

Public Policy Research in South Asia

Nature of Demand

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Evidence-based, rigorous, relevant and up-to-date research is vital to the public policymaking process; it enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of policy decisions. This article reflects on the nature of demand for such research in the South Asian region and contends that though the quantity and quality of evidence and knowledge for policy research is important, it is equally important to assess the factors that affect its demand. Hence, the preferences and requirements of the policymaking community should be taken cognisance of, otherwise the uptake and use of evidence and knowledge in policymaking would be impeded.

We thank Jai Asundi and Anshu Bharadwaj at CSTEP as well as the anonymous referee of this journal for invaluable comments and guidance.

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In recent decades, there has been a steady increase in organisations seeking to influence or inform policy through research or evidence in South Asia. The supply of research for policymaking in developing countries comes from a variety of institutions—think tanks, university or academia, or studies undertaken by multilaterals, media reports or even civil society organisations and advocacy groups. Further, in South Asia, the growth and influence of these organisations has been shaped by a variety of factors; democracy, strategy of economic development, and open sociopolitical systems have greatly influenced the way policy research organisations have emerged. Initially, bureaucrats (non-elected government officials) and technocrats in line ministries were the key source of knowledge, meant to aid policy formulation and decision-making, with experiential learning being a key factor. The planned economic development and reforms initiated from the 1970s onwards in the South Asian region changed this modus operandi, when the demand for expertise, not necessarily available within the bureaucracy, began to grow. The first and modest state response was to incorporate experts within the government bureaucracy. It was only much later that external support from think tanks began to be recognised as a resource for policymaking. Therefore, even though policy research institutions were encouraged by the government and several were housed in universities, due to shrinking government funding over time, external (bilateral/multilateral) funding sources assumed increasing importance.

“With liberalisation and increased interest of international agencies in policy research, civil society and advocacy groups have also taken the initiative to form

their own institutions” (Mathur 2009: 2). At present, the influence of national and international think tanks on policy is considerable. In India, while there is no precise information available on the total number of think tanks¹—or even what would constitute a think tank—it is widely agreed that there are a large number of them in the country, largely supported by external funding, especially since the mid-1990s. Several of them churn out good quality work on some of the most complex and challenging areas of development policies.

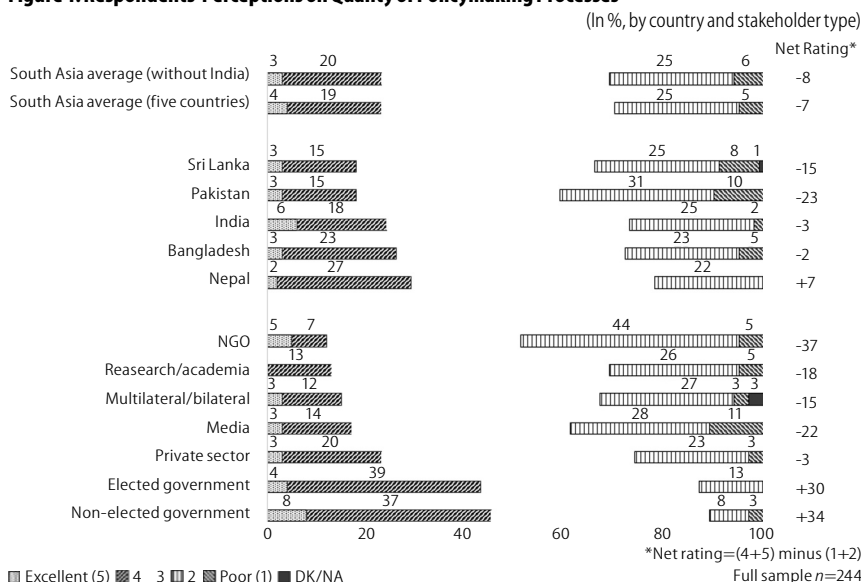
The nature of the research itself is based on a fuzzy understanding of the demand for such research; an understanding that relies more on organisational or individual experience, rather than on a scientific basis or comprehensive evaluation of demand in the policy landscape. This article aims at sharing some reflections on the less understood aspect of demand side of policy research. We argue that while the quantity and quality of evidence and knowledge for policy research is important, it is equally important to unpack the factors that affect their demand (Carden 2009). In doing so, the preferences and requirements of the policymaking community (demandeurs) assume significance. In the absence of such understanding, uptake and eventually the use of evidence and knowledge in policymaking would remain at best partly understood and leveraged.

