; some may need more handholding.

Finally, the involvement of grassroots civil society organisations provides the necessary quality and innovation focus.

Originally Published in

https://onthinktanks.org/articles/in-conversation-with-uma-mahadevan-revitalising-rural-libraries-in-india/

Interview with Prasanth Nair, Special Secretary to the Government of Kerala and prize-winning film director

AUGUST 10, 2023

Fighting hunger with compassion in Kerala

Welcome to our interview series featuring changemakers across Asia, where we delve into policy and change processes that are shaping the region. In this article, Annapoorna Ravichander, Executive Director of the Public Affairs Foundation in Bangalore, India, talks to Prasanth Nair, Special Secretary to the Government of Kerala, as well as a prize-winning film director.

Q: *Please introduce yourself!*
A: I am Prasanth Nair, a former lawyer and now a civil servant and a film director.

I grew up in Thiruvananthapuram and wanted to be a cinematographer in my childhood. However, I started preparing for the civil services when I was in the 1st year of my graduation.

I cleared the civil services examinations in 2007 and became part of the esteemed Indian Administrative Services of India. I have worked in several departments and sectors including taxation, tourism, roads, skills development, water supply. and have also been a part of two major World Bank projects.

I have also acted in a few movies, including Ajay Devaloka's '*Who*', and my directorial debut '*Daivakanam*' which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival.

Q: *How has your film work informed your civil service work?*
A: The intersection of film work and civil service, for me, has been profoundly enriching.

Filmmaking is about storytelling, about presenting narratives that resonate with diverse audiences. It requires empathy and emotional connect with the public.

This perspective has enabled me to better understand the narratives and aspirations of the people I serve.

It helps me to envision governance not just as a system of regulations and procedures, but as a continuous dialogue with citizens, making them feel seen, heard, and represented.

Q: *Can you explain what the Operation Sulaimani initiative is and how you initiated it?*
A: Operation Sulaimani (OpSu) holds a very special place in my heart. It's an incredible initiative that brings together the people of Kozhikode to fight hunger with an outpouring of compassion.

We started this beautiful campaign as a beacon of hope, reaching out to those in need, one meal at a time. Witnessing the plight of the hungry in our community moved us deeply, and we knew we had to do something about it. The '*Compassionate Kozhikode*' campaign became our driving force, uniting us all to make a meaningful difference and ensure that no one goes to bed hungry.

OpSu is modelled on the '*food on the wall'* or *'paying ahead*' concept that is popular in Europe, suitably customised for the Indian scenario.

Q: *What were the main challenges you encountered in developing and implementing the initiative? How did you navigate these?*
A: Developing OpSu was not without its share of challenges. Convincing restaurants to join this cause was a task in itself.

We approached each establishment with fervent determination, emphasising the immense positive impact their participation could have on countless lives.

Preserving the anonymity of the sponsors was crucial, as it instilled a sense of dignity and respect in the act of giving.

To ensure this, we implemented robust systems and guidelines, cherishing the spirit of giving without seeking recognition. Dignity of the beneficiaries was paramount.

Q: *Where do you seek evidence from to inform decision-making for OpSu? And what kind of evidence do you find most useful?*
A: Evidence is the backbone of our decision-making process. We draw from multiple sources to gauge the impact of OpSu.

Counting sponsored meals is essential, but it goes beyond numbers for us. We seek heartfelt feedback from the beneficiaries themselves, for their stories touch us deeply and drive us to do more. Hearing about the positive change in their lives reaffirms the significance of our mission.

Social impact assessments, surveys, and open conversations with stakeholders enrich our understanding, helping us refine and improve the initiative. Ideally, we would like fewer people availing their benefit of OpSu.

Q: *How do you measure the impact of your initiative? How do you use evidence to refine and improve the initiative over time?*
A: Measuring the impact is both humbling and inspiring. We count every sponsored meal as a triumph of compassion. But it's the personal stories of transformation that make it all worthwhile.

We listen to the voices of those whose lives we touch, and it is through their experiences that we learn and grow. Their stories help us refine our approach and adapt to the ever-changing needs of our community.

Evidence guides our path, ensuring that OpSu remains a beacon of hope, lighting the way for a hunger-free Kozhikode. The real transformation has been with restaurant owners and volunteers who participated in the implementation of the project and this includes me!

The time and resources needed for social impact assessments, surveys, and open conversations vary widely based on the scope and depth of the projects. Generally, these activities might span over weeks to several months.

We believe in the principle of continuous engagement, so these exercises are ongoing at different scales and frequencies. While there might not be dedicated monitoring, evaluation, and learning specialists for every project, we collaborate with external agencies specialising in these domains.

Once data is gathered, it is analysed and synthesised into actionable insights. These insights are then utilised in a structured manner, ensuring that the voices of the stakeholders are at the heart of policy decisions and implementations.

While anecdotal feedback mostly drives us, such structured feedback has to validate us periodically.

Q: *It seems like collaboration between government departments, think tanks, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders was essential for driving forward OpSu? Would you agree, and if so, what advice would you offer to other changemakers to facilitate effective collaboration among these diverse actors?*
A: Collaboration and co-creation has been the lifeline of OpSu. We are immensely grateful for the support we've received from various stakeholders who share our vision of a compassionate Kozhikode. The collective efforts of government departments, think tanks, NGOs, and businesses have fortified this initiative and given it wings to soar. To all changemakers, I'd say, embrace collaboration with an open heart. Engage with stakeholders as partners, valuing their unique contributions. Trust and inclusivity foster meaningful partnerships that fuel positive change. Together, we can create a symphony of kindness, harmonising for the betterment of society.

Compassion, I believe is the ultimate key to better administration.

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https://onthinktanks.org/articles/in-conversation-with-prashanth-nair-fighting-hunger-with-compassion-in-kerala/

Interview with Ashok Khemka, IAS, Indian Public Servant and Bureaucrat

SEPTEMBER 28, 2023

Developing the Courage to do what is Right

Welcome to our interview series featuring changemakers across Asia, where we delve into policy and change processes that are shaping the region.

In this article, Annapoorna Ravichander, Executive Director of the Public Affairs Foundation in Bengaluru, India, talks to Ashok Khemka, an Indian civil servant known for his commitment to honesty and integrity within his public service. In 2011 he received the S.R. Jindal Prize along with Sanjiv Chaturvedi, for their "*Crusade against Corruption*" activities, and in 2009, he was given the Manjunath Shanmugam Trust Commendation for Public Works.

Q: *Please introduce yourself!*
A: I was born into a humble, middle-class family. My family had migrated from the district of Jhunjhunu (Rajasthan) to Kolkata (Bengal) circa 1900. I was fortunate to imbibe the best of both the Shekhawati and the Bengali cultures.

My schooling was in Calcutta, the City of Joy and the intellectual capital of India. After graduating with a grade point average of 9.87/10 in Computer Science from the Indian Institute of Technology, I had ready the option to migrate to the USA, as was fashionable then.

It was not difficult to get into the Ivy League, but with a deep sense of abiding duty, I chose to stay back. I joined the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Mumbai for a Ph.D. programme.

My becoming a public administrator was a matter of serendipity. During my stay in Mumbai, I came in contact with a relative who was in the Civil Services. He motivated me to join the government.

Since my student days, I had been an active participant in social and political issues, and I believed that my potential would be put to good use in the government. Hence, I took a diversion from a career in research to a career in the Civil Service.

Q: *You have been widely recognised for your commitment to public service and your unwavering honesty and integrity. Where did this drive come from?*
A: I chose a career in the Civil Service due to a deep and abiding commitment to justice. The Service provides enough for our needs, through temptation always lurks around. Therefore, remain-

ing contented and grateful are essential to maintaining integrity.

Q: *What are some of the achievements you're most proud of during your years of service?*
A: In public service, it is always teamwork. No achievement is individual.
Some of the things I was involved with, and which come to mind, are efforts towards a more decentralised district administration, preventing over-exploitation of groundwater, reducing demand for asbestos containing materials, Direct Benefits Transfer, reforms in the transport sector, sports policy etc.

However, an effort which brings even a small change in the life of an ordinary man brings great satisfaction.
To me, remedying any injustice against those without a voice has been a cherished moment.

Public corruption is a disease which has infested the Nation like a termite. I am more known in the country as an anti-corruption crusader. But my inter-disciplinary abilities in areas of economics, finance and law is something I hold closer.

Q: *What have been the biggest challenges you've faced in performing your duties?*
A: The biggest challenge has always come from the vested interests. Touching them is not easy.

Having developed a reputation of an intelligent but an unyielding officer, I was transferred a lot. I believe that my full potential was not put to best use due to frequent transfers and inconsequential postings.

Perhaps in my zeal to take corruption head-on, my career paid the price.

Q: *From your experience, what can you tell us about how evidence is used in decision-making within the Indian Administration?*
A: We have to walk some distance towards a more evidence-based decision making in the states.

However, the NITI Aayog and various sectoral regulators at the national level, like the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), Competition Commission of India (CCI), Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDAI), Central Electricity Regulation Commission (CERC), Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), Reserve Bank of India (RBI) place greater reliance on data and other evidence in their respective decision-making.

Q: *Are there any other insights from your life and work that you would like to share with our readers?*
A:

- Acquire competency.
- Work with passion.
- Develop courage 'to do' what is right and 'resist' what is wrong.

Originally Published in

https://onthinktanks.org/articles/in-conversation-with-ashok-khemka-developing-the-courage-to-do-what-is-right/

Interview with Santha Sheela Nair, IAS, Vice Chairman, State Planning Commission.

OCTOBER 15, 2023

50 years Shaping Public Policy in India

Welcome to our interview series featuring changemakers across Asia, where we delve into policy and change processes that are shaping the region. In this edition, Annapoorna Ravichander, Executive Director of the Public Affairs Foundation in Bangalore, India, engages in a conversation with Santha Sheela Nair, a former official of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS).

Santha was appointed as the first woman District Collector of Trichy in Tamil Nadu and retired as a secretary to the Government of India. After retiring, she was asked to work in the Chief Minister's office and as the Vice Chairman of the State Planning Commission.

Q: *Please introduce yourself!*
A: I don't know how to introduce myself. I'm just one of those countless boring bureaucrats who are not very popular in today's world. If you want to call somebody by a name, you call him a '*babu*' [a term of respect] or '*bureaucrat*', and you know then you have said it all. I'm just one of them and one of the many and that's all I can say.

I went through a lot of interesting assignments, some very good, some not so good. I started life in 1973 as a young professional in the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy Of Administration (LBSNAA) in Mussourie. I then went on to Madurai district where I was assigned the Tamil Nadu cadre.

I went to Madurai district as an Assistant Collector under training, then was Sub Collector in Dindigul, which was very eventful. It was the time of the Emergency +, and I had the opportunity to work as an escort to the then Prime Minister.

So right from a very early age we were rubbing shoulders with the high and mighty. But we were very small people at that time. And, though it was almost 20 years after Mrs Anna Malhotra, the first woman IAS officer, came into service, there was still a lot of apprehension about women being officers. There are still some misgivings but relatively it's far better these days.

I was Secretary Government of India in the Ministry of Rural Development, Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation. I was mostly in the water supply sector at the functional level as an executive and at the policy for the state and national levels. So that is an area where

I developed some amount of expertise, so to say, all only as administrative expertise.

Q: *Tell us about some of the achievements you're proudest of during your years of service.*
A: I don't know one significant achievement. The achievements, depending on the context, are so different that not one can stand out.
The one thing that everybody likes to talk about, and you know that I am known for, is having introduced rainwater harvesting as a legislation. Making it compulsory and making it successful for the first time, probably in the world, in the State of Tamil Nadu. It became a model for other states to implement. We went beyond just having official orders and brought specific legislation for it. Of course I was supported completely by the Government, I persuaded them to make sure that the election manifesto promise was taken up seriously.

I was pursuing rainwater harvesting on my own as a bureaucrat at many levels earlier. But I couldn't achieve state-wide success without the political support from the leadership. And that was a fantastic achievement.

In fact, the NITI Aayog had predicted that Chennai would be dry by 2022. And I had refuted it in the press. Today, Chennai has ground water five-20 feet in most places.

Since we were the first government who pioneered rain water harvesting at state level we did not have any role model. We just went by common sense. I used to say it wasn't rocket science, you just needed to get the water into the ground or collect it. It was done for centuries in this country, in many parts of India, including Tamil Nadu and more particularly in desert areas like Rajasthan and Gujarat.

Q: *What are some of the challenges you have faced as a woman during your work?*
A: When I was posted as one of the first women collectors in Tamil Nadu, there were many men who said they didn't want to work under me. They said, how can we serve a woman? The police officer didn't want to salute me; they said, we have never saluted a woman.

There is this thing about being a woman, and I'm talking about 40 or 50 years ago when there weren't so many women in public life or in positions of authority, in administration and so on. There were a lot of apprehensions but you get over that pretty soon. If you are not all the time conscious that you're a woman and you just get on with your work, everybody sees that, and then you build a reputation.

Whether you are a man or a woman you build a certain reputation in your career and that is what's ultimately important. I have always felt that sometimes this big disadvantage was an advantage. I have more eyeballs in the sense that people sat up and took notice of me because I was a woman. So my colleagues used to say what is it that you are doing differently that you get all this admiration and fan following while we are doing the same thing. I realised people start with a lot of misgivings, but they also give you extra appreciation when you do something good which your male colleagues may not get. We always talk of gender discrimination but in the context of women there are other types pf discrimination too. When I first worked in Delhi I was referred to as a Madrasi (a person from Madras) and my looks and manners did not quite fit into their stereotype of a Madrasi and I had to negotiate my way through these myths.

Q: *How did you go about mobilising resources and securing political support for your initiatives?*
A: When you start an initiative and there is appreciation from ordinary people and the media it is very important. The politician sees mileage in it and takes ownership of it because it is good for him to say that all this is being done under his direction.

If you are low key and let the appreciation go to the leadership, then by and large I think it can work. I would like to talk of another instance when I was posted as Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture Government of India, New Delhi. I was the first IAS Officer posted as Horticulture Commissioner, as before that it was always headed by an agriculture scientist.

At that time, in 1991, our five-year plan budget was Rs. 25 crores, of which we were able to spend only Rs. 17 crores. I had the opportunity to revise the budget from 25 crores to Rs. 1000 crores for the five-year period. This was a huge milestone in the resources available for the horticulture sector nation-wide and I had the opportunity to work on horticulture projects from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. Such an opportunity you can get only in the civil services.

I often said that the job of Horticulture Commissioner of India was like a romance for me, I was so smitten and devoted to the sector. My junior colleagues joked at my farewell party that "Madam enjoyed the romance but the baby now is left with us." I was hugely supported by my colleagues and bosses – the officials and political leaders. The friendships forged then have lasted to this day as we all shared a common goal and achievement.

Q: *From your experience, what can you tell us about how evidence is used in decision-making within the Indian Administrative Service?*
A: A lot is dependent on the individuals, some are very rule bound and won't stray even a bit, and that's mostly the old school. But more and more now it is evidence-based administration or data-based administration.

It has good points and bad points in a sense, because some evidence may not be applicable universally, it cannot be standardised. Superimposing that as a framework for something across the state or across the country may not be the right thing to do. So you know, you have to choose the type of evidence and fit in appropriate parameters for flexibility, for its development, for it to take its own form or shape. That is very important and sometimes, the evidence will be faulty and other times evidence may not have been gathered at all.

Today a lot of bureaucrats are much better, but in our time we never thought of recording anything, never thought of documenting anything. So a lot of it is lost, we said let the work speak for itself. Some of the negative experiences were never documented and the lessons from that were lost forever.

And there's another thing in the civil service, I'm sure it's in the corporate sector also, that your successor always thinks that he has to do better than you and as a result charts new plans. So the evidence and work that you have done in the past may simply go out of the window, because it's not part of the system, especially when a government changes.

Q: *Are there any other insights from your life and work that you would like to share with our readers?*
A: The only thing I can say about the Indian Civil Service is what a great opportunity it is. I don't think there's any civil service anywhere in the world quite like it in the sense of the opportunity that it gives.

Today, we have the legacy that our predecessors protected and we benefit from it. Today, the armed forces, and to some extent the judiciary, are looked upon with respect and trust for doing the right thing. The civil service should also try to build up such a reputation that the country can rely on them.

A lot of things will change. In the system there will be some people out there who will safeguard whatever is valuable and safeguard the ethics of the system. When I think that my own experience, I feel that there are many messages we can give to ordinary people, even being babus and bureaucrats and faceless, nameless people.

You are at the cutting edge very often. You deal directly with the citizen and at that time it is your individual personality and values system that will deliver justice and fair play. I think we shouldn't forget that and I hope we don't.

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Interview with D. Dhanuraj, Founder Chairman of the Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR)

May 4, 2020

The Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR) is an independent public policy organisation dedicated to in-depth research and scientific analysis with the objective of delivering actionable ideas that could transform society. CPPR is based in Kochi, Kerala State, India. D. Dhanuraj is the founder chairman of CPPR. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, conducted this interview.

Q: *How would you define a think tank?*
A: Think tanks are organisations with expertise in one or more areas related to the public policies of the state. The idea is to give insights and expert views in the field of knowledge to stakeholders, as well as to the general public. Their duty lies at five levels: ideate, innovate, inform, influence, and provide insight. The activities of a think tank are similar to an academic institute, but dissimilar in the way operations are conducted or carried out. Think tanks have less time to respond to the issues and challenges emerging in their focus areas, so thinktankers should be very competitive and ready to learn new topics and content on a day-to-day basis.

Q: *What were the main challenges faced in becoming the founder chairman?*
A: These were some of the challenges I faced:

- Setting up systems and processes relevant for think tanks
- Updating and keeping interest in topics of the institutions
- Training researchers and preparing them for bigger assignments
- Wearing the hat of a social entrepreneur and also of an academic
- Becoming involved in educational work while continuing networking activities satisfactorily

Q: *What kind of support or services does CPPR (and other similar organisations) need to meet its objectives?*
A: Think tanks in India are still fairly new. The culture is evolving. Unlike their counterparts in the western world, think tanks in India have limited patronage. This raises challenges on the sustainability front. The governments should be open to the role of the think tanks and acknowledge them, since the government is the ultimate beneficiary. The economic growth of the country may help think tanks in the long-run as more funds and philanthropists may start supporting the work done by these organisations. Freedom of expression is another essential factor that needs to be guaranteed for think tanks to be able to meet their objectives.