Demand-side Preferences

We draw extensively upon the two sets of Policy Community Surveys (PCS) commissioned by the Think Tank Initiative² (TTI), a multi-donor global programme, managed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada (GlobeScan 2014). In this article, we share only a few exploratory hypotheses from some of the survey findings and reflect on the nature of demand for policy research in the South Asian region. We also try and validate some of the emerging results with the existing (albeit meagre) literature on the subject.

The two surveys were “designed to gather views of senior level policy actors

Figure 1: Respondents' Perceptions on Quality of Policymaking Processes



Legend: Excellent (5), 4, 3, 2, Poor (1), DK/NA. The white space within bars represents rating of 3 or neutral rating. Source: GlobeScan (2011).

within national policy communities on their need for research, perceptions of research quality, and think tank performance. The study was not intended to gather perceptions of a larger, representative subset of the policy community which could generate statistically significant findings on demand for research” (GlobeScan 2011). The first PCS (PCS-I) was carried out from 2 December 2010 to 11 February 2011 in five South Asian countries, namely, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

A total of 244³ senior policy stakeholders from the policy community—government officials (elected and non-elected), staff members of non-governmental organisations (NGO), media people, people working with multilateral/bilateral organisations, private sector staff, and academics and members of research institutions—in these countries were interviewed for PCS-I. The second survey (PCS-II) was conducted from 19 September 2013 to 18 November 2013, and 242 senior policy community stakeholders were interviewed. The surveys were conducted through online, telephonic and face-to-face interviews. All the stakeholders selected were active members of the national policy community (that is they had a role in developing or influencing national government policy) in their respective countries. It is important to note that the majority of the sample respondents in PCS-I and PCS-II were not

identical. However, the make-up of the sample was similar.⁴ The target was to select 40 respondents per country “with a balanced quota of responses across different stakeholder categories” (GlobeScan 2011). But in India, 80 respondents were interviewed due to the larger size of the policy community compared to the other countries in the region.

Rating Quality

Before discussing *demandeurs’* preferences on policy research, their perceptions regarding the policymaking process begs attention (Figure 1). The survey in 2011 indicated that a majority of the policy community surveyed in all five countries gave a neutral rating to the quality of policymaking processes. Nepal is the only country where more people perceived the quality to be good versus fair or poor. Notably, while most private sector stakeholders tended to be neutral, majority of the people from research, multilateral/bilateral agencies,

and media categories were critical. Except for the government officials, and to some extent members of the private sector, very few stakeholders perceived the quality of policymaking processes in their countries to be good or excellent in the region.

The respondents were asked to rate the quality of policymaking process on the basis of the following factors: competence of technocrats, “mechanisms for policy-making and implementation,” “participation by individuals other than the policy makers in policy processes,” “use of evidence in policy debates and formulation,” institutional mechanisms and transparency. Unfortunately, what cannot be inferred from the results is what attributes of “quality” were rated low and what were rated high, as this was not covered in the survey. A worthwhile exercise would be to unpack these attributes and then understand how the policymaking process is rated on each of these attributes. Further, a study to understand perceptions of the quality of work/influence across stakeholder types in each of the specific countries can also throw up interesting insights.

Independent Think Tanks

Respondents were asked to rate the various types of institutions on the quality of research they provided; the quality of research “being understood as evidence-based, robust and rigorous; relevant and up-to-date; reputable and credible; and situated in relation to existing research literature and findings, nationally and internationally” (GlobeScan 2014). Table 1 presents the quality ratings for research provided by the various types of organisations. In India, significantly more *demandeurs* perceived the quality of research emanating from national and international independent think tanks to be very good compared to other

Table 1: Percentage of Respondents Selecting ‘Excellent’ Rating for Quality of Research, by Country⁵

| | Average 2013 | Bangladesh | India | Nepal | Pakistan | Sri Lanka |
|--|--------------|------------|-------|-------|----------|-----------|
| International independent policy research institutes | 68 | 66 | 69 | 68 | 73 | 64 |
| National independent policy research institutes | 68 | 77 | 74 | 51 | 61 | 68 |
| International university-based research institutes | 67 | 66 | 59 | 72 ^ | 79 ^ | 66 ^ |
| International agencies | 58 | 65 | 53 | 50 v | 54 | 74 ^ |
| National university-based research institutes | 41 | 31 | 39 | 47 | 37 | 56 ^ |
| Government-owned research institutes | 34 | 22 | 40 ^ | 35 ^ | 27 | 39 |
| Relevant government ministries/agencies | 33 | 22 | 44 ^ | 40 | 30 | 20 v |
| Local/national advocacy NGOs | 28 | 21 v | 31 | 33 | 34 | 21 |
| Industry associations | 23 | 14 | 18 v | 12 | 27 v | 47 ^ |