Q: *In your opinion, what are the best ways that think tanks can work togeth*

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Q: *In your opinion, what are the best ways that think tanks can work together? Are there any best practices you would recommend?*
A: Think tanks should share their opinions and ideas amongst their network. The established think tanks should believe in co-creation of values and support in building the competency in the emerging ones. This could be done by sharing their publications and articles on the social media platforms of other think tanks. Conferences and meet-ups in the think tank communities would also be useful.

Q: *How do you maintain independence from your donors?*

A: My experience is that donors don't get into your work if the terms and references are clearly defined in advance. Instead of approaching the donors, they will be coming to you if your institution establishes credibility and publishes good quality work. This will help the think tank to take their position independently. Moreover, it depends on the value system that a management and the team cultivate over a period of time. If the value system is of openness with a transparent engagement with the donor, there will not be any avenue for the donor to intervene in your work.

Q: *How do you establish your research agenda? How do you ensure policy relevance?*
A: A think tank needs a track record and competence to set its research agenda. It also depends on the competency of the team and their exposure and experience. The team should be ready to read and learn about various changes and challenges emerging in their respective fields of expertise from time to time. One can also prioritise the areas according to the larger public policy issues discussed at the local, national or international levels according to the bandwidth, expertise and interests of the team.

Q: *What is your organisation's contribution to public policy in your country?*
A: We have worked locally and nationally. Many of our policy recommendations in the last fifteen years have been accepted by the respective governments or by their departments. There are major success stores at the national and also at the state level. We have worked in more than 70 cities in India and more than 23 states on different project requirements.

Q: *Where do you see the gaps in the regional policy research landscapes?*
A: There are many challenges at the regional level. One is the openness of the government in power to think tanks. Second is the data availability and its reliability. There is a gap in the number of think tanks operating in India. For a country with a population of 1.3 billion, India should have thousands of them and many of them could work on local policymaking and have a focus on the urban and rural areas. This layer is missing in India. Also, most of governments are not in favour of the consultation. Finally, higher education institutions and universities are also not performing on high standards, which diminishes the scope of local think tanks.

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Interview with Diana Thorburn, Director of Research at CAPRI

October 1, 2020

The Caribbean Policy Research Institute (CAPRI) is a not-for-profit, public policy think tank dedicated to the production and dissemination of impartial, evidence-based knowledge to inform economic, governance, sustainable and social policy decision-making in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean. Diana Thorburn Ph.D. is Director of Research at CAPRI. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, conducted this interview.

Q: *What are the main functions/activities of the Caribbean Policy Research Institute (CAPRI) and what is your role?*

A: CAPRI is a non-profit, independent public policy think tank based at the University of the West Indies, Mona. Our work is concentrated in four main areas: the economy, the environment and sustainability, governance, and social issues, which include gender, citizen security, and health. We conduct research that seeks to answer pertinent policy questions and provide evidence-informed policy recommendations that are grounded in the extant policy environment. Our work takes the form of written reports, consultations with stakeholders and policy makers, and public fora where our reports are launched with a panel discussion with relevant stakeholders, followed by a question and answer session.

My role as director of research is, broadly, to ensure that all the research we do and the reports we produce are done to the highest methodological and editorial standards. More specifically, I participate in determining our research agenda, conceptualising research projects, supervising researchers' work from start to finish and editing the final report. I ensure that the organisation's quality assurance protocol is adhered to and, as necessary, I engage in the research and writing myself. Finally, I represent the organisation in a variety of arenas, including presenting research results, whether on the media, to closed audiences, or at our public fora.

Q: *As a think tank, how has funding affected CAPRI?*

A: Funding affects our very existence and everything we do- from the research that we conduct, to our staffing. As an independent think tank, we do not have a parent organisation that we rely on. The majority of our core funding is from large Jamaican corporations and a couple of non-Jamaican private businesses. That core funding primarily pays most of the organisation's 12 employees. The University supports us with office space, overheads and two salaried positions. Most of our research funding comes from international development partners. The main ones we've worked with in the past few years are the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO, formerly DFID,) UNICEF, the European Union, the Inter-American Development Bank and USAID, in response to themed calls for proposals. This means that, for the most part, our research agenda is not solely determined by us. While we are fortunate to be in a stable financial situation, our salaries are well below market rates which makes it difficult to hire and retain quality talent.

Q: *In your opinion, what are the best ways that think tanks can work together? What best practice would you recommend?*
A: The best ways that CAPRI could work with other think tanks is through staff exchanges, attendance at each other's events, and sharing proofs of concept (including replication of innovative research projects). To date CAPRI's efforts at working with other think tanks have not borne fruit, due to lack of funding and lack of capacity to meaningfully follow up.

Q: *How do you see the space of women in think tanks? Equally represented? Or some areas male dominated and others female dominated? How does the revolving door work for men and women? Are there any differences?*
A: Jamaica may be unusual with regard to the gender dynamics of organisations like CAPRI, and professional organisations more generally. Women generally outnumber men in administrative and middle management positions. Of the twelve people at CAPRI, the only men are the executive director and two interns. Ninety percent of applicants for vacancies are women and so far none of the few men who applied ended up taking the job, whether on our end or theirs. Our low salaries may be a factor here: women in general, for a wide variety of reasons, tend to accept lower salaries than men.

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Interview with Dr. Samina Khalil, Director at the Applied Economics Research Centre (AERC)

September 11, 2019

The Applied Economics Research Centre (AERC) in University of Karachi was established in 1973. The major functions of the centre are policy-oriented academic research, contract research for clients, post-graduate teaching and advisory services to the government. Professor Dr. Samina Khalil is the director of AERC. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, conducted this interview.

Q: *Give us a brief background about yourself before becoming the director of the Applied Economics Research Centre (AERC)? How did you get into the world of think tanks and your role as a director?*
A: I was appointed as a research professor in February 2016, before getting appointed as the director of the Applied Economics Research Centre (AERC) by the syndicate of the University of Karachi in July 2016. I began my career as a research assistant at the AERC in January 1990, after completing my MSc degree in economics from Karachi University in 1988. I completed my MPhil degree in 1995 at the University of Cambridge in economics of developing countries and got my PhD in environmental economics and resource management in 2010 from the University of York.

Q: *What have been the biggest challenges you have faced so far – or expect to face? How are you solving them or plan to solve them?*
A: The biggest challenge was and still is to restore the image of AERC as a prestigious think tank and academic research institution. We are working toward this by initiating various activities such as organising an annual international conference, enhancing the quality of our academic journal, and also ensuring to impart quality education by updating the course outlines of various modules and training workshops.

Q: *What do you think are the main roles for think tanks in Pakistan?*
A: Think tanks can contribute by undertaking quality research work to help policy makers design evidence-based policies. Think tanks can also help build society's awareness about various socio-economic issues through media, talk shows and other forums to develop consensus among the masses on approaches to development initiatives. They can also build pressure on public policymaking institutions to get their priorities straight.

Q: *How has the think tank community and broader landscape changed in the last 10 years? What do you think the future holds?*

A: I think the future looks reasonably better as far as effectiveness of efforts and the role of think tanks in Pakistan. Think tanks have broadened their scope of work by using different forums to disseminate their research findings and influence the government circles to make or change their decisions in favour of the country and society.

If government can fully recognise the importance of think tanks and their positive and effective role in society, they will be able to help government play their role effectively by developing evidence-based effective policies with right priorities and sound allocation of economic resources.

Q: *Are there any laws in your country that promote or limit private sector funding?*
A: It depends on the type of private organisations, as many are very genuinely working for the downtrodden of the society. Pakistan has been internationally recognized as the seventh most generous country in the world with respect to philanthropic activities and donations of the affluent class of our society. Some well recognised hospitals, education institutions and orphanages get a lot of funding from private organisations and individuals.

Q: *How is the philanthropic sector in your country and region?*
A: It's very strong. People tend to avoid paying taxes to public institutions, as the system of revenue collection is very corrupt and money paid in taxes is not used for the general welfare of the people and the development of the masses. Hence, people give donations directly to the needy instead of paying taxes.

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Interview with Sunita Narain, Director General of Centre for Science and Environment (CSE)

October 7, 2019

Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) is a public interest research and advocacy organisation based in New Delhi, India. CSE researches into, lobbies for and communicates the urgency of development that is both sustainable and equitable. Sunita Narain is the Director General of CSE. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, conducted this interview.

Q: *What are the main functions or activities of Centre for Science and Environment and what is your role?*
A: CSE is an independent public interest research and advocacy organisation based in New Delhi. It researches into, lobbies for and communicates the urgency of development that is both sustainable and equitable. It works on the areas of pollution mitigation and public health, low carbon development and natural resource management. I head the organization as its Director General.

Q: *What were the main challenges you or your organization CSE face?*
A: In almost every green issue, there are conflicting interests at play. In air pollution mitigation, for instance, one has to navigate the conflicts of interest between the needs of industry and those of public health. It's the same with the pesticides debate. Even in tigers there is a conflict of interest in terms of ideology and thinking between 'conservation' and wider development concerns. The challenge is: how do you change mindsets and get people to sit up and take notice?

The poor are more sensitive to environmental degradation while the rich of India are resource ignorant. The problem is convincing the rich and middle classes that they too will pay a price in the long run. The real challenge is overcoming the mind. We are increasingly getting confined within our own bubbles – reading what confirms, reaffirms our own opinions and 'unfollowing' those whose opinions are hard to digest.

Q: *In your opinion, what are the best ways that think tanks can work together? Is there any best practice you would recommend?*
A: Think tanks typically have a clearly carved out space and focus. However, their coming together often leads to definite policy actions. It is therefore important to respect individual institutions' stances, but at the same time, create platforms for cross-learning and sharing for advocacy.

Q: *How do you see the space of women in think tanks? Equally represented? Or are some areas male dominated and others female dominated? How does* *the revolving door work for men and women? Are there any differences?*

A: I don't think it matters in my field whether you are a woman or a man. I don't think we have the excuse any more to say that we cannot do something because we are women. We are very bright—some of the brightest people I have worked with are women. We are very dedicated, very honest to our work and we have the ability to succeed.

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Interview with Ajaya Dixit, Executive director of ISET-Nepal

JANUARY 9, 2017

Ajaya Dixit is the Executive Director of ISET-Nepal a non-governmental and not-for-profit organisation and a think tank. It primarily studies and analyses developmental issues of rapidly changing social and environmental context that demand new insights into the emerging challenges to manage resources for sustainable development.

Q: *Could tell us about yourself?*
A: After obtaining my Bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering, I began to teach Water Engineering at the Institute of Engineering in Tribhuvan University. In addition to this, I also began engaging in other areas that were more multi-disciplinary in nature.

However, around the mid-1980s, I came to realise that the technical focus of my work was limiting. All my professional work focused on design, development, operation and management of water systems, but these designs often did not encompass the institutional, social and ecological dimensions of water that are central to determining productivity, acceptability and sustainability. In fact, while the science of water flow and the application of technology were fairly established, these other aspects remained poorly addressed. Thus, gradually, I began to study these social and natural dimensions as well. These other aspects are still poorly addressed.

Q: *How did ISET-Nepal come about?*
A: After the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, Nepal saw rapid changes in its social and political milieus. Meanwhile, climate change emerged as a major global threat during this period and Nepal began to deal with its challenges by, for example, adapting to induced vulnerabilities.

Such changing contexts motivated a group of us to establish the Institute for Social and Environmental Transition-Nepal (ISET-Nepal) in 2001 with the objective of undertaking interdisciplinary examination of social and ecological changes. At ISET-Nepal, we focus on improving knowledge regarding the changing dynamics of resource use to understand the larger shifting social, economic, political and institutional contexts.

Q: *What have been your main challenges as an Executive Director? How you address these? Did you receive any support from, if so from whom?*
A: During the early days, as ISET-Nepal was evolving, we paid little attention to the needs and priorities of different types of audiences in our outreach activities. However, today, we make efforts to engage with a diverse range of decision-makers in the government, lawmakers, development organizations and civil society actors. We also work with university departments, students, local groups, media outlets, other think

tanks, teachers and local communities.

We understand that it is critical to understand the imperatives, needs, and incentives of diverse actors if research findings are to deliver changes through public policy actions. Researchers need to build diverse partnerships and alliances to ensure that policies are based on evidence generated through research. We also recognise the need to cross national borders and constructively engage with regional and international counterparts.

Finding ways to work with decision-makers in the government remains a daunting task. Though the world is becoming more complex, officials at the helm of implementing public policy often show little inkling for reflection and iteration – the fundamental basis for conducting any effective research. These agencies try to minimise risks by promoting tested methods generated by in-house expertise rather than through insights from current researches.

Investments in improving ISET-Nepal's organisational capacity have helped produce high quality research, effective policy engagement and advocacy.

But retaining qualified human capital and ensuring financial sustainability are our two major challenges. In fact, retaining qualified professionals is a major challenge for many research agency and think tanks in Nepal. We find ourselves competing with international NGOs, bilateral donors, and multi-lateral agencies for qualified human resources. This has forced us to be creative: we invest in training a young generation of professionals and provide them with new opportunities. This has helped maintain our staff retention rates.

The changing in-country regulatory context presents another challenge. Any research organisation or think tank must comply with national laws. In Nepal, regulators inquire about the specific contributions that our research has made to meet the country's development objectives. We re-iterate that our role is to produce knowledge and argue that research findings should be aimed at improving policies and practices –but are not directly responsible for them. But we have a hard time making a case.

Regulators use the same yardstick to judge research organisations as they do to judge a development organisation that, for example, works on building schools or planting saplings. This is like comparing apples and oranges. One of our biggest challenges right now is to change the perceptions of government regulators regarding the importance of critical research and the role it can have on the policy landscape.

Q: *This is important in respect to the long-term support that think tanks require from domestic sources -including the State. In your opinion, what is the future of the funding scenario in Nepal? If funders were to discontinue funding, what would be the future of think tanks like yours? Would you be able attract domestic funding?*

A: Nepal's development is, for the most part, externally funded through bi-lateral and multi-lateral agencies. This is also true of resource allocation for research and knowledge production.

Funding for research on topics such as climate change vulnerabilities, adaptation, disaster risk reduction, resilience building and many other such critical areas comes from external sources. Most of these calls are packaged within the specific funding architecture of different donors. Recently, and often, there seems to be increasing donor preference towards for-profit private sector development actors and less for home grown think tanks.

Q: *Does this also affect what gets funded and what doesn't?*
A: Yes. We find it very hard to make a case for funding support that helps build capacity towards the assimilation and synthetisation of knowledge. Insights from many on-going projects have remained fragmented and not consolidated into knowledge. They are not available for the larger public policy making community. At the same time, capacity of in-country organisations to conduct independent research and policy outreach remains low.

Still, to ensure the diversity of our sources of funding and to remain engaged with key development actors we do take part in project based proposal calls even though they provide little room for building core funding.

To make matter worse, national investment in knowledge generation is extremely low. We continue to explore possibilities of raising in-country funding for research and knowledge generation, though this terrain is unlikely to change any time soon. Without assured funding, wherever it comes from, it would be difficult to allocate resources for research on emerging challenges such as climate change adaptation, the post globalising world, and inequality, as well as carryout out activities related to innovation on poverty alleviation.

Q: *What key lessons have you learned in your role as Executive Director of ISET-Nepal?*
A: As the Executive Director of ISET-Nepal, I have had the benefit to continuously learn from the research we conduct as well as from how the organisation has evolved over the years. I have learned that working to build an institution is very different from trying to achieve a personal milestone as an independent researcher. Building an organisation does not only mean that you must move forward as a team but you also need to build alliances within and outside the country.

Meeting these larger objectives and demonstrating tangible gains will require continuous investments in universities which are where knowledge is principally generation. In Nepal's context today, universities are heavily politicised, which is seriously compromising critical knowledge production. Because we understand that no country can move forward if its universities do not contribute to high quality research, we have established partnerships with selected university departments in Nepal to help in knowledge generation to whatever extent we can. We partner with university departments to conduct collaborative research, bring out joint publications, and supervise students' theses and organise conferences for master level graduates for knowledge sharing and networking.

Production of knowledge involves contesting conventional wisdom with new ideas. One must be engaged with the larger research community, learn, reflect, revisit assumptions and bring froth new ideas. Nepal's continued political transition, particularly in the prevailing partisan national politics and public policy landscape, present challenges in use of research to inform public policy. Though policy makers may recognise the importance of evidence, in the prevailing political climate, evidence from research is hardly used in public policy-making.

Over a longer term, we at ISET-Nepal have had some positive incremental outcomes in terms of influencing policy. But such influences cannot be directly attributed to our work alone as many other actors also contribute to this. Grounded interdisciplinary research, that has geographical diversity, is beneficial for policy processes but they must be weaved effectively and linked with the policymakers' needs.

Our work also shows that the policy world is not homogenous and influence occurs through a non-linear process that involves forming an opinion, shaping a discourse, and then finally the uptake of evidence. This has been one of my key learnings. But for the most part, convincing policy makers about the importance of research and evidence is a herculean task.

Q: *And what about lessons emerging from your experience managing ISET-Nepal? For instance, how has your interaction with your Board members been?*

A: ISET-Nepal's board is an independent entity. The Board provides strategic and policy directions, monitors compliance to the law and the regulatory requirements. The members are supportive, and provide ideas and opinions on issues faced by the organisation and help with its growth.

Q: *How do you plan on choosing a policy issue to work on or a project? Is there a specific agenda or process that you follow?*

A: Our organisational strategy has set broad themes for research. The themes are based on lessons from our past research and Nepal's needs. We also respond to calls for proposals relating to themes such as climate change, disaster risk reduction, resilience, water and energy. By participating in such different calls, we attempt to remain engaged but not too stretched while looking for opportunities to diversify our portfolio of projects and funding.

We emphasise on the mentoring of young students and young professionals during research and production of knowledge as we believe that this is key to larger positive outcomes.

Q: *How has the think tank community changed since ISET-Nepal was founded?*

A: The number of research organisations and think tanks in Nepal is increasing, which I believe is a positive development. At the same time, we see less interest in generation of critical knowledge and learning. The establishment views efforts at critical knowledge as irritants. As members of the think tank community we must recognise these trends and work towards meeting the objectives of evidence-based research and use the evidence for effective policy engagement.

I see a much greater need for dialogue, sharing and understanding. The pervasive use of social media presents many opportunities but also many challenges: we seem to be becoming more mechanistic and individualistic. We need more interaction among researchers, particularly of the younger generation if we are to successfully identify solutions for the prevailing problems. The institutions we have created over the decades, to address many social and natural problems, appear unable to adapt to the changing circumstances. The challenges are coming up with new business models. I believe that regular interactions among researchers of South Asia and at the global level are key to meeting some of these objectives.

The emerging complexity and uncertainty with instances of increasing pollution, inequality and poor governance makes our line of work even more challenging. In this complex and uncertain world, the dominance of a singular worldview is a recipe for more conflicts. While identifying ways forward most tend to simplistically paint the world in black and white or to argue that one must choose between A or B. The choice is not only between A and B, however. There is also a C and a D. We need to work toward enriching the policy space with critical but constructive questioning and nurture diversity and pluralistic democracy.

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Interview with Dr. Abid Qaiyum Suleri, Executive director of Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI)

AUGUST 1, 2017

Dr. Abid Qaiyum Suleri is currently the Executive Director of Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI). SDPI was founded in August 1992 on the recommendation of the Pakistan National Conservation Strategy (NCS), also called Pakistan's Agenda 21. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, conducted this interview.

Q: *Could you please share a brief background about yourself. Why and how did you join SDPI?*
A: I was in grade three at school, when General Zia ul Haq imposed his 11 year-long martial law in Pakistan. My father is pro-democracy and that helped me turn into a human and social rights worker during school days. I have a Bachelor's degree in Agriculture and a Master's degree in Entomology from Pakistan. At university, I was elected office bearer of student political movements. I had brief stints in both multinational private sector companies and provincial civil service offices before leaving for the UK in 1996 to do my PhD in Food Security.

I always liked contributing my analysis to policy discourse. This led me to leave the civil service and join an independent policy think tank, SDPI, in 2001. After three years as a researcher at SDPI, I joined the OXFAM GB Pakistan Programme as head of programme. However, I realised that SDPI offered more intellectual freedom as well as a multidisciplinary approach, along with choices of action. I rejoined SDPI in 2005 as deputy executive director, then worked as interim ED in 2007, and have been heading it since 2008. I have enjoyed all my roles at SDPI. I get paid to work on what I believe and do as a student: research analysis and evidence based advocacy for a just and peaceful society. The sense of societal contribution I have through my work at SDPI is a great source of satisfaction.

Q: *What have been your challenges as an ED in terms of retaining human capital, raising and managing funds and engaging with a different audience?*
A: Since its inception, SDPI never had an endowment or core grant, sailing smoothly until 2005. Due to a changing funding landscape, the organisation faced a financial crisis starting in 2006. It was a vicious cycle: we could not retain human capital due to lack of funded work and without this talent didn't have the research capacities to compete for funded work.

2008-09 was the most difficult period.

Most senior researchers had left due to funding constraints and the Board of Governors was considering closing down the organisation. However, a few of us opted to work on reduced salaries, adopted austerity measures and tried not only to produce quality research but also carried out objective advocacy. The aim was to try to remain “relevant” to the policy needs of Pakistan.

I always tried to compensate monetary benefits with non-monetary benefits like intellectual freedom, flexible work hours and opportunities for exposure in academic and policy circles. This team work paid off- we got a break by winning a competitive research grant from the Think Tank Initiative from IDRC. This funding helped us recruit and retain quality staff, strengthen research and advocacy programs and prove our competitiveness to other funding sources. Over the last seven years, there has been a complete turnaround at SDPI. Today, we are considered as South Asia’s premier and most prestigious independent policy think tank. We are present at all important policy making fora in Pakistan and are heard by policy makers, the media, parliamentarians and community members.

However, in the absence of an endowment or a core grant, conducting quality, independent, research on non-funded but extremely relevant issues remains a challenge.

Q: *In addressing these challenges did you get any support? If so, from whom?*

A: My team members are a constant support. Those who stood by SDPI in 2008-09 and accepted to work on reduced or no salaries inspired others to believe that working for an independent think tank requires missionary zeal. Our team shares a collective vision and that makes it easier to face challenging times. Having said that, funding from IDRC’s Think Tank Initiative was a breakthrough. It helped us to break out of the vicious cycle we were caught in.

Q: *In your opinion, what is the future of the funding scenario in Pakistan? If funders were to discontinue funding, what would be the future of organisations like yours?*
A: There is no free lunch in the funders world. Most of the funders have political economy tags attached to their funding. Pakistan is facing political uncertainty and acts of terrorism at the domestic end and, despite the exemplary sacrifices by its people, a demand of doing more to control terrorism from the external ends. On the other hand, funders, especially American and European, are facing their own fiscal challenges and a policy shift in funding priorities. Thus one can foresee a situation where major funders will start diverting their development funds from Pakistan either because of their changed priorities, or to put pressure on the Pakistani government.

Increasingly stringent rules for funders to stop flow of money to anti-social non-governmental organisations will be another challenge. However, I don’t see a discontinuation of funding in Pakistan. Hypothetically speaking, if there is no funding from bilateral sources at all, even think tanks like SDPI would survive. SDPI's team has earned credibility and has a proven track-record of conducting independent research and bridging research-policy gaps. Any organisation with these attributes would be resilient enough to survive even if it is through small funders or UN projects.

Q: *What are your current challenges?*
A: To remain relevant to national, regional, and global policy priorities. Over the last 25 years SDPI has turned into a one-stop shop for policy advice seekers in and on Pakistan. This has put tremendous pressure on us. We have to keep updated on all major and minor developments in the field of sustainable development. The second challenge is when policy makers ask for policy advice on issues and sectors where SDPI might not have done any research recently. Trying to retain our niches, produce quality research, achieve a balance between the urge to spread too thinly and to focus on select areas, and maintaining our credibility are the major challenges I face as the ED of a 25 year old think tank.

Q: *In your opinion, what are the best ways think tanks can work together? Are there any best practices?*
A: Organisations are made up of people. I believe in working with likeminded people. These likeminded people and organisations can work together to form issue and sector based alliances and networks. These alliances and networks should collaborate on a non-funded basis. They should keep on doing what they would have been doing if they were not part of a network and then give a collective identity and brand to their outputs. This would work extremely well. I have seen this working successfully for CANSA (Climate Action Network South Asia) and for SAWTEE (South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment). The networks which are formed to seek a funding opportunity often turn dysfunctional once the funding runs dry.

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Interview with Dr. Jyoti Parikh, Executive director at Integrated Research Action for Development (IRADe)

AUGUST 28, 2019

Dr. Jyoti Parikh is a founding member and a member of the governing council at Integrated Research and Action for Development (IRADe) a think tank based in New Delhi, India. Their key objectives include conducting research and analysing information on effective policies among stakeholders and policy makers. Apart from this, they build capacities among professionals for multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder policy analysis. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, conducted this interview.

Q: *What makes Integrated Research and Action for Development (IRADe), a credible organisation?*

A: In my opinion the following reasons makes IRADe credible:

- Strong focus on multidisciplinary research and analysis
- Evidence based scientific research and sound policy advice/ measures
- Working simultaneously at local, national, regional and global levels and trying to converge in thinking and approach, thereby shaping policy making at all levels
- Consensus building approach by involving all stakeholders and groups of interest
- Strong linkages with policy making communities
- Extensive assignments with government, ministries and other governmental departments
- Cross-sectoral analysis and generating holistic insights/understanding
- Mix of research and action related work

Q: *How did you establish your credibility?*

A: Establishing credibility is a continuous process. We build our credibility by:

- Being competent and becoming an expert in our field in the areas of modelling and driving regional energy co-operation, gender aspects, etc
- Having the ability to analyse an issue/situation and develop several potential solutions/options and tailor-made recommendations
- Doing rigorous work, and by publishing in journals and other publications
- Being people-centric and consistent in the approach.
- Continuing focus on multidisciplinary research and analysis
- Thinking globally and acting locally

Q: *What is your organisation's contribution to public policy in India?*
A: IRADe has been working in the area of public policy research and advocacy and has been very successful in advancing various key reforms, development and governance agenda related to India's:

- Economic development and transformation, energy pricing reform and energy governance;
- Climate change strategies and mitigation and adoption measures, including low carbon strategies for inclusive growth
- Long-term energy transition in India and technology analysis
- Gender and poverty alleviation, food security and livelihoods
- Disaster management (disaster resilience action plan, natural disaster risk reduction strategies)
- Program evaluation of flagship schemes of Government of India (to give critical feedback to policymaking)
- Reforms in Public Distribution Scheme (PDS) and Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)
- Reforms and modernisation in Indian agriculture, climate adaptive action plans
- South Asia regional energy co-operation.

Q: *What kind of projects do you accept? Do you have a policy for what you do?*
A: We accept projects where we have the independence of saying what we found. We have been working with 11 ministries- these ministries throw us a policy problem and we solve it most of the time. It is sponsored by them but sometimes we do things on our own. When we recognise a problem we write articles on it and get it published in newspapers. We prefer those that require some amount of analysis and in-depth understanding of the subject. Occasionally we comment on current issues. Our exposure is in newspapers, journals, reports, e-reports which we circulate, so our views are known in the public.

Q: *How would you define a think tank?*
A: A think tank has to search for policy issues which are baffling sometimes. For example – how to address climate change, how fast we need to shift to electric vehicles, how to address urban development issues, disaster resilience, what to do about linking up with South Asia and so on. These require certain methods, which should be independent and not partial or give partisan information and analysis. Think tanks should be willing to weigh in when new information comes in. So, basically, a think tank, the way it is defined in India, addresses policy issues. It is slightly different from NGOs which are working in the field. Think tanks may need to do some work in the field as well (also known as action think tanks), and they do field work to verify that the key policy advice we give is valid on the ground or not. Policy advice should be delivered after considering multi-stakeholder perspectives.The entire value chain should be addressed: if it is an electric vehicle, you start with the vehicle manufacturers, the charging infrastructures, the consumers and the government if it has to give subsidiary. Think tanks provide comprehensive analysis.

Q: *What are the main concerns you have as an executive director?*
A: The executive director is concerned with all aspects of running an organisation, which relates to hiring appropriate man power, keeping them busy and giving them skills or time so they are capable of addressing new issues. We also have to raise funds for our activities. We have to ensure that when we receive funds, the deliverables are given correctly and on time, ensuring the communication of our deliverables not just to satisfy one sponsor, but that we actually try to communicate our findings to a wider audience. That is how we differ from consulting companies, which answer to the sponsor and whose work may also be confidential. In our case, we try to make a public debate out of it and correct ourselves if we find that some perspectives are missing from our analysis.

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Interview with Dr. Nischalnath Pandey, director of the Centre for South Asian Studies

AUGUST 1, 2017

The Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS) is an independent, non-political, secular, think tank based in Kathmandu, Nepal. Dr. Nishchalnath Pandey, director at CSAS was interviewed by Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks.

Q: *Why and how did you join the Centre for South Asian Studies?*
A: The Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS) was founded in 2008 as an independent think tank in Nepal. CSAS is also the convener of the Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT), which has some of the top think tanks in the region as members. The CSAS and COSATT hold seminars and conferences on issues facing South Asia. We also publish books, some of which are in the curricula of master programmes at various universities. Our books are focused around connectivity in South Asia, youth radicalisation, energy security, amongst others.

Q: *How do get your funding?*
A: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Germany) supports the COSATT network. We also seek support from donors to conduct other conferences. In the past, CSAS has partnered with the EU Commission in Nepal and the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) in the Netherlands. CSAS is also a partner institution of the Near East South Asia (NESA) Network, which is under the National Defence University (NDU) in Washington D.C.

Q: *In your opinion, what is the future of funding for think tanks like yours? Is domestic funding a good alternative?*
A: Funding is a real challenge. Without regular government or private funding it is difficult for think tanks to survive in our region. Domestic funding is a challenge because there are not many private donors within Nepal that are willing to fund research or finance publications.

Q: *What is your institutional structure today?*
A: We have researchers, account officers and interns at the CSAS.

Q: *What projects are you working on?*
A: We are planning events to commemorate 10 years of operation of CSAS, and we hope to bring leaders and representatives of our partnering think tanks to Kathmandu for these events.

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Interview with Dr. Shamika Ravi, Director of research at Brookings India

AUGUST 28, 2019

Dr. Shamika Ravi is the director of research at Brookings India and a senior fellow of governance studies program, at Brookings India and Brookings Institution Washington D.C. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, interviewed Dr.Shamika Ravi as part of the of the series on South Asian Executive Directors.

Q: *Can you tell us a bit about yourself?*
A: I am an economist who has been researching India for the last 20 years. My focus areas have been financial inclusion, health, urbanisation, farmer suicides, gender inequality and political economy. I have a PhD from NYU and regularly publish in peer reviewed academic journals as well as national and international newspapers. More recently I have become a member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council.

Q: *What have been your key learnings as the director of research at Brookings India?*
A: My key learnings have been two-fold:

- Building a high calibre research team is difficult in a '*thin*' market like India, given the scarcity of highly trained human resources, and
- Policy impact requires a think tank to constantly "translate" its rigorous academic work into accessible briefs and white papers for outreach and dissemination.

Q: *How has your interaction or work with your Board members been?*
A: Exceptionally good- they have been my greatest champions. They have also given constant suggestions and advise to address the problems described above.

Q: *How do you plan when choosing a domain or a project? Is there an specific agenda or method that you follow?*
A: The research or project is chosen by a scholar's interest. My decision to focus on health and gender inequality in India comes from my early empirical findings, which fuelled further interest in me. The initial success that our health studies received have also been encouraging.

Q: *How has the think tank community or landscape changed since you joined Brookings India? What do you think the future holds for it?*
A: It has been 4 years since I joined Brookings India. In this time, the think tank community has evolved significantly, enjoying greater professionalism and impact. Several leading institutions

are working closely with governments and hosting massive international platforms for cross-border engagements (Tracks 1.5 and 2). I am very confident on the future on the think tank community in India. However, given the needs of the country, there is an enormous capacity gap when it comes to research/evidence-based policymaking. This gap is also felt in the larger public space, where speculation and opinions abound with little in-depth scholarly basis. We need to inform and engage with government, industry and society for the overall development of our country.

Q: *As the director of research, could you share some tips on how you manage projects at different levels and with different stakeholders?*
A: At Brookings India each scholar manages her or his own project with full support from the administration and operations team. Before publication, however, my role is to put them through a thorough peer review process to ensure the publication is of the highest quality. Internal consistency between the grants and outcomes for each project is managed by the finance and development team within the institution.

Q: *Can you share a success story?*
A: The Brookings India Health Monitor has received over 300 citations from media and policymakers. It is being used by NITI and state governments. The Health and Morbidity Report became the "go-to" document for the Ministry for Health, the Family Welfare (MoHfw), and others working on health in India. Our work on energy has been cited by Piyush Goyal, the (former) Minister for New and Renewable Energy, as well as various senior officials in this government. Ravishankar Prasad quoted results from our study on Electronic Voting Machine (EVMs) in India. Our Foreign Policy book became the background for comprehensive "*Modi-Obama*" joint declarations – both visits. Our farmer suicide paper was carried by several local newspapers and has changed the narrative in India on "*debt deaths*". There are several others that we are very proud of.

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Interview with Dushni Weerakoon, Executive director of the Institute of Policy Studies

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Dushni Weerakoon is the executive director of the Institute of Policy Studies in Sri Lanka. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, interviewed Yamini Aiyar as part of the of the series on South Asian Executive Directors.

Q: *Could you please tell us a bit about yourself?*
A: I spent my school years in Sri Lanka, Nigeria and India. I entered the University of Colombo as an undergraduate student, but left after the first year as Sri Lankan universities were getting caught up in youth unrest in the mid-1980s. I then went to the UK to complete my undergraduate and postgraduate studies in economics. I returned to Sri Lanka in 1994 and took up a research position at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), which back then a young research organization.

Q: *IPS was established in 1988. What were the motivations for setting it up?*
A: In the mid-1980s, Sri Lanka's Minister of Finance had conceived the idea of a think tank to support the government's economic policy formulation. There was a gap to be filled in identifying medium-term development priorities alongside efforts by other agencies such as the Central Bank of Sri Lanka and the Department of National Planning. The government of Sri Lanka enacted an Act of Parliament to establish the IPS as a semi-government institution.

Q: *Prior to becoming the executive director what was your role in IPS? What was it about IPS as an organisation that attracted you to it?*
A: I joined the IPS in 1994 as a research fellow. In 2005, I was appointed to the newly created post of deputy director. The primary task was to set and steer the Institute's research program, including overseeing research staff training and capacity development. I enjoyed that role as it dovetailed what I found most attractive about IPS: a liberal research environment where researchers were encouraged to form their own views, present their work, network, get established, etc. This may not be a challenge for most think tanks but for IPS, as a semi-government institute, fostering an environment of independent thinking has been a trademark of its reputation.

Q: *What are the main lessons you have learnt as a woman leading an institution?*
A: To be quite frank, I have never considered my role from a gender perspective. As a specialist in macroeconomics,

I got used from the onset to being the '*odd-one-out'* in a room full of men. This of course doesn't mean there is gender parity and equal acceptance, especially in Sri Lanka's corporate sector. My experience is that women most often face a key challenge mid-career, like balancing work-life priorities, and those decisions ultimately have an impact on how far you get and how quickly. The most you can try to do is to encourage women to employ their skills and education and provide as much flexibility as possible within an organization to foster those talents.

Q: *What are the main lessons you have learned in your career? Are they critical and essential?*
A: The main lessons I have learnt in my career is that the world of research is changing and the skills and tools that researchers need also change as they progress up the career ladder. Management skills and an understanding of financials are essential today to lead any organisation. I was fortunate to have had the exposure to gain some of those skills serving as an independent non-executive director in the corporate sector in Sri Lanka. Given the importance of human resource management and financial sustainability as prerequisites for think tanks to flourish, the importance of catching up on these skill-sets for researchers who aspire to management roles cannot be understated.

Q: *Do you think that think tanks should encourage some clauses in their employment rules like flexible working hours (especially for women), in-house gender sensitisation sessions, and include gender aspects in their vision and mission statements?*
DW: I don't think that a set of guidelines and clauses on employment rules can be uniformly applied to think tanks. Often times there are institution-specific or country-specific factors that need to be borne in mind. Most organisations will evaluate their rules and regulations and adapt to changing circumstances and environments.

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Interview with Gurucharan G, Director at Public Affairs Centre

OCTOBER 10, 2018

Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks interviewed Gurucharan G, director at Public Affairs Centre (PAC) in Bengaluru, as part of the series on South Asian Executive Directors.