^ represents increase of 10% or more from 2011 to 2013. v represents decrease of 10% or less from 2011 to 2013. Source: GlobeScan (2014).

sources. In both India and Bangladesh, more respondents rated national think tanks' research quality higher than international think tanks. In Nepal and Pakistan, on the other hand, more demanders valued international think tanks over their national ones. In fact, compared to PCS-I, the ratings for international think tanks in both Nepal and Pakistan improved in PCS-II. However, Sri Lanka stood a bit apart. Not only did more demanders there rate the research quality of international agencies as excellent in 2011, their numbers increased in 2013. Interestingly, the research quality of industry associations received a remarkably high rating in Sri Lanka, which is in stark contrast to all other South Asian countries. Except for India, and to some extent Nepal, few demanders perceived the research quality of government-owned research institutes and government agencies and ministries to be good. National and international think tanks and international university-based research institutes are widely perceived to provide research of excellent quality. Whereas, much fewer respondents rated government-owned research institutes and relevant government ministries as good quality sources.

More elected and non-elected government officials viewed the research quality of international university-based think tanks to be good; fewer government demanders gave comparable ratings to national and international think tanks (Table 2). The perception that national think tanks are not as good as international

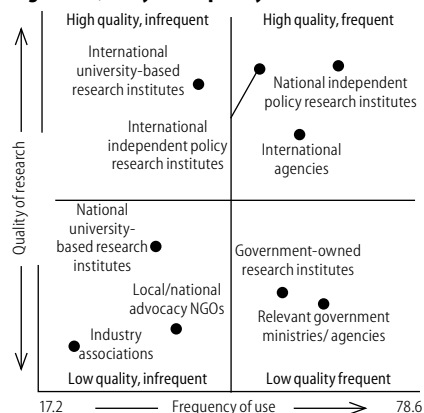
ones could have to do with the motivation and the funding sources of autonomous think tanks (Reddy 2013).

Not the Only Driving Force

Given the above, one would expect that those sources that have been rated as providing good quality research would be used more. PCS-II indicated that the top reasons for turning to a particular source (think tank, or university, or any other agency) were quality of research provided and its relevance to the respondents needs (GlobeScan 2014). However, it is notable that government ministries/agencies and government-owned research institutes are used as primary sources (interpret as frequency of use) despite being widely perceived by most as providing poor quality research/evidence (Figure 2). This is especially worrying since most government demanders, elected representatives in particular, did not rate government sources as good quality. Further, nearly 60% of all respondents selected international agencies as a primary source of research-based evidence in South Asia. The number of respondents reporting this in 2013 was also greater than the number in 2011. This indicates a significant influence of multilateral and bilateral agencies in the region. Figure 2 also points to what is widely known; the secular decline of universities as research institutions in the entire region.

The survey itself did not investigate the underlying reasons for the choice of a primary source of research-based evidence. However, the existing literature on the

Figure 2: Quality vs Frequency of Use



Source: GlobeScan (2014).

subject helps us explore some hypotheses to a limited extent. International agencies have been honing and improving their modes of engagement beyond technical assistance programmes. But has this paid off? In its 2015 report, AidData,⁶ a research and innovation lab, raised a question “which development partners do leaders in low and middle income countries prefer—and why?” (Custer et al 2015). The report ranked international agencies on four metrics of performance “engagement,” “usefulness of advice,” “agenda-setting influence,” and “helpfulness in reform implementation.” Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal were among the top 30 countries (of 126) that scored development partners favourably on engagement (that is metrics on frequency of communication and working with the policymaker); meanwhile only Sri Lanka scored international agencies favourably on usefulness of advice. Whereas all five South Asian countries considered in this article, scored the international agencies poorly on agenda-setting influence and helpfulness during reform implementation (Custer et al 2015). While international agencies clearly influence demanders and meet their varied requirements, a deeper investigation is required into what sources of information meet which requirement of the demander and why.

Meanwhile, the perception pertaining to relevance may be linked to usefulness and effectiveness of the information required for specific purposes. Policymakers interviewed in the AidData study preferred analysis based on government data—no matter how poor its quality—to increase local resonance of their analysis

Table 2: Percentage of Respondents Selecting Excellent for Quality of Research Provided, by Stakeholder Type

| | Average 2013 | Elected Government | Non-elected Government | Media | Multilateral/Bilateral | NGO | Private Sector | Research/Academia |
|--|--------------|--------------------|------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| International independent policy research institutes | 68 | 55 | 75 | 61 | 80 | 73 | 54 | 70 |
| National independent policy research institutes | 68 | 71 | 64 | 76 | 55 | 