Q: *Can you please give us a brief background about yourself before becoming the director of PAC? How did you get into the world of think tanks?*
A: I was a civil servant all my professional life and had spent over 38 years in public governance and the public sector, across different domains. As a member of the prestigious Indian Administrative Service (IAS) I had the privilege of serving in the higher echelons of the government of India as well as the state government of Karnataka, retiring as Secretary to the Government of India. This had given me the unique opportunity of a ringside view of development praxis – policy making and programme implementation – and the experience of working closely with the communities that I was posted to serve. Striving to improve the quality of governance to improve development outcomes became the dominant work ethic in my professional life. It is with a deep sense of satisfaction that I look back on the journey that has taken me through the backward by lanes of rural India, the dusty potholed streets of cities, and the corridors of power. This first-hand experience has been invaluable.

Following my retirement from government at the end of 2016 I decided to remain actively engaged in public governance, but this time as a non-government actor. I wanted to approach the development process bottom-up from the perspective of the community. A couple of years prior to my retirement Dr. Samuel Paul, the founder of Public Affairs Centre (PAC), had suggested that I consider taking up the responsibility of leading the centre. But at the time I was in the midst of important assignments in the federal government and had to decline the offer. Serendipitously, two years later while I was poring over the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW), by far my favourite serious reading, I stumbled upon an advertisement calling for applications for the position of director at Public Affairs Centre. I applied, was interviewed, and was selected. In my role as director, I provide strategic leadership to a talented young team engaged in action research centred around the sustainable development agenda 2030. Our focus is on working with the community at the last mile.

Q: *What have been the biggest challenges you have faced or expect to face? How are you addressing them?*
A: Two principal challenges are central to our work.
The first is to understand the patterns of exclusion emerging in India's develop-

ment path. Doubtless, India has made remarkable all-round progress on human development and remains one of the fastest growing economies. Yet, large swathes of poverty – of health, education and livelihoods – persist. This remainder represents the hard end of the development challenge. To understand why exclusion occurs and how – understanding the structure and agency issues – is a necessary condition to make meaningful interventions if we are to leave no one behind and achieve the SDG goals in substantial measure.

The second is to enhance community agency – the capacity to participate in development governance not as mere beneficiaries but as equal partners. How to democratise development by raising awareness, informed advocacy, and outcome-based action in the communities that we work with represents a strategic objective of action research.

Our experience teaches us that evidence based and community led action research is critical to make interventions that can be the basis for a step change in the power relations in the community. We recognise the importance of data analytics in development. Our primary thrust is therefore on open data research using government data and partnering with governments. The second is to reinforce the principle of subsidiarity by working with the community to strengthen community-based organisations in the human development sectors – health, education and gender.

Q: *Funding from TTI is coming to an end soon. How is this going to affect PAC? Are you ready for "life after TTI"?*
A: The Think Tank Initiative was intended to be strategically aimed at building organisational capabilities for medium to long term sustainability. Hence, in PAC we targeted two key outcomes – enhancing research quality and policy engagement. This has helped strengthen the breadth and depth of the work we do and also frame our research to cater to a diverse set of projects partnering governments, international organisations, and think tanks. Our ability to influence policy is growing. We have begun our journey on a sustainable path of becoming a credible and influential think tank and the TTI has played the catalyst in this process.

Q: *What do you think are the main roles of think tanks in modern India? What is the context in which think tanks operate in India? Is it conducive to your work?*
A: Think tanks have an important role in any society, but this role is sharply enhanced in developing societies. In essence, a think tank must do three things at all times: speak truth to power, give voice to the community to hold the state to account, and help improve the quality of governance for better development outcomes.

India is at heart a liberal democracy and a plural society. India has a progressive constitution that provides the basis for individual freedoms. It also casts responsibility on the state to ensure liberty, equality and justice for all. While in practice there may be some instances of transgressions of these principles, as a society of over 1.2 billion people of different languages, ethnicities and faiths, India is an exemplar of the freedom and considerable space provided to non-state actors to engage constructively in the development space. PAC partners with diverse stakeholders including governments and we find the action research process and the environment that circumscribes our work conducive and open.

Q: *What are the biggest challenges and opportunities for think tanks in India today?*
A: The biggest challenges for think tanks in India today are to produce high quality impactful research, with insights that can be transformational, and adding new knowledge to the human development discourse. In many ways, this will determine which think tanks remain relevant and which will fall by the wayside. Much of the dominant discourse at a global level has been led disproportionately by think tanks and researchers from the global north, often, I dare say, with less than credible knowledge or understanding of the realities on the ground. This is beginning to change. Exceptionally good research is now emerging in the global south and particularly from India. At PAC, we aspire to be at the frontiers of this process of change and build on this enormous opportunity before us.

Q: *In your opinion what does the future hold?*
A: From a community perspective, I see the role of the state in the development process diminishing across the world. This will mean greater responsibilities will have to be shouldered by the market and the community. From a sustainability perspective, we are beginning to see the far-reaching consequences of ecological degradation and climate change manifesting in extreme climate events that are jeopardising the lives of millions of people. Local action to address global problems is no more a choice but an imperative. Finally, the pace of technological change is transforming life and our world as we know it.

The principal question of the future is emerging at the intersection of these three grand processes: how do we ensure and sustain an equitable, just, and humane society. How we address this question will in substantive ways determine the future of mankind.

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Interview with Khalida Ghaus, Managing director of Social Policy and Development Centre

January 3, 2017

Prof. Dr. Khalida Ghaus is the Managing Director of Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC) in Karachi, Pakistan. She is the former Director of the Centre of Excellence for Women Studies.

Q: *Please tell us a bit about yourself; about your background.*
A: Prior to joining SPDC, I was Professor of International Relations and served in the capacity of Chairperson of the Department of International Relations at the University of Karachi with additional responsibility of Director of the Centre of Excellence for Women Study (CEWS). The Center was established by the Federal Ministry of Women Development as an autonomous body in the University of Karachi.

Similar centers of excellence were also established in the other four public universities of Islamabad, Quetta, Lahore and KPK (former NWFP). In my personal and in honorary capacity, I have also served as Director of the Pakistan Center for Democracy (PCD) and the SS College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (SSCLASS). The College was a constituent of Hamdard University and I, as a founding Director, was responsible for the planning and development of all its three degree programmes of Social Sciences, an MBA Executive Program and of Liberal Arts.

Q: *Can you tell us about how you joined SPDC and what challenges you have faced as an Executive Director?*
A: I joined SPDC after being approached and offered the position by the SPDC Board members.

For SPDC, the challenges have been several. The shift in the focus from programme-specific financial support to project–specific funding has created new challenges for all policy research organisations including SPDC. The absence of core funding from a single source is an issue.

And changes in the priority areas of work of the donor community again are causing difficulties in raising funds.

Equally crucial, is the negative effect brought by the fluctuations in the exchange rates, which are also proving to be disadvantageous for the recipient country of the grant.

The comparatively lower salary structure of both the research and support staff, of late, has resulted in the departure of a couple of our researchers. It is therefore becoming extremely difficult for policy research organisations to compete with the current market salaries.

Our engagement with different audiences has not been a challenge itself. However, we do feel the disadvantage of being located in Karachi, specifically due to the very limited exposure to the donor community which does no travel (due to the security alert) to Karachi.

Q: *In your opinion, what is the future of the funding scenario in Pakistan? If funders were to discontinue funding, what would be the future of organisations like yours look like?*
A: This is an extremely difficult scenario. The other scenario will be to work closely with the government both at the federal and provincial levels and the other option can be to work with the parliamentary committees at the federal and provincial levels.

They do have the research funding available e.g.: on SDGs/MDGs – it is important to work with various parliamentary committees/task forces in identifying research and capacity building areas.

Q: *What have been your key leanings as the Executive Director of SPDC?*
A: Keep the focus on building the research capacity of my research team and also of the administrative and finance team. Equally important is to build the culture of collaborative research.

Q: *How has your interaction with your Board members been?*
A: Throughout my eight plus years at SPDC, my experience with the Board members has been smooth, supportive and of mutual learning.

Q: *How do you choose a policy issue to study or a project? Is there a specific agenda or method that you follow?*
A: It is mainly through the '*call for proposals*' published in the print media, sent through e-mails or the websites. Particular care is taken that those areas are identified for research in which expertise is available within SPDC.

Q: *How has the think tank community changed since you joined SPDC? What do you think the future holds for it?*
A: The think tank community has changed drastically. The number of policy research organisations has increased in Pakistan and they are now mainly looking into issues with a multi-disciplinary approach. With programme support becoming difficult, the culture of bidding through consortia is being opted.

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Interview with Nitin Pai, Co- Founder of the Takshashila Institution

Indian think tank based in Bengaluru, is an independent, non-partisan and non-profit organisation. Nitin Pai, co-founder of Takshashila, was interviewed by Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks.

Q: *Why and how did you start the Takshashila Institution?*
A: Takshashila was created to "*build the intellectual foundations of an India with global interests*." As the country addresses its developmental and social challenges, its policies and actions increasingly affect the entire planet. We founded Takshashila to fill that need.

Q: *What are the current trends in policy research in India?*
A: There have been a couple of positive changes on policy research in India over the past few years. First, we see an increase in the use and analysis of data. Second, there is a larger number of professionals without backgrounds in social science working in research. On the negative side, we have also seen that policy research has become more partisan and more inclined to supporting the establishment's perspectives.

Q: *Why do we need evidence for policy?*
A: Any decision that affects the lives of millions of people should be backed by evidence.

Q: *Can you share a success story?*
A: Let's just say that the more successful the story, the less we talk about it. Good policy advisors provide recommendations to decision-makers privately. If the result is success, decision-makers will often take credit for it.

Q: *How do you plan on choosing a policy issue to work on or a project? Is there a specific agenda or process that you follow?*
A: We decide on a few broad research areas and let our research fellows and analysts explore those that are of interest to them. If we find these have potential, we assign more resources to the project. We prefer to invest in the study of issues that are three or five years ahead. We are currently working on international relations, public economics and technology policy.

Q: *What key lessons have you learned as the executive director of Takshashila Institution?*
A: Simply put: "if you want to think, don't start a think tank." The amount of time required for managerial, financial and fundraising is grossly underestimated. That said, what was really positive is that we decided to be an 'institution' from the start, rather than a collection of individuals. We have a good Board, a good panel of Advisors and a great multidisciplinary team. There is tremendous value in getting this set-up right.

I've also been vindicated in my belief that the real shortage is in talent, not funding. Takshashila is a talent magnet, so if you have experience in any field and have enthusiasm to tackle the world's toughest problems, we want you!

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Interview with Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi, Director General at the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS)

Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi is the Director General at the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), a New Delhi-based autonomous Think-Tank. RIS specialises in issues related to international economic development, trade, investment and technology. The focus of the work programme at RIS is to promote South-South Cooperation and collaborate with developing countries in multilateral negotiations in various forums. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, conducted this interview.

Q: *Give us a brief background about yourself*
A: I am currently the director general at the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), a New Delhi-based think tank, under the Ministry of External Affairs. I was a Global Justice Fellow at the MacMillan Center for International Affairs at Yale University. I worked on issues related to development cooperation policies and South-South cooperation and also worked on issues like trade, investment and innovation linkages with special focus on WTO; S&T; development cooperation; SDGs; etc. Previously, I served as a visiting professor at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and have also been a consultant for the FAO, the World Bank, UN-ESCAP, UNESCO, OECD, the Commonwealth Secretariat and IUCN. I have been a developing country fellow at the University of Amsterdam (1996), visiting fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla (2003), and visiting scholar at the German Development Institute (2007). I am on the Editorial Advisory Board of the IDS Bulletin (UK) and editor of Asian Biotechnology Development Review. I have authored/edited nine books apart from publishing several research articles in various journals.

Q: *How ready were you for the job as a director?*
A: I have always been fully committed to whatever responsibility I have been assigned to in my career as a researcher. Becoming a director general at RIS in September 2014 was a challenging proposition, and I accepted the task with humility and with a deep sense of commitment to serve the institute to the best of my ability with the support of my colleagues. Being part of the senior research faculty at RIS, I was conversant with the work programme of RIS and its aims and objectives to serve as an active and effective think tank of developing

countries. So when I became director, RIS had a clear vision of how to strengthen and deepen the role of RIS in the national and international research fraternity.

Q: *Why and how did you join RIS?*
A: The Government of India had invited applications for the post of director general at RIS. I was selected and appointed to the role by the Government of India in consultation of RIS Governing Council in September 2014.

Q: *What have been your challenges as director general, in terms of retaining human capital, raising and managing funds, and engagement with different audiences?*
A: Building and sustaining an institution is a herculean task. Every day comes with a new challenge and I look at them as a new opportunity. This of course requires committed human capital and availability of resources. We are striving hard on all fronts to build upon the existing available resources. I am thankful to all my colleagues from the faculty and different divisions of administration for their unstinted, whole-hearted, support. The foremost challenge is to serve India and other developing countries with sound analytical support on issues concerned with international economy.

Q: How do you plan on choosing a domain or a project? Is there an specific agenda or method that you follow?
A: As mentioned above, RIS is a think tank intended to serve developing countries. Hence, the entire focus of our work programme is to realise this objective. While evolving our agenda we select the themes for research and policy dialogue accordingly.

Q: *What key lessons have you learned in your role as director general of RIS?*
A: We have to keep expanding our network of experts and institutions to arrive at policy cohesion to promote development cooperation at a global level. This requires not only intensely inter personal communication with stakeholders, but also reaching out to the larger sections by organising policy dialogue, sometimes at very short notice. This calls for mobilising available resources at a fast pace for a successful outcome.

Q: *Your organisation works closely with the government and policy makers, what has that experience been like?*
A: We need to keep strengthening mechanisms to provide analytical support and policy research inputs by bringing all stakeholders to a common platform. Sometimes this requires quick response to provide required inputs. Of course, all inputs are to be provided in a non-technical framework for clarity on the issues involved. Of late, the list of issues on which inputs are being provided has expanded to diverse topics.

Q: *Can you share a success story?*
A: That is for others to tell. On our part we would like add that there are several milestones, but we cannot rest assured of them as we have a long way to go on our chosen path. The examples of South East Economic Summit process, ASEAN-India, SDGs, IORA, Blue Economy, WTO, South-South Devel-

opment Cooperation, IBSA, BRICS, BIMSTEC, etc. are the areas where strong RIS presence has been felt.

Q: *What is your funding strategy/ pattern? How do you manage to raise funds?*
A: RIS receives regular financial support from the Government of India. Apart from that we also undertake research studies sponsored by various international organisations.

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Interview with Professor Hitesh Bhatt, Director at the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA)

Prof. Hitesh Bhatt is the Director of the Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA), a pioneering academic institution in rural management education and research based in Anand in Gujarat, India. It is committed to pursuing excellence, creativity and integrity. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, conducted this interview.

Q: *Could you please share a brief background about yourself?*
A: I started my career with Reliance Textiles way back in 1979. Working in senior positions in companies like Mafatlal and the Sunflag group in Tanzania, I always has a yearning to teach. I am a people person, and love work involving interaction with people, so teaching and training comes naturally. This drove me to apply for a teaching position at IRMA in 1995.

Q: *What was your experience when you joined IRMA as its director?*
A: The director's position came to me without intention, and I was pleasantly surprised when the Chairman, Shri Dilip Rath, called me to his office and asked if I would like to take up the position. Here I am since December 2017.

Q: *Did you foresee any challenges? What were they and how did you overcome them?*

HB: I became the director on December 1, 2017, so it is still too early to say anything. However, what I can say is that running an institution is not an easy task. Every day brings with it a new set of challenges. My main challenge is to get everyone on the same page with pride in their association with IRMA, and to implement this with the greatest transparency possible.

Q: *In addressing these challenges did you get any support? If so, from whom?*
A: I consider myself lucky with the support I have got from the IRMA community, be it faculty, officers, or staff. The enthusiasm with which everyone has come forward has been a big boost. It makes me optimistic for the future.

Q: *How has your interaction or work with your board members been?*
A: The board has been very cooperative. It was they, after all, who suggested me for the director's position. My interactions with the board members have been full of camaraderie and good will.

Q: *As a director, could you share some tips on how you manage projects at different levels and with different stakeholders?*
A: I don't know if I would call them 'tips' but I like to work encouraging integration and reaching out to people. You will often hear that I am never

available in my office, because I prefer to be 'out there' in the field. I prefer to be with the people I work with to understand their problems, where they come from, and working out solutions through interaction in a collective spirit.

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Interview with Professor Mustafizur Rahman, Executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue

NOVEMBER 25, 2016

Professor Mustafizur Rahman is the Executive Director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), a leading centre of excellence in Bangladesh. He discusses his career at CPD, the challenges he faced, CPD's impact, and the role that funders and the think tank's leadership and staff have played in contributing to CPD's development over the last decade.

Q: *Can you tell us a bit about yourself?*

A: I am an economist by training. After having done my PhD in development economics, I joined the University of Dhaka as an Assistant Professor in 1986. When the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) was founded in 1993 by Professor Rehman Sobhan, I was part of the core team. It was indeed an exciting time. Bangladesh was leaving behind the decade-long military rule and the vibrancy of the civil society was palpable. The need for independent voice, evidence-based engagement and an interactive dialogue process was increasingly being felt in Bangladesh. It was in this backdrop that CPD was established by Professor Sobhan with the vision of contributing to Bangladesh's journey forward by promoting an inclusive, constructive and informed dialogue process among key stakeholders. The need for such a dedicated institutional facility in support of this was acutely felt at that time. Such a facility would serve as a platform which would facilitate debate and discussion, influence policies and reforms, pursue policy activism and give voice to the marginalised sections of the society. I saw my involvement with CPD as a unique opportunity to be part of this exciting journey, where I could bring on board my passion for research and my desire to work towards positive change in Bangladesh. At the beginning, I was both teaching at the University of Dhaka and helping Professor Sobhan in getting CPD off the ground, in particular looking after CPD's research related activities.

Q: *And how did you arrive at this post?*

A: When CPD started to work under an institutional structure, after a review carried out in 1999, I was made the Research Director. I served for eight years in this capacity, between 1999 and 2007. As Research Director, I was very closely involved with CPD's research activities, both supervising CPD's Research Division and being closely involved in CPD's research related activities. Work as the Research Director gave me an opportunity to set up and strengthen research capacity, undertake research planning and provide leadership in implementing CPD's research work plan. At the same time, I worked closely with the then Executive Director Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, who was defining role in giving CPD a strong institutional and organisational foundation and steering CPD towards its emergence as a leading think tank in South Asia. My close association in this process helped me to have an in depth understanding the ethos, vision, mission and mandate of CPD. When I became the Executive Director in 2007, I was thus well-conversant with CPD activities, its vision and mission, and where it aspired to go in the future.

Q: *What was the leadership transition like?*
A: I had carried out the responsibilities as CPD's Research Director for about eight years then the CPD Board appointed me as the Executive Director. I had long been a part of the senior management of CPD and was thus, as it were, an "*inside*" person. I was closely involved with planning, operational and implementation related activities spearheaded by the Executive Director. I was committed to pursuing the vision and mission of CPD and had excellent rapport with the collective at CPD. My transition from a Research Director to the Executive Director was thus quite smooth. My predecessor Dr Bhattacharya who was moving to Geneva as Bangladesh's Ambassador to the WTO and UN organisations helped me a lot in getting ready for the executive responsibilities and helping me get ready in taking up the responsibility of the Executive Director of the CPD.

Q: *Did you foresee any challenges, if so what were they and how did you overcome them?*
A: Whilst CPD's leadership transition was smooth, I was aware of the fact that maintaining the standards and track record of the CPD was going to be a challenging task. The Chairman and the CPD Board, which include some of the most eminent citizens of the country, were extremely supportive and I benefitted enormously from their advice and encouragement. My colleagues at the CPD gave me unconditional support. By this time CPD had consolidated its position as the country's leading civil society think tank. I tried my best to maintain the level of excellence to which my predecessor had elevated the organisation. In 2006 it had produced the Vision 2021 document through country-wide consultations and campaigned in favour of good governance. When I took over, the country was entering into a new phase, where a military-backed civil administration had assumed power after months of civil unrest. There was a large degree of uncertainty with the new power exercising restrictions on activities of non-state actors. My colleagues and I had to strategise in view of the emergent situation, consolidating our achievements and avoiding taking risks.

The other challenge I faced was to strengthen CPD's institutional capacity through organisational and human capacity development. Under the wise guidance of the CPD Board, and with help from colleagues, we continued to strengthen our in-house research capacity and strengthen our Dialogue and Communication Division. We focused on issues of interest and importance to Bangladesh and tried to design our activity portfolio accordingly. We also started to take preparations for financial strengthening of CPD since a major multi-year programme support was coming to an end.

We felt the need for endowment fund and capacity building support to enable CPD to free itself from projectised involvements and to enable the CPD to develop and pursue a demand-driven portfolio and to carry out research and dialogues with high degree of professionalism. The TTI announcement in 2009 came as a unique opportunity to address this challenge, and the CPD Board, senior leadership and all colleagues were extremely keen to take advantage of this. We spent a lot of time and gave our best efforts to get ready for the competition, and to prepare the needed documentation. We were delighted when CPD was selected as one of the few think tanks which received the TTI grants in Phase I through a highly competitive process. Indeed, CPD was also awarded TTI support under the Phase II support.

Q: *How did the TTI funding make a difference?*
A: The senior management at CPD has put emphasis on, and gave priority to, building on what CPD had achieved and was keen to take this further and forward. Research portfolio became more diversified and effort was put on strengthening CPD's institutional architecture. A Strategic Pathway document was prepared and quality assurance mechanisms were put in place in all the three Divisions of CPD: Research, Administration and Finance to ensure quality assurance in research, and good governance, transparency and accountability in running the institute.

CPD also endeavoured to reach out beyond the remits of the country. Over the next years CPD took the initiative to spearhead and host two global networks – one, the Least Developed Countries IV Network, concerned advancing interests of the LDCs in view of the Istanbul Programme of Actions for the LDCs; the other, Southern Voice on post-MDGs, was geared to give voice to southern think tanks in view of the SDGs.

Strategic moves were gradually put in motion to realise CPD's ambition of transforming itself as a think tank with "*local roots and global reach*". In carrying out my responsibilities as the Executive Director, I received full support of my predecessor, Dr Bhattacharya who returned to the CPD after having represented Bangladesh at the WTO as Ambassador, and working at the UNCTAD where he served with high reputation as Adviser for the LDCs to the UNCTAD Secretary General.

Q: *In your opinion, what are the best ways that think tanks can work together? Are there any best practices you would recommend?*
A: I feel that there should be more and closer collaboration among think tanks, beyond participating and giving presentations in seminars and conferences where they often tend to meet. Mutual learnings, in terms of research quality assurance, institutional management, human resource development, best use of outreach tools and social media, resource mobilisation etc. are critically important for institutional development and organisational strengthening of the think tanks. There is much to learn, as regards to best practices, from each

other in each of these areas. This is particularly relevant for new and relatively weakly-endowed think tanks.

Hence, I reckon the regional and global Think Tank Initiative conferences and meetings are very good platforms to bring think tanks awardees together to stimulate cross-fertilisation of ideas, encourage learnings across think tanks and to identify common modalities for collaboration. Joint capacity building programmes have also worked well under the TTI support. I have found that membership of think tanks in common regional and global networks works well, particularly when they take up collaborative research. An Opportunity Fund+ type of window, where think tanks take up activities of similar and complementary nature, also produce good results. Inter-TTI fellowships and exchanges, on a regular basis, should be encouraged to promote learning across think tanks.

Q: *There have been projects where CPD has work very closely with the government. Can you briefly share with us your experiences regarding this and how do you avoid getting "**too close**"?*
A: CPD does not take any financial assistance from the Government of Bangladesh (GoB). This is because a key mandate of CPD is to put under close critical scrutiny government's policies and practices, on a regular basis. The apprehension is that financial transactions could create conflict of interest in relation to the government and could constrain voicing of independent (and critical) analysis and opinion. Indeed, this was one of the reasons for staying away from any financial dealings with the government.

However, CPD remains proactively engaged with the government. CPD's research and policy recommendations are shared regularly with the relevant government entities. Policy briefs are prepared to service needs of specific Ministries/bodies. High level policymakers including Ministers, Secretaries and high officials are regularly invited to, and to take active part in CPD dialogues and events. CPD's senior management and colleagues are invited to be members of various important policy committees constituted by the GoB; they are also invited to take part in government delegations and negotiations.

My predecessor, as was mentioned, was invited to represent the country in the WTO as Bangladesh's Ambassador. Senior colleagues have been members of Panel of Economists for successive five year plans and participated in climate change and trade negotiations as part of government delegations. All these allow CPD to interact closely with high level policymakers, and contribute to policymaking. This is an excellent way to make practical use of CPD's research work and policy recommendations.

However, when CPD's assessment of government's performance is not to its liking, or when government data analysis and evidence are put under critical scrutiny, or when the state of governance, transparency and accountability concerning public sectors and performance of the government is questioned by CPD, then CPD is subjected to harsh criticism and at times sanctions of various types. CPD is very careful to maintain and sustain its credibility through evidence-based assessment of policies and by remaining honest and maintaining integrity. On the other hand, CPD has also worked closely with the government on specific issues and have found the government receptive to many ideas put forward by CPD.

Q: *Has the work of CPD resulted in providing effective solutions in the government decision making process? If so, could you share an example?*
A: It is not unusual that without giving credit to CPD, some of its recommendations are accepted and implemented by the government. A number of policy suggestions as regards monetary and fiscal policies, trade related policies, reform issues, negotiating stance in various fora and Bangladesh's stance on key global issues on negotiating tables may be cited in this regard. CPD believes, however, not in attribution but in contribution.

When CPD senior management colleagues are members of government committees, they can influence policies in more direct ways. CPD has in this way made important contribution to formulation of Bangladesh's policies including environment, trade and industrial policies. In the past, CPD has worked closely with the Ministry of Commerce and played a key role in the design of negotiating stance in the WTO, through research and also thanks to appointment of CPD's immediate past ED Dr Bhattacharya as Bangladesh's Ambassador to the WTO. CPD has found, through practice, that when it is able to involve senior policymakers such as Secretaries of Ministries as Chairs of CPD's programme Advisory Bodies, collaboration with concerned Ministries is greatly facilitated and the possibility of policy recommendations to be accepted by concerned authorities also rises significantly.

One pertinent example is the BCIM-Economic Corridor. CPD pursued this initiative from the very beginning, since 1999, when this was known at the "Kunming Initiative". CPD's Chairman Professor Rehman Sobhan, and the late Dr M Rahmatullah, who was Director of CPD's Transport and Connectivity programme had earlier laid the intellectual foundation of the BCIM-EC initiative. CPD was the focal institution for the BCIM Forum and contributed to steering the BCIM idea from Track-II (civil society) to Track I (intergovernmental) in the context of Bangladesh. CPD contributed through research, hosting of BCIM Forums, popular writings, awareness raising events with private sector and key stakeholders and close collaboration with the policymakers. Gradually, the idea took shape and got realised into concrete actions at intergovernmental level. CPD also extended fullest cooperation to the holding of the BCIM Car Rally from Kunming to Kolkata where the GoB played the key role.

The other example is that of the "Transfer Pricing Cell" at Bangladesh's National Board of Revenue (NBR). CPD worked with NBR to come up with a Working Paper on transfer pricing. CPD organised a number of events with participation of high level policymakers and concerned officials to pursue the cause. Subsequently, a Transfer Pricing Cell was established at NBR which is working to ensure that capital flight from Bangladesh through transfer pricing can be adequately dealt with.

Q: *As an Executive Director, could you share some tips on how you manage projects at different levels and with different stakeholders?*
A: CPD's management of project and dealings with stakeholders involve interaction at five levels: getting permission from authorised body of the government (NGO Bureau of Bangladesh), project management, project implementation, project reporting, and dissemination and outreach among key stakeholders.

Proper management of projects at different levels and with different stakeholders is contingent on a number of factors. Development partners with whom CPD works haave specific requirements. The smart way is to take cognisance of particular practices of specific partners and supporters in setting up the activity and financial management system. This should be done in a manner that addresses specific demands of the partners.

CPD has to get permission from the NGO Bureau to receive foreign funds. Documentation has to be done meticulously. CPD strives to carefully follow project outputs and reporting milestones son reporting milestones are clearly delineated to ensure timely delivery of the outputs.

CPD's project ideas are generated through in-house consultations taking stock of emerging needs and views of policymakers and stakeholders. Concept Notes for relatively larger projects are developed and then consulted at expert group meetings (EGMs) for further refining. It is also CPD's practice to organise EGMs to discuss draft research outputs.

The reports are then presented for discussion and feedback in the presence of high level policymakers, involved stakeholders and the media. The purpose is three-fold: policy awareness, policy influencing and generating comments, suggestions and feedbacks to get inputs for the revision work. The feedback received is then incorporated in the final version of the report. Research reports and policy briefs are widely circulated through various avenues and, increasingly, by taking advantage of the social media.

Sometimes if the project so demands, CPD sets up networks to pursue the cause downstream. For example, in view of the CPD work on the SDGs, CPD has set up a Citizens SDG Platform where research findings are disseminated with the help of the network members who also are actively involved in the dialogue process.

When CPD feels that an issue calls for urgent attention of policymakers, but CPD doesn't have in-house capacities, support of outside experts is sought to help deliver the outputs. This is also seen at the CPD as a good way to develop in-house capacity on particular issues with collaboration of outside expertise.

Q: *Many think tanks in the region are concerned about the source of their funding. How important is domestic funding for CPD? How hard has it been to raise this kind of funding?*
A: The share of domestic funding in CPD's overall resource envelope is rather insignificant. Reasons are three-fold.

First, as far as Bangladesh's private sector was concerned, the practice of allocating funds to think tanks, for research, dialogue and outreach purposes, is rather absent.

Also, as I mentioned earlier, CPD does not take GoB funds being apprehensive of a possible conflict of interests. CPD also avoids taking funds to pursue research work from organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF who have important say in reform measures and policies in Bangladesh so that no conflict of interest arises in undertaking assessment of those reforms. CPD is also very cautious to take funds from the private sector as it often puts under scrutiny business practices pursued by business houses and there is a perceived apprehension that support could influence CPD's voice if a transactional relationship is established with such entities.

Having said that, we do not shy away from dealing with the aforesaid important stakeholders in Bangladesh's socio-economic progress and development. Indeed, CPD very closely works with Bangladesh's private sector to promote policies that are conducive to promoting business-friendly environment in Bangladesh. CPD is also engaged in policy debates and discussion with the World Bank, IMF and other multilateral institutions working in the country. On specific occasions, CPD has partnered with particular business groups and multilateral organisations to organise events. In such cases, CPD is very cautious who the partners are in order to ensure that there is no conflict of interest in implementing such activities

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Finally, and regrettably, the practice of setting up of foundations by the private sector, which could then allocate resources for supporting think tanks, is yet to take root in Bangladesh. If this would have been the case, domestic think tanks would have access to local funds and they would not be so overwhelmingly dependent on foreign-funded projects and outside support as they are at present

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Interview with Rohini Nilekani, Founder and Chairperson of Arghyam

Rohini Nilekani is the founding chairperson of Arghyam, former journalist and philanthropist. She is an active supporter of think tanks in India. This interview is made up of two parts. The first is the transcript of an interview carried out by Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, from CSTEP for Aditi. The second, follows from it, and was carried out by Enrique Mendizabal for On Think Tanks.

She provides a refreshing insight into funding for think tanks and reinforces our view that the only way forward in developing countries is to leverage and mobilise domestic funds for policy research.

Q: *Why was water chosen as the main area of focus of Arghyem?*
A: When I started on water I was looking for an area in which an Indian foundation could step is and fill some gap and also do some strategic work. And I hit upon water actually by accident. But as soon as we started doing some research on the water sector we realised that it was an area where there was going to be tremendous crisis and there was a good scope for philanthropic effort.

Q: *What do you see in the role of think tanks in developing nations such as India? How can they make an impact?*
A: I think think tanks in countries like ours are going to play and increasingly important role as we enter a new phase of both economic development and inclusive agendas, which in a country like ours with 600 million people being left behind cannot be forgotten. There are many public policy areas and areas of research that need to be undertaken and encouraged.

Obviously we need a multitude of think tanks. There are already several good ones in India but for a country this size and for a public policy landscape that is emerging I think that we need many more and they should be backed both with good academic rigour, public commitment, and advocacy strength. And if a diversity of credible voices are able to influence the public policy sector in India I think the outcomes will be good.

Q: *What aspects do philanthropists like you consider when supporting think tanks and what outstanding concerns do you have with regards to funding think tanks in India?*
A: Speaking for my self: I like to support think tanks because we need to have good data, good research, we need thinking people of integrity to put out papers, to put out evidence, to collect data to speak truth to power, to hold a torch light to government, to research areas where there is not enough public

discourse as in some cases when it comes to governance or environmental issues. [We need them] to deepen the discourse and to do it all in a civil manner. And to really inform the debate.

That are the reasons I fund think tanks. In fact, I fund think tanks that sometimes think differently to me because I believe that wherever people are coming from, from across the ideological spectrum, if they are doing work with commitment and integrity and are adding evidence to the policy debate I think they must be supported.

I do not need to agree with every paper from the think tank I support; I do not need to agree with everything that comes out from them. So long as it is backed by integrity, commitment and evidence.

Q: *How can government best support philanthropy in India? What kind of financial, political or institutional conditions should be in place?*
A: There is still scope for government to do a bit of policy tweaking in the philanthropic sector. The philanthropic sector depends on many actors that have to be supported and I think that in the last few years government has come down quite heavily on the NGO sector in terms of pushing them, various regulatory issues sometimes have been handled rather heavily, and perhaps we need to create a system of transparency and trust between government and the civil society sector.

If you really want to encourage philanthropy in India then you have to look at what other countries have done. We need to have a debate on inheritance tax, we need to look at structures that we have set up in terms of societies and trusts and see if there are any more innovative structures that have relevance to the Indian condition that need to be allowed by Indian policy. So I think there is scope for the government to do a lot and to create a fair, transparent and equal regime for philanthropists to operate in and for civil society actors to engage in.

That way we increase the absorptive capacity of philanthropic capital; which right now I think is quite low.

If you want to have impact and scale up you need to work with government. If you just to innovate then you can work without government. So most philanthropists have to work with government whenever possible and in many cases government has been quite open to that partnership.

There can be natural tension between philanthropists and government but that is also important. We have to be able to speak openly to each other.

Sometimes it can be a contrarian relationship. For example if some philanthropic capital is going into exposing government then obvious government is not going to roll over and say “wow come and do more”. So we have to balance our role as philanthropists.

Q: *Which global philanthropic organisation do you admire? And why?*
A: There are several I admire and it is hard to pick out one. Certainly George

Soros' work with the Open Society Foundations, some aspects of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, many of the early work of Ford Foundation, many other smaller groups that are doing small but important work and there are lessons to be taken form there also. I do not want to ignore what is happening on this side of the world. There are many east Asian family foundations that are also doing important work and I think sometimes we leave them out but I hope that going forward that we can have more cooperation and partnerships with philanthropists from other Asian countries. I can see that coming in the near future.

Some of their work is quite relevant to India. We do not get many chances to meet but the few I have met are very interesting. There are many places to get inspiration from.

Q: *If you were to fund new areas for social change in India with no limits of funds available what would some of them be?*
A: I think a lot more work remains to be done in health and mental health: preventive health, primary health care, mental health, etc.

Issues related to the environment: how do we keep growing the economy when more and more people can participate in it and yet not go the Chinese way? Even to unpack those things is going to require a lot of philanthropic capital.

I think there is more to do in almost every field but even in the arts and culture space a lot more philanthropy needs to come in. Libraries, why can't every nook and corner of the country have futuristic libraries?

I can go on and on and on.

Justice, access to legal rights, a lot of these issues have not been invested on enough.

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Interview with Salai Ngun Lian Sang, Executive Director at the Centre for Development and Ethnic Studies

Salai Ngun Lian Sang is the Executive Director of the Centre for Development and Ethnic Studies (CDES). CDES is an independent think tank and study centre founded in 2012 to generate ideas on democracy, human rights and federalism as an effective vehicle for 'peace and reconciliation' in the Union of Burma/Myanmar. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, interviewed Salai Ngun Lian Sang as part of the of the series on South Asian Executive Directors.

Q: *Can you tell us a bit about yourself?*
A: I am of Chin ethnicity in the multi-ethnic country Myanmar. I was born in 1990, shortly after the 1988 democratic movement that resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and a military coup that led to a centralised military dictatorship in Myanmar. However, I had the chance to grow up different parts of the country as my father was a police officer and we frequently moved from one place to another. I believe this way of growing up made me see things in Myanmar objetively. I studied history at Kalay University in the Sagaing Region of Myanmar from 2007 – 2015. After my studies at Kalay University, I started working at Centre for Development and Ethnic Studies (CDES) and am currently the executive director.

Q: *What circumstances led to your appointments as executive director?*
A: I started working at CDES as project coordinator in early 2015. The then founder and executive director, and current senior consultant, Dr. Lian H. Sakhong is a man of wisdom and vision. He recruited young, active and intellectual people and trained us to become skillful and industrious individuals in our respective positions, in an effort to contribute to peace and reconciliation in Myanmar. In March 2017 I was appointed executive director. It was the leadership qualities of Dr. Lian H. Sakhong and the team work of CDES that helped me get this role.

AR: *How has CDES been active in the policymaking process of the government?*
SNLS: From its creation in 2012, the theme of CDES was peace and reconciliation. Until 2015 the activities of CDES were mainly based in the border areas with Thailand, China, and India. These border areas were and still are controlled by Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). The main activities of CDES are research, publications, trainings on

federalism. We also conduct advocacy work to inform the international community about the real situation of Myanmar through briefing, analysis and working papers.

In 2015 CDES established its office in Yangon and was registered as a local non-profit organisation in the Ministry of Home Affairs. Until 2017, CDES engaged mainly with EAOs, who are major stakeholders in the current negotiation for peace building in Myanmar. We also conducted workshops and seminars to produce position papers for negotiation with the government and Tatmataw (the Myanmar army).

We are also engaging with multi-stakeholders who are crucial in peace building and state building processes in Myanmar. The research and publications of CDES are distributed to members of parliament (MPs), government officials, Tatmataw officials, political parties and civil society organisations (CSOs). So far, CDES has distributed nearly 300,00 copies of 42 publications across the country.

We also conducting trainings and workshops for MPs, political parties, CSOs and activists in the sub-national levels as a tool for knowledge generation and policy influence.

Q: *How do you plan your research agenda? Is it based on the interest of the organisation or on the political demand?*
A: The research agenda is planned based on both the interest of the organisation and on political demand. For instance, research on constitution building (which is related to federalism) is designed based on the current political situation, whereas gender equality and federalism are on the mission statement of CDES.

Q: *Do you have any specific career growth path for your staff?*
A: We have monthly in-house training for all staff in which external experts are invited as resource people. For individual growth, CDES encourages and provides financial support for all staff to attend short-term trainings on specific skills development related to their position. Moreover, certain staff members are recommended and sent to attend international seminars, conferences, trainings and seasonal schools abroad.

Q: *What are the key areas or domains that CDES focusses on?*
A: CDES focuses on federalism, gender equality, peace building and constitution building.

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Interview with Sanghmitra S Acharya, Professor and Director at the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS)

Sanghmitra S. Acharya is a professor and the director of the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS), an Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) recognised institution. It was set up in 2003, by academicians and civil society activists to understand the problems of marginalised groups, identify the causes of their marginalisation and suggest policies for their empowerment. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, conducted this interview.

Q: *Can you please share a brief background about yourself?*
A: My academic training in one of the most prestigious institutions in the country, Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, and my doctoral thesis on social area analysis initiated my interest in the issues around inequalities. My work experience in the Department of Development Studies at the International Institute of Population Sciences in Mumbai and at the Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health, JNU, futhered my interest in this field. The opportunity to be part of a research project on social exclusion in multiple spheres undertaken by IIDS during 2006-08 polished my skills to understand social exclusion and discrimination. All these experiences collectively contributed to my becoming the director.

Q: *What was your initial experience when you joined IIDS as an executive director?*
A: Overwhelming. A young organisation with extensive and robust research and publications! The contribution of IIDS in the study of social exclusion and discrimination is matched by no other organization. The work environment is highly cordial.

Space constraint and resource crunch were felt almost immediately after joining, but these challenges have not deterred the research output in any way.

Q: *Did you foresee any challenges? If so what were they and how did you overcome them?*
A: Yes. With very little experience in administrative affairs, there were plenty of challenges. Understanding the governance structure and functioning; administrative hierarchy; roles and responsibilities of personnel; gearing resources for research and related activities; and adequate functional space were some of the challenges. Since social exclusion and discrimination is a sensitive issue, the other challenge involved sharing the

research output with different stakeholders.

Q: *In addressing these challenges did you get any support? If so from whom?*
A: The support of my colleagues and advice from senior colleagues and mentors helped me overcome these challenges. Periodic staff meetings with the staff and research faculty, the governing body, along with discussions with personnel on different issues (for instance, deciding to upload a matter on our website considering the sensitive nature of the work) also helped overcome some of these challenges

Q: *What has been a key take-away as the executive director of IIDS?*
A: Be firm in decision making and assertive in understanding the challenges and when addressing them.

Q: *How has your interaction and work with your board members been?*
A: The board meets regularly at least once a year. These meetings are the channel for the smooth functioning of the institute. They connect the day to day operations with the formal structures of the institute. Reporting of the activities and suggestions for change(s)/modification(s) if any, are transacted cordially.

Q: *As an executive director, could you share some tips on how you manage projects at different levels and with different stakeholders?*
A: We have stringent and strict norms for how a project is conducted to maintain the high quality of research. All project proposals are discussed at length at various levels- internally among faculty members, followed by presentations in the research advisory committee. Conceptual framework and research design are worked upon before bringing them for discussion. Only then the project proposal is submitted to the funding agency or the study is initiated. In addition, periodic meetings are convened to deliberate on the progress of the project.

Periodic progress is communicated to the funding agencies. The findings are shared as they evolve through the study, and at the culmination. This communication happens through seminars, conferences, and roundtable discussions with the stakeholders cutting across grassroots level workers, researcher and academicians to policy makers. The institute also prepares policy briefs as part of dissemination of research outcomes.

Q: *There have been projects where some of your work involves working closely with the government. Can you briefly share with us your experiences regarding this?*
A: The institute has undertaken many projects for the government- both state and central. Most of the projects have become the basis of policies in various spheres. Some direct influence on policy outcome because of IIDS research in recent times are: Procurement Policy for SCs and STs Micro and Small Enterprises, 2012; Prevention of Caste-based Discrimination in Higher Educational Institutions Regulations by UGC, 2012; NCERT Teacher's Training Module to Address Caste-based Discrimination Inside Schools and Classrooms, 2013; Strengthening and Leveraging

Panchayat Raj Institutions for Effective and Non-discriminatory Delivery of Public Goods and Services, 2013.

In addition to the above, the institute's research informed the inclusive planning for Scheduled Caste (SCs) and Scheduled Tribe (STs) in the government's 12th Five-Year Plan. Studies done by IIDS on the access and utilisation of Government National Flagship Programmes among socially excluded sections has drawn attention for the government to take steps to deliver services in a non-discriminatory manner. Based on the research outcomes on excluded groups, the institute has provided policy inputs to the post-MDG2015 discussion.

This is indicative of a positive experience working with the government.

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Interview with Sanjay Kumar, Director of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

Sanjay Kumar is currently the Director of CSDS. It is one of India's leading institutes for research in the social sciences and humanities.

Q: *Could you tell us about yourself?*
A: I am the Director at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Co-Director of Lokniti, a Research Programme of the CSDS. +My core area of research includes Electoral politics using survey method as a research tool survey based studies on Indian Youth, State of Democracy in South Asia, State of Slums of Delhi, State of Indian Farmers and Issues of Electoral Violence.

As an expert in Survey Research, I have directed various National and State level studies conducted by the CSDS including the National Election Studies, (NES) 1998, 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014, various round of bi-annual '*State of the Nation Survey*' and various State level studies.

My publications include an edited volume Indian Youth and Electoral Politics: An Emerging Engagement, Changing Electoral Politics in Delhi: From Caste to Class and (with Praveen Rai) Measuring Voting Behaviour in India. Other publications include: (With Christophe Jaffrelot) Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies and (with Peter R de Souza and Sandeep Shastri) Indian Youth in a Transforming World: Attitudes and Perceptions. I have contributed chapters for several edited volumes, written various research reports, published articles in both international and national research journals and writes regularly for popular newspapers.

Q: *How and when was the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) established? What were its key objectives?*
A: The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) was established in 1963 in Delhi and is marked by several identifiable 'moments' in its intellectual and institutional evolution.

These include the Centre's participation in debates on modernisation in the 1960s in which its emphasis on the importance of empirical research in politics and political behaviour proved to have a life beyond the moment. Some of the other landmarks in the history of the Centre are its critique of science, reason, and governmental categories, and the bid to estimate the continuing significance of `*traditional*' affiliations, world-views, and social and ecological practices against the demands of modernity; and the exploration of new democratic potentials in the contemporary period.

During its first decade CSDS was known for its pioneering empirical work on Indian politics. Its founder, Rajni Kothari's Politics in India (1970) was the first systematic and comprehensive study of the national political system by an Indian; the work also received unprecedented international acclaim. The crucial insight of this work was that there was neither an easy translation of west-centred categories in the Indian social and political setting nor was a useful link available between methodologies and the reality that they were meant to understand and explain.

At a time when social worlds seemed to be neatly divided between tradition and modernity, work at the Centre, perhaps not inappropriately, was steeped in the modernisation theory.

However, as the country's most extensive data unit was being developed at the Centre, a healthy skepticism about some of the conclusions it was yielding also began to grow and led to a profound questioning of western modernity. The scholars at the Centre began scrutinising the fundamental cultural and intellectual assumptions underlying western social science and started a thorough search for alternative paradigms.

During this period the Centre also gave an intellectual direction to influential civil society movements through initiatives like Lokayan,+ which had a major impact on non-party politics. The Centre was among the first to warn of the dangers of a blind faith in science and technology and in particular, development-induced displacement.

In the Centre's imagination, then, as now, India cannot be conceived or understood independently of its neighbours. The Centre was among the few places in India that continuously tried to connect with researchers in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Nepal. It was its long-standing commitment to this engagement that made possible the studies on the State of Democracy in South Asia.

Q: *What have been your main challenges as an Executive Director? How did you overcome them? What type of support and from whom did you get help?*
A: I became the Director in 2014. Prior to this I was a faculty member. The challenges faced by me on taking over as the Director of CSDS have been minor ones with the exception of raising funds for the institution. The Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) provides us with funding for the salary of our regular faculty and staff, but it offers no regular funds for institutional resources such as the library, IT services or institutional activities such as seminars, workshops and conferences, and field work and archival research funds for faculty research. This was overcome to a great extent by IDRC TTI funding during my tenure. The Think Tank Initiative (TTI) funding immensely helped in institutional building and provide resources for continuing with our research agenda.

Q: *How has the Think Tank community/landscape changed since you joined CDS? What do you think the future holds for it?*
A: I do not think that the landscape has changed much since I joined CSDS, in the last 5-7 years.

There is some shift in thematic focus; there is an emphasis on working in Indian languages at CSDS. The faculty + has been able to bring about three research journals with three different thematic focuses, one on Politics, another on media and one journal in Hindi language, the first peer review journal in Hindi language. The demand for all these journals are likely to increase in coming years.

Q: *In your opinion, what is the future of the funding scenario in India? If funders like the TTI were to discontinue funding (which they will), what would be the future of organisations and think tanks like yours?*
A: The future scenario of social science funding from both state and non-state actors does not look very bright in India. The ICSSR which has been the main government funder has not revised its funding allocation for a long time and the government's push for self-generation of funds has further restricted this resource allocation. Foreign funding which has been the mainstay of social science promotion in India has been brought under stricter government surveillance leading to cancellation of Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) licenses (though CSDS has managed to get it's FCRA license renewed). In general, the inflow of foreign funding has declined leading to resource crunch for conducting research.

The absence of dedicated funds at CSDS after the TTI support is over on project overheads, would lead to considerable fluctuation in and depletion of institutional resources. Thus, fund raising continues to be a major challenge and a long-term plan for approaching Indian funders and achieving self-reliance is the need of the hour for the CSDS.

Q: *So do you think there are domestic funders who will be able to "pick up a the tab" –at least in the mid-term? Who are they?*
A: Difficult to answer, though there are domestic funders who could be approached for funds. At CSDS we get funds for the various projects, which is not very difficult to acquire. However, institutional support is an area that we are finding difficult with respect to funding.

Q: *How has your interaction/work with your Board members been?*
A: My interaction with Board members has been cordial and collaborative. Their advices have been quite encouraging in improving the functioning of CSDS and charting future plans for the institution. The Board members have been quite cooperative in finishing the pending agenda like introduction of Reservation for Schedule Caste (SC), Schedule Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Class (OBC) communities in faculty positions and finalising the processes for initiating fund raising with renewed vigour.

Q: *Do you think the board can play a role in helping you raise funds from new funders? Are they playing this role?*
A: Yes the CSDS governing body members are prominent people in their respective fields, they could play an important role in fund raising and they are helping us in that. They have guided us how to go about doing this. They have also promised that they will help us in-

troduce us to some possible funders, so we are very positive about our board helping in resource mobilisation.

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Interview with Seethalakshmi S and Rahul Nandan, Chief mission officers at Antardhwani

Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, interviewed Antardhwani's chief mission officers Seethalakshmi S and Rahul Nandan in December 2017.

Q: *Can you please provide a brief background about yourselves?*

S S: I was the City Editor (Bengaluru) at The Times of India until November 2017. I am a seven-time award winner for excellence in journalism and have written more than 2000 articles, news features and interviews across different subjects during my years at the Times of India (TOI). I am also a recipient of the prestigious IVLP scholarship from the United States Government.

R N: I was a journalist with a decade-long experience in various national newspapers such as The Times of India (TOI), The Indian Express and The Statesman. I was deputy news editor in the special projects team of TOI Delhi and Bengaluru until I decided to do something more meaningful and fulfilling. I was among seven journalists selected in India by the US Department of State for the prestigious foreign press reporting tour on "*Emerging women entrepreneurs in America*". I continue to write for various newspapers as a freelance author.

Q: *Why and how did you start Antardhwani? What are key areas that you are working in?*

SS: During my years in the media I realised that I needed to be involved and engaged in policy making, specially in health and education. I wanted to go beyond writing what others have said or done and be a part of making it. This propelled me to switch careers and start a think tank under the aegis of South Asia's leading cancer hospital – HCG (Healthcare Global Enterprises Ltd).

RN: The desire to get involved and engage in the change-making process and work with like-minded people led me to join hands with HCG to nurture Antardhwani and launch it early this year. Our primary areas of engagement are health, education and improving livelihood in India.

Q: What is your funding model? How easy or difficult was it for you to get funds in the initial stage?

SS: Antardhwani was born out of the vision of noted oncologist Dr B S Ajai Kumar, who is the chairman and CEO of HCG Ltd. Antardhwani is an arm of HCG, the parent company which takes up public policy issues. Since Antardhwani is the brain-child of the founder and chairman, finding funds was not a problem.

RN: Antardhwani is fully supported by HCG as an independent entity. We have recently started working on an appropriate and sustainable funding model.

Q: *What is your experience working with policymakers? Are they receptive to your suggestions?*
SS: As a senior journalist with 17 years of experience reporting on public issues, working with policymakers is not a challenge for me. Because I was engaged in political reporting, I am familiar with the nuances in governance. If the suggestions are well-meaning and in public interest, they are receptive. To achieve this, it is crucial for think tanks to structure their proposals and do thorough homework on every issue they embark upon.
RN: As a think tank we must work along with the government to bring changes. We work with the conviction that policymakers should be receptive to well-meaning suggestions intended for public good.

Q: *Being a fairly young think tank what best practice have you have adapted?*
SS: I am in the process of learning and collaborating with more experienced think tanks. From working with India's largest media house, I have learned that one needs to have clarity from end to end in every issue that we take up. Solid research coupled with disciplined execution is the key to achieving end goals.
RN: Best practice is the backbone of any social organisation. Being a young and spirited think tank we are exploring global best practices to put in place. We are also open to new and innovative ideas. However, right intention, integrity and action are the foundations of our institution.

Q: *Is there any particular strategy that you have planned or chartered with reference to your future (say in the next 10 years)?*
SS: Clearly, Antardhwani should not be another NGO. In my view, a think tank is beyond an NGO. Merely producing research reports is not the path I would like to tread. Action oriented and systemic development and work is the goal and the strategy. The areas of my work must see a visible change.
RN: Antardhwani aims to bring evident and meaningful changes in the sectors of health and education through real time action at the grassroots level, policy intervention and strategy.

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Interview with Suresh Raghavan, Director of Public Affairs Centre (PAC) India

Suresh Raghavan is the Director of Public Affairs Centre (PAC), based in Bengaluru, India. He was interviewed by Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, On Think Tanks' South Asian Editor.

Q: *Can you tell us a few things about yourself?*
A: I have a background in the natural sciences, and a record of extensive work on the ground on livelihoods and natural resource management. In addition, I have worked in several capacities – field manager, strategic manager, programme manager for funding organisations, network builder, freelance consultant, etc. I have developed a special interest in organisational learning and knowledge management, and incorporated several working tools on participatory management into my repertoire. I had a working experience of about twenty five years when I was contacted by the Public Affairs Centre.

As an independent consultant, I had managed a successful project for PAC for over a year when the incumbent Director left office. After a short spell as Acting Director, I was offered the position of Director of PAC by the Board, which I accepted. I was well-prepared for this position as I had had a year's experience of watching PAC from the 'outside', and was alerted to the major fault lines in the organisation with regard to structure, personnel and finances. I had also led the internal discussions at PAC on strategy formulation for a perspective plan. I was able to hit the road running when right from the start.

Q: *Why and how did you join PAC?*
A: I took up this position in the genuine belief that PAC could do much better in terms of its relevance to India's many development problems if it took a less insular view of its own obligations. PAC had positioned itself as a research NGO, generating learning through its many applications of social accountability tools and offering them to others for expansion, elaboration and application if necessary.

In my opinion, however, PAC had not picked up the gauntlet on 'walking the talk' enough. This could be attributed to the nature of its personnel and the hesitation of its Board in wanting to directly engage with forces against transparency and accountability in public delivery systems.

I believed that I had all the right starting points to initiate this organisational transformation.

I began with a series of internal organisational workshops to generate consensus on the change needed, the resources available, and a game plan. After generating enthusiasm and bringing the governance structure on board, the task reduced to a challenge of work organisation and resource generation for the transformation.

Q: *What have been your challenges as an ED, in terms of, retaining human capital, raising and managing funds, engagement with different audience?*
A: Modernising an organisation presents a few difficulties with regard to vitalising old attitudes of organisational change, empowering key team members to act alongside for the revised goals, and replacing intransigent elements who represent a decadent view. I was most fortunate that I had the complete support of the founder of the organisation who agreed with my view of rejuvenation.

The first challenge in this task was to raise the funds necessary to re-configure the Public Affairs Centre as an organisation that meant business, not only in terms of its research approaches and unique competencies, but also with regard to altering its research path to include key action elements so that on-ground change was visible. The announcement of the Think Tank Initiative in early 2009 was the trigger for PAC to earnestly firm its conceptual understanding of the change required at the organisational level, and use this as the basis for an application. This was successfully defended and the partnership with the Think Tank Initiative from 2010 has proved to be the primary sustenance for the transformation process. This partnership also attracted attention from several other important donors who offered resource support to flesh out several key strategic and operational plans that PAC had produced for itself during its conceptual development process.

The next challenge was to strengthen administrative regimens within PAC so that it ran largely on auto-pilot, with some discretionary and statutory elements within the control of the Director. Refreshing the administration team became a priority and this was accomplished through the careful recruitment of motivated and senior personnel who could be depended upon, and removing old team members from key positions of responsibility. This move released the time of the ED to focus on programme direction and quality assurance.

Beyond this, the key functions of programme design, definition and roll-out were entrusted to senior personnel. They were delegated powers to choose their teams, and to manage resources approved by their budgets. The ED retained a say in commenting on the quality of outputs, and timely delivery. Credit for work done was also appropriately devolved to those directly involved with projects and activities. Programme redesign was a frequent topic of discussion in the early days, as specific and targeted outputs and outcomes required better and more-focused activity definition.

Refreshing the team periodically was an important task, as there was a constant turnover of personnel for career reasons.

Identifying stable and reliable sources of trained young people willing to work for relatively low salaries (compared to what the corporate sector could offer) and to commit to a cause which was nebulous but important required the calibration of recruitment procedures to assess technical fit, social fit, as well as financial fit. Over time, this more systematic recruitment process led to the development of a stable young team willing to commit a few years of their lives under the guidance of senior and experienced persons, to acquire a unique perspective of the development opportunities of a growing country like India.

The shift in strategy towards a more direct engagement with communities along with working with policy makers meant that the team also had to be reoriented appropriately. A raft of participatory tools that were familiar to the ED and some senior personnel were presented to the team, and systematic training in these, as well as incorporation of these tools within the existing set of social accountability approaches, became a priority. This led to a renewed sense of mission and direction besides contributing to team bonding in field situations.

Q: *How do you chose a research domain or a project? Is there any specific agenda or method that you follow?*
A: PAC has defined its core domain areas for the next five years in its latest strategic plan. The plan envisages equal facility with sectoral specificities as well as research approaches when engaging with a new domain. To this end, each project is chosen and designed to exploit our potentials and assessed for new learning on a process basis, with the support of external peers as well as working partners. This accompaniment process allows for the incorporation of new ideas even while a project is being executed.

Q: *How has your interaction with your Board members been over this period of change?*
A: The Board has consistently supported most of the transformational elements proposed by the team, although all the implications of these measures have not always been internalised by them. Trust from the Board has been a hallmark of my time at the Public Affairs Centre. Besides administrative sanction, the Board has, from time to time, offered network bridges and project ideas to the team.

The Board has, unfortunately, not spent adequate time with the team members to understand their motivations and lines of growth. In my opinion, the Board of a think tank needs to directly engage with all members of the team if only to appreciate the drivers of transformation within the organisation. This needs to be done without treading on the ED’s toes.

Q: *What have been your key learnings as the Executive Director of PAC?*
A: It has been an honour and a privilege to have had the opportunity to lead a young team towards a new purpose over the past seven years.

The most important learning has been that providing space for subordinates leads to the blooming of special potentials for people and teams. A lighter hand with super-ordination almost always leads to pleasant surprises with respect to innovation and creativity. At that point all that is required is a steady hand to streamline new learning into styles and modes that are familiar to the larger world we operate in.

An important learning with regard to gaining credibility with your peers is that honesty of opinion is valued, and an open discussion on a burning topic can generate much empathy and perhaps an offer of collaboration. Clichéd responses attract similar responses and do not advance your cause very much.

On the whole, thinking on your feet is the primary quality for a leader. The failure to cultivate this may result in the loss of a great opportunity when it presents itself. At the same time, this capacity to envision on one's feet needs to be balanced with an equal discipline to refrain from being all things to all men. There is much at stake when a leader commits to an action – resources, time, and most of all, the goodwill of your team.

Q: *How has the think tank community and broader landscape changed since you joined PAC? What do you think the future holds for it?*
A: The think tank community has been a vibrant space for different opinions and ideologies. Over time, the weight of national pressures is increasingly felt when presentations are made, or issues discussed. This indicates that spaces for think tanks to work in are shrinking significantly. Maintaining a sense of perspective and direction in times of stress is the primary challenge that a think tank faces over time. Not to mention the financial pressures that are faced by any organisation that is not inherently viable and dependent on largesse from within or outside the country. Within networks, leadership and power are issues that persist, and many think tanks leaders are unable to balance their organisational pressures with the demands of community action on behalf of all think tanks.

Whether the future is bright or otherwise within a national sphere, it is important that think tanks continue to produce and disseminate balanced and non-partisan views of government and development so that the thinking public is offered alternatives with regard to choices of governance and strategic direction.

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Interview with Yamini Aiyar, President and Chief executive of the Centre for Policy Research

Yamini Aiyar is the president and chief executive of the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) in India. Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, editor at large for South Asia at On Think Tanks, interviewed Yamini Aiyar as part of the of the series on South Asian Executive Directors.

Q: *Can you please tell us a bit about yourself?*
A: I am a policy wonk and mother of two small children. I spend most of my time juggling (mostly unsuccessfully) between trying to be a good professional and a good parent!

Q: *CPR was established in 1973. What were the main motivations for setting it up?*
A: CPR was founded with the objective of providing rigorous, scholarly, expert advice to policymakers in India. The policymaking process in a complex country like India requires policymakers to negotiate the multiple, often conflicting, needs of citizens. It also requires the ability to ask difficult questions and objectively assess evidence to make credible judgments on issues that are inherently uncertain. Finally, asking these questions and seeking answers is a role that cannot be played exclusively by policymakers and technocrats. Instead it requires a continuous, honest and evidence-based dialogue between researchers engaged in knowledge generation and the policymaking community. This is the role CPR plays.

Q: *Prior to becoming the chief executive, what was your role in CPR? What was it about CPR as an organisation that attracted you to it?*
A: I joined CPR in 2008 to develop a programme that would focus on questions of governance and accountability. I built the initiative from a one-person experiment to a 35-member strong team engaged at the policymaking level and -this I am proudest of- at grassroots level. I was attracted to CPR because of its commitment to academic freedom (it offered young people the opportunity to explore their creative potential with complete autonomy) and its commitment to rigorous scholarship. There are few organisations in this country that hold these values dear. CPR is an institution that nurtures talent and ideas. This is what attracted me most to the institution.

Q: *Which were the main challenges you faced at the start of your career at CPR?*
A: Converting an idea into a full-fledged programme has multiple challenges, including raising funds, getting government (which is extremely hierarchical)

to take a young person seriously and building a talented team. I was very lucky to have the support of some great mentors who backed me unquestionably, were extremely generous with their time, advice and, most importantly, by joining me in collaborative projects. This emboldened me to leap to the unknown, set ambitious targets, and scale up my work.

Q: *In the Indian context, what is expected of a think tank? Has the role and function changed since you first took over as chief executive?*
A: I think one of the biggest challenges for think tanks in today's world is to remain true to one's research and scholarship even as public discourse is increasingly sharp and polarised, often blurring the lines between critical engagement and partisan endorsement of ideas. This polarisation has made objective evaluation of policy choices confronting India today difficult, resulting in the adoption of short term and often unsustainable quick fixes. I believe it is even more important in these times for think tanks to remain true to their values as independent, non-partisan, research focused contributors to the public discourse.

Q: *How has CPR coped with these challenges?*
A: We are trying! We stay true to our values even as we attempt to craft a new identity that is keeping up with changing times.

Q: *What personal and professional characteristics should a director of a think tank have?*
A: Commitment, passion, a willingness to work hard and not be fazed by unexpected hurdles and, most of all, the ability to have fun!

Q: *How important is it for you to excel in your career as a woman?*
A: I think it is important for me to excel in life, regardless of gender.

Q: *Do you think think tanks should encourage some clauses in their employment rules like flexible working hours (especially for women), in-house gender sensitisation sessions, and include gender aspects in their vision and mission statements?*
A: Yes, of course. It is critical to ensure that the workplace builds in flexibility, gender sensitisation and other gender aspects to create a truly equitable work space. However, I do think it is important to recognise that the work place is often a construct of social norms- not a solution to it. Through our work we need to continuously engage in a public discourse on changing social norms (including in the workplace) that respect women and the multiple roles that women play both at home and in the work place. I deeply respect women who chose to be full-time parents over competing in the workforce and I believe that a truly equitable society is one that respects the importance of family as much as of the work place.

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Talk it Over, is a weekly show curated and hosted by **RJ Annapoorna Ravichander, Public Affairs Foundation**. This series brings together a pool of experts who share their opinions and ideas on varied topics.

[By Radio Active CR 90.4 MHz] **#COVID19 #PAC**

#Talk it Over: Interview with Sonja Stojanovic Gajic

DECEMBER 25, 2020

Sonja is the Founder & owner of public Engagement. She is an experienced leader with a demonstrated history of management of non-profits especially think tanks and Civil Society Network. She is currently a member of the Executive Board of Belgrade Centre for security policy and owner and director of public engagement consultancy for research and facilitation of security and peace.

In an interview to RJ Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander Sonja shared the following:

She began by introducing herself by stating that she is a society activist for more than 20 years and she grew up in a country that was not democratic. Based on both her personal experience and the socio political situation in the Balkans Sonja decided to engage in research which influences security situation to work for a better democracy and peace and not work against it. As a result, she was leading a think tank called Belgrade Centre for the last 13 years and focus on security policy that specialises in monitoring accountability of police Military Intelligence services and General Security governance in Serbia, and in the Balkans. Based on her experiences she established Public Engagement a consultancy because she believed that she needs to engage in the constituencies where she can work with people and not just feed data to make a change. She added by stating that she is not only a strong and passionate believer in conducting good research but also keen on participatory research by facilitating dialogues and communities.
To a question on how has COVID-19 impacted the region of Balkans, she responded saying that the pandemic has created a huge havoc and initially most of the government's in the region responded with the different kinds of restrictions. In Serbia the restrictions were severe with regards to freedom of movement during the lockdown cutting some of the rights that they didn't have officially during the state of emergency.

She added that fortunately they did not have many cases of people affected by COVID-19 but the government continued to have strict measures and restrictions. The measures differed base on the situations in different regions and some had liberated measures.

The public were grateful to doctors for doing their work in the migrant camps. On the flip side the security was used to discipline people there was no clear communication from the political leadership. Adding to what she meant by disciplining she stated that the security along with the judiciary were pressurising people by severely fining them for minor misdemeanours or for breaking rules laid down for the lockdown and used this as an excuse against those that were criticising. For example, in Serbia, there was a situation where a journalist reported on a bad situation in a hospital and was taken into custody for the same. Her equipment was taken away under the pretext that she was publishing fake news, despite her information being correct. She was released and the case was dropped only when Civil societies and International Civil Societies made a hue and cry regarding this.

On the other hand a number of other countries for example in Eastern Europe and Central Asia put in place a new legislation under the excuse of COVID-19 to fight fake news. This of course was actually not used to fight conspiracy theories and untruths shared through social media, but actually used to censor those that were criticising the government for inappropriate responses to the pandemic. She added that this is relevant globally to an extent.

She also said that the country has seen a deterioration of democracy during COVID-19 and it is very important that one should not allow many of the emergency or crisis management tools that were introduced to respond to COVID-19 that restrict human rights and to become the new normal. She also added that this does not mean that one should not wear masks in public or one should not maintain social distance. She added that these are very logical measures that depicts solidarity to each other.

She responded that the takeaways/lessons learnt from the pandemic, mainly included:

Key Takeaways

1 How to work remotely and the possibilities of continuing to engage in workshops If you know your audience you can have meaningful dialogues

2 Unlike face-to-face interactions, remote interactions need to be focussed and brief
The meaningful and focussed interactions helped in making quick comparison on common issues (between countries) and this was useful while making recommendations to the policy makers

3 Engaging with communities, focusing on informal practices, networks and looking behind the scenes was important apart from measuring things

4 Last but not the least my last learning people actually appreciate meaningful engagement with their peers, especially in such situations you don't want to feel lonely

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#Talk it Over: Interview with Chandra Shekar Gowda

DECEMBER 25, 2020

Chandra Shekar Gowda works as the Chief Operating Officer at the Sulochana Thapar Foundation. He has over 22 years of experience of working with the marginalised community.

In an interview to Radioactive he shared that the Foundation which was formerly known as Avantha Foundation works on 2 key issues nutrition and urban governance.

In the area of nutrition, they work very closely with integrated child development services of central government focusing on strengthening the last mile service delivery. In the area of urban governance, they work on empowering city governments and urban local bodies as they provide best quality of living to its residents.

The above is done by initiating reforms in the areas of finance, revenue generation citizen's engagement, human resource management, technology etc. The Foundation is currently working in states of Maharashtra, Goa, Jharkhand

Effect of COVID-19

COVID-19 has affected a lot of the strategies that were planned. For example, the capacity building activities which was an important component in all the nutrition projects had to be halted. The programme primarily built the capacities of the Asha workers and members of the Anganwadis. This was done since the government wanted these frontal workers to focus on the prevention of COVID-19, it was a difficult decision we had to make on prioritising their activities.

Use of phone and technology was increased so that front line workers could be reached in case they required support/help and also engagement with Gram Panchayats also was intensified. This was also done in the urban areas where interactions with the governments increased. So a lot of activities in the urban areas had to be changed to allow the governments to focus on COVID-10. The Foundation focussed on creating awareness messages on prevention of COVID-19.

Key Takeaways

There were both positives and negatives. The key takeaways and learnings included:

1. Be ready for such an event, god forbid if it occurs, especially NGOs.

2. Change home-work policy and put in place the use of IT related infrastructure to facilitate working conditions

3. Incorporated an element of technology in all projects accepting the fact that technology is an enabler. It also provides end-to-end solutions, this includes introducing a mobile-based platform to enhance training and capacity building activities

4. Include a contingency item in all the budget so that such emergencies can be dealt with effectively. This contingency will provide a cushion to deal with major issues and will not disrupt the programmes.

Conclusion

It is very important that that all team members and the management should not be impacted and one should strive to motivate teams and allay their fears.

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#Talk it Over: Interview with Ajit Thandur

DECEMBER 17, 2020

Ajit Thandur along with his wife Uma run an organic home stay called Organics Retreat (rightly named) in Mysuru. The one-acre property houses their residence, quarters for support staff, rooms for guests and 3 lovely dogs apart from a gazebo and a well-maintained garden plot that has organic vegetables and fruits. What is unique is that this venture was germinated due to the personal interest that the couple have for nature. This apart, Ajit is a fitness freak, nature and animal lover and an excellent host.

Genesis of Organics Retreat

In his introduction Ajit stated that the homestay began with the need to share his and Uma's experience on organic living and farming. Paying attention to a lot of minute details the homestay was put together with indigenous materials-Manglorean tiles, brick walls and colourful flooring using athangudi tiles apart from encouraging young artists to paint some of the walls with colourful murals and warli art work. The homestay was started around a year ago and picked up some good business, but the COVID-19 came into the scenario and they had to stop taking in guests due to the lockdown.

Effects of COVID-19

Ajit mentioned that his business was hugely impacted by COVID-19, due to the lockdown. Both international travel and national/local travel was zero, hence no visitors or customers. However, things slowly started coming back to normalcy. So the first thing they did was to be cautious and check on the guests with regards to their background, where have they come from etc etc.

Key Takeaways

1. Importance of hygiene
2. Going back to folding hands (namaskar) rather than shaking hands
3. Maintain social distance at all times
4. Simple things to follow, but nothing new, this was being done earlier and as children we were taught to do this
5. My eyes opened to understanding what is co-morbidity and issues faced by elders, during the pandemic
6. If one maintains good health they are helping people around them to be healthy.

User Experience at Organics Retreat

Families and children who visit the homestay get to experience vegetable gardening, they can actually see and pluck some basic vegetables and see them being cooked before relishing. Children are encouraged to dirty their hands by planting seeds, farming, talk to plants. Often Ajit walks them through the plot and explains to them the different usage of plants. Sometimes children sow seeds and the growth of the sapling is captured and shared with them.

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#Talk it Over: Interview with Nandita Amin

DECEMBER 09, 2020

Nandita Amin wears several hats. She is passionate about nature, cooks' exotic dishes. She is a keen photographer and runs many institutions in Vadodara. Primarily Nandita is an architect and specialises in landscape architect. However, in this interview I captured her love for animals and birds.

Nandita Amin is the Founder Chairperson of Vadodara Centre for Animal Rescue and Emergency (VCARE), an institution that cares of stray animals and birds apart from running a boarding kennel for doge, a cattery, a special enclosure for donkeys. It also has an ICU and provides water therapy for animals. In fact, I was one of the persons who started VCARE along with Nandita way back in 1997. It is non-religious and non-political. VCARE started with a small fundraiser where Hema Malini and her troupe performed the Mahalakshmi ballet which was well-received by the public.

Over the last 22 years VCARE has tried to set up infrastructure as in when funds are and it depends on contributions from well—wishers to keep it going. VCARE is a non-re;igious and non-political organisation and most important compassionate.

COVID-19 and Animal Welfare

When the lockdown began VCARE realised that there were several street animals, primarily street dogs, some cattle and cats who had to fend for themselves. Earlier they were fed by cart food vendors and petty shop owners, but the lockdown left these animals in a lurch. VCARE came up with a brilliant idea of feeding stray animals by asking the staff and volunteers to go around the city and feed the stray animals. So puffed rice (poha), milk, biscuits were carted around the city and the stray animals were fed. In addition, because of intense summer water was also placed at vantage points.

The activity started at 6.00 p.m. and went on till 8.30 p.m. Soon it became a routine where the street animals would wait for this "treat". Even after the lockdown was lifted they continued this activity. However, the snag is they depend on funds and contributions from well-wishers.

Response from Common Man

VCARE acknowledges the fact that the common man has begun to understand the plight of street animals. There is a lot of compassion compared to what was seen earlier, when they started this exercise. Of course there is still a long way to go to involve citizens in such activities. Many people have come forward to be a volunteer and when faced with civic authorities for feeding food to street animals, they are counselled and government orders are shared with them. It is commendable that the governments both at the Centre and at the State levels have started in their own ways to help stray animals by engaging with volunteers.

On this point Nandita suggested that it would be great for localities to form volunteers and encourage them to take care of street animals within their geographic areas, since it may not be possible for an individual to do this. The volunteers could either cook some simple meals, provide simple medications (after contacting a local vet). The volunteer groups can contribute some money (small amounts) or collect from family and friends to help them with the activities.

She concluded by stating that this will be a small beginning and doable since one need not always be dependent on an NGO, who often look out for funding themselves.

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#Talk it Over: Interview with Dr. Jai Asundi

November 27, 2020

Jai Asundi is the Executive Director of Centre for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP), one of the leading Think Tanks in India. Primarily CSTEP measures and attempts to enrich public policymaking with innovative approaches using science and technology for a sustainable and secure society. Broadly CSTEP's focus areas include climate environment, sustainability, energy and power and artificial intelligence using digital tools for social impact and materials in strategic studies. CSTEP also develops computational models in their research to leverage innovative technology-based ideas to solve development challenges

How is CSTEP Coping with the Pandemic

Jai mentioned that COVID-19 is a very unique issue right now. He shared his thoughts from two perspectives one-personal and the other work-wise. Personally he felt that he was fortunate that there was minimal effect in his life, apart from the inconvenience of not being able to travel and meet friends. He also felt he was lucky that he is amongst the lucky people who does not have to walk miles on the road, due to the pandemic. It was disheartening to see people who had lost their jobs and livelihood.

Professionally, he has taken over as the Executive Director and would have liked to meet most of his team members and speak to them to give a sense of hope and provide confidence during this trying time. A lot of work was "work from home" and most of the processes to meet his was in place, this concept at CSTEP was not new, since it had already started. To do this the HR processes had to be tweaked to include explaining to the staff how to effectively work from home, take advantage of the flexibility this offers.

In addition, they had to hire staff and had to figure it how the process could be made more effective, especially while ensuring and welcoming new staff. Productivity of work did not take a back seat from this "*work from home*" concept, so the organisation had to ensure the "human contact" aspect with the staff (existing and new) to ensure that "*Business-As-Usual*" to ensure that no work suffered.

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#Talk it Over: Interview with Enrique Mendzibal

November 20, 2020

Enrique Mendzibal is the founder and director of Enrique is an independent policy entrepreneur. Apart from wearing several hats, he worked as adviser to the Multiparty Commission for the Bicentennial of Peru's Independence at the National Congress. He lives in Lima (Peru) but spends quite some time in London and traveling to visit think tanks across the world. He combines this with travel writing.

Effect of COVID-19 on Working Environment Globally

In this interview Enrique shared that COVID-19 has affected the working environment, while some Think Tanks found it easy, since they have been working from home and have very good internet connections. However, some think tanks had to invest in internet packages, some others, especially think tanks who are doing a lot of good quality work.

Another cause for concern was the issue of collecting data where people have to go out at the risk of their health. Some organisations are not only battling with what is going to happen next, but what is going to happen in the next year, since the real effect of this crisis will be see in the eco-socio and political aspects of a country.

Key Takeaways

1. Several organisations, started paying attention to the welfare of their staff
2. Use of funds effectively is another important lesson
3. With reference to the business models of think tanks going digital was key.

Points to balance the ills of COVID-19

First of all, it is important for organisations to seek (internally) what they want, why do they want funds, especially in times of such crisis. Organisations should stay prepared for a crisis in future. The process will probably include building back the role of research and think of research project agenda in advance. It is best not to get distracted but to think of long-term solutions.

It is important for organisations to recognise that the staff in an organisation is the first community which ideally includes interns, young researchers up to Board members. Another important thing is reach out to people, communicate to them and find out how they are coping with the crisis.

Survey Conducted by Think Tanks

On Think Tanks conducted a survey of all think tanks across the globe and the following was elicited:

- Networking has increased to address common challenges
- Some Think Tanks continued to be supported by their respective governments, while some did not receive any funding.

Conclusion

In conclusion he stated that there is a silver lining where think tanks have broadened their ideas and are exploring new business models. Use of digital tools have increased and new ways of communication has also been enhanced. Many think tanks have begun to adopt new ideas, methodologies and as a result their approach to research and funding is also changing.

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#Talk it Over: Interview with Thelma Narayan

November 13, 2020

In the interview she gave a broad overview of Public Affairs Foundation's activities. She has been associated with PAF almost since the time of its establishment. She said that both PAF and SOCHARA where she is associated are like-minded organisations and focus on citizens getting access to the best quality public services that were possible, through Loops of feedback and social accountability.

Citing the importance and need that individuals need to keep in mind during the pandemic, Dr. Thelma shared that though COVID-19 poses a challenge to all it can be taken as a huge learning both internally as a learning for each individual as well as for families and communities. She added that the pandemic has created panic and fear but it is best that one is well-informed and aware of facts. She added that a simple way to do this was to maintain social/physical distancing and social solidarity – social distancing is often the word most commonly used but actually it means physical distancing where possible. Wearing masks, washing hands, maintaining hygiene, especially when one is coughing or sneezing by using tissues or handkerchiefs. She also added that one should learn to build resilience, by performing simple breathing exercise (this can be fun), even in small spaces, do yoga and pranayama.

Regarding simple home remedies, she encouraged people to have herbal tea, kadak chai, (adding ginger and pepper, tulsi leaves etc),

Interacting with Communities

Keeping in mind all the precautions that have been introduced by the government, organisations/individuals should maintain social distancing conduct health check-ups, meetings in community centres, Anganwadi centres and health centres. Planning and allocating time to small groups of people will also be useful and this could be done by using Smart phones which most of the people have). Simple rules like maintaining 1 or 2 metres when waiting in a queue, wearing masks, using sanitisers and uses tissues/handkerchiefs when coughing or sneezing, will in some arrest the spread of the virus.

Dr. Thelma concluded by stating that "*we all should see public services are part of our services and treat the service members as our family member. So if we treat the Asha workers in the Anganwadi, police, sanitation workers with a great degree of love and respect, it will help a lot in boosting their morale*".

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#Talk it Over: Interview with G. Gurucharan, Director PAC

October 21, 2020

G. Gurucharan Director, Public Affairs Centre (PAC) was interviewed. In this interview on RadioActive he shared PACs experience in tackling COVID-19 and how the centre is working in tandem with the Government of Karnataka to address the issues related to the pandemic.

He began by introducing PAC and stated that it is a not for profit think tank, we work in diverse areas of governance primarily focusing on use of data science data analytics and artificial intelligence to try and drive evidence-based policies and programs. He added that recently concluded a Knowledge Partnership with the Government of Karnataka to try and develop artificial intelligence-based use cases to improve the quality of governance and to improve development outcomes.

Highlighting the key aspects of the reports on COVID-19 developed and submitted to the Government of Karnataka he began by emphasising a few facts as a backdrop to explain the work that PAC does to try and help the Government of Karnataka. He added that the world has been taken over by COVID-19 and that everybody recognises it as probably the worst pandemic seen since the Spanish Flu in 1918 -1919 which is close to a hundred years. It killed 675,000 people in the United States alone and globally 40 million people died, relative to this so far at least the impact of COVID-19 in terms of mortality has not been as severe. It has been seen that about 4 million people are affected by COVID-19 globally and 3000 deaths within this context. He added that however, the economic effects of the Spanish Flu were short term primarily because the world economy was not at that time as micro integrating or as micro specialised.

He connected this to the challenges the Government of India and Government of Karnataka and said that they are not only combatting the containment of the virus but the battle on the health front is a greater battle. The economic shocks will be far more severe than that of the Spanish Flu.

In response to the question on the usefulness of data analytics and the benefits during such pandemics, Gurucharan highlighted that in India the 1st case broke out in January 2020 in India and in Karnataka it was March 4, 2020. The Government of Karnataka must be commended to act with urgency on this issue with an act of urgency. Even before the Government of India announced lock down the state government had taken steps to announce the lockdown, on March 18, 2020. One should not forget the fact that State government's response is very coherent and well-coordinated not just between the political leadership and civil services but also across all departments. The Government of Karnataka demonstrated that it is capable of handling crises like this and introduce very strong Praxis policies and programmes.

PAC's role in this was really to try and use data analytics using data generated by the state government and available on public domain. PAC attempted to use data to provide evidence-based advice to the state government. After identifying the probable reasons for the rapid spread of COVID-19 The first thing we did was we said Based on data both spread of the virus, no of cases braking out temporally and spatially that we must come out with a strong communication strategy.

The idea of the communication strategy was to reach out to not so much to the city dwellers who have access to newspapers and the television but really to reach out to the rural people. In this in partnership with Public Affairs Foundation (PAF) a short video as a communication strategy was developed in Kannada. This was disseminated through our District Level Partner Organisations (DLPOs) to try and reach out to the more disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. The video titles Corona Virus Do Not Panic Be Aware was very simple and precise. It tried to convey to the people that there was nothing to fear about COVID-19 provided, people took the required precautions. The video also explained the possible symptoms and if recognised they should report to the nearest health centres. Emphasis was laid on the importance of social distancing, importance of staying home, wearing masks when they stepped out.

He then added that they identified what might be of use to the Government and hence identified ideas for an Exit Strategy using data analysis to predict a trajectory. For example, using vector analysis they could indicate the magnitude and the direction of coronavirus might be like in Karnataka. PAC was probably one of the early organisation to provide a framework to identify the red and green zone areas. Based on a risk analysis matrix a lockdown exit strategy was suggested and also included on how progressively the government of Karnataka might open up the economic activities in the state.

The 2nd report gave a day-by-day prediction on what the rate of growth of the number of positive cases is going to be. It was also recommended that a "one-size-fits-all" approach of lockdown may not work. Focus on complete lockdown was suggested. Based on this, the state government did take cognisance on some of the recommendations and found it useful and it helped them formulate a strategy.

He added that PAC will also attempt to use econometrics model to simulate what the impact of COVID-19 might be on the state economy. To address this a macro management report was drafted. It included specific findings on what the decline in revenues might be what the growth in expenditure patterns might be and how the state government could adopt a comprehensive economic plan. He concluded by stating that a management plan will focus on reprioritising expenditure.

Key Takeaways

1. Working with Governments is important to transform research ideas into action-hence adapting action research is useful

2. Using data effectively helps in identifying problems which in turn helps in focusing on viable solutions.

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#Talk it Over: Interview with Vanesa Weyrauch

October 21, 2020

Vanesa Weyrauch, is the co-founder of Politics & Ideas and Associate researcher of the Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth (CIPPEC) in Argentina. She has worked in the field of policy and research for the last 12 years, especially with Latin American think tanks and policymakers, through knowledge generation, capacity building and mentorship.

In this interview, Vanesa shared her experience on how she/her organisation is tackling COVID-19. Introducing Politics & Ideas (P&I) she said that they are now called Purpose & Ideas to reflect the large organisational changes they are undergoing. P&I was established in 2012 to improve the interaction between knowledge and policy with a special focus on Southern generated ideas and working as a dynamic network of researchers and practitioners rather than a fixed and structured organisation.

It was a year ago that they began the process of re-thinking about what they did and why. They had worked with many think tanks and public agencies across the continents, and learned a lot but felt that in some way they came to dead ends that limited their impact. She added that their enthusiasm was decreasing and questioning increasing. So in December 2019 they decided to halt and rethink their purpose. After a long process they arrived at a new vision to include that they – "*they wanted to help identify and activate the potential that exists in people and in groups to address the challenges they face and better serve their purpose. Everyone can have one or more than one purpose: people, teams, projects, organisations. Because of the lack of it, more than 2/3 of the employees do not feel engaged in their work. One thinks about the amount of money spent in leadership capacity building but no visible changes were seen, hence they decided* *to rename our network and become Purpose & Ideas*". She added that they would create spaces and facilitate processes that awaken collective intelligence. By collaborating with their partners, and based on systemic approaches, they would co-create ideas and actions to address complex and wicked problems.

How has COVID-19 affected the organisation?

The process of Purpose & Ideas was synchronous with COVID-19. The volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) scenario and requires a very similar process to the one they in December. This meant the need to stop, look and then go. Many questions like We cannot continue to live as we were used to, how are we going to live? What type of work are we going to create and promote? How are we going to produce our food and take care of our planet? Came to the forefront.

They decided not to jump to answers but instead look deeply as to what is the best future that can emerge from collective intelligence…this is completely different from the way we and our partners (think tanks, universities, public agencies, etc.) are used to working. Generally, projects were always designed, planned and initiatives with an established desired impact and the rest would have to change according to the plans and intentions. However, COVID-19 has changed this and ensured that one should acknowledge interdependence and find ways to better listen and understand each other. She also added that one needs to listen from their hearts, and also listen using their bodies and mind. too…our minds have a too large and predominant role in these past centuries. She quoted the famous economist Thomas Friedman, "*We began working with our hands, then with our minds and finally we do it with our hearts. In the industrial era we worked hard with our hands; in the information era we work with our minds. In the future, machines will do the work of our hands and brains. The working challenge is to connect people with people. Something that machines cannot do*."

Challenges Faced

To my question on challenges faced she added that one has to learn to work with uncertainties, it may involve approaches and ideas which may not fit into the system. Doubts like Who is going to need us? Who is going to support us? Will linger in everyone's mind. One may not know this but must develop trust in the process of change and transformation, this does not rule out having fear and doubts. She concluded with a quote from as Brene Brown who has wisely pointed out, "*we believe vulnerability can be a door opener to new types of genuine relationships: we can show genuinely and frequently what so many of us are craving for: to be real, to be seen and heard and respected just the way we are*".

Key Takeaways

1. Encourage each other to be brave
2. Be united in thoughts
3. Learn to co-create new ways to live and work together
4. Allow best potentials to emerge and intertwine.

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#Talk it Over: Interview with Nitin Pai

October 5, 2020

Nitin Pai is the co-founder of Takshashila Institution an independent Centre for Research and Education in Public Policy.

In an interview with him, Nitin broadly shared the work that the Takshashila Institution does in general and in particular how they are tackling the pandemic.

Takshashila Institution is a policy school which educates people from all walks of life on public policy and strategic affairs. As a Think Tank the organisation looks at technology, policies related to international relations and economic policies. In addition to this Takshashila is also a policy media organisation and addresses topics related to this in public discourses.

In response to a report on COVID-19 published by Takshashila, Nitin Pai shared that the report was put together in late March-early April based on the inputs provided by a Task Force Committee. The members of this committee include Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Kris Gopal Krishna to name a few. The primary intention was to understand how to move forward and manage the pandemic. The 3 key things that were emphasised included:

- Re-opening is a calibrated resumption of economic activity; it is not going to be a linear process that removes from lockdown to progressive levels of reopening but the possibility that there may have to be further lockdowns.
- Lockdown and reopening should be done at a very local level as local as possible since the demographics is

different with relation to the current economic activities. This includes limits of districts and municipalities.

- Approach the pandemic by using colour codes like green, yellow, orange to threat levels instead of looking at a linear or binary solution.

One should also protect vulnerable segments in society and allow essential economic activities to continue within the context of social harmony. The report contributed to the discourse within the state government and at the union levels also. He was happy to say that some elements suggested have been included by the government.

In response to my next question regarding his mention on Twitter where he had stated the following 3 important things:

- How to tackle COVID-19 or break as quickly as possible?
- How the provision of humanitarian relief to those hit by it is relevant?
- How does one get the economy back online as soon as possible?

To this he responded stating that one can easily get distracted with respect to public discourse politics and government policy making. Three things he highlighted included:

- Contain the COVID-19 outbreak which means either by maintaining social distancing, managing the progress of the disease, working towards the vaccine and figuring out how to deliver the vaccine to as many people as possible in a short period of time
- Several aspects like livelihoods, mental health, gender issue, children have been severely affected by the pandemic. For example, in the case of children there is a digital divide where some of them have access to the Internet while some do not. These problems cannot be solved by only government grants or projects, involvement from every citizen with a compassionate outlook is very essential. In fact, compassion should be included in government policies, the way we interact with each other, especially during this period.
- How does one want economy of the country back on track? The longer the economy is in cold storage and mothballed the more difficult it will become to combat COVID-19 or provide humanitarian aspect at least for it did get back on your feet again.

Listen In
https://soundcloud.com/radioactivecr90-4mhz/lets-talk-it-over-ep-7-with-nitin-pai-by-rj-annapoorna

Read
https://radioactivecr.wordpress.com/2020/10/05/throwback-talk-it-over-ep-7-rj-annapoorna-in-conversation-with-nitin-pai-on-the-pandemic-interventions/

#Talk it Over: Interview with Dr. Meena Nair

Dr. Meena Nair, Head-Research at Public Affairs Centre (PAC) a think tank based in Bengaluru

Introducing PAC Dr. Meena highlighted that PAC has been working in the areas of governance and Public service delivery in the last 25 years. As an organisation it continues to evolve to ensure that their research is relevant to stakeholders they engage with.

Dr. Nair added that one of the key methods is to use Social Accountability Tools (SATs) like the Citizen Report Card (CRC) Community Score Card (CSC) etc. to receive feedback from the community and feed it back to policy makers. This is primarily to ensure that community-led action is effective.

"*We focus on Primary Health Care, education, livelihoods, women and Child Development and social welfare, especially of vulnerable populations*".

This is done to ensure that an entire life cycle approach is attempted. This ideally helps us to achieve sustainable solutions, which are mostly community-led. This has also brought in community ownership, since once we leave the project area the community is able to continue without any hindrance.

Listen In
https://soundcloud.com/radioactivecr90-4mhz/lets-talk-it-over-ep3-with-meena-nair-by-rj-annapoorna

Read
https://radioactivecr.wordpress.com/2020/09/16/my-experience-as-an-rj-dr-annapoorna-ravichander/

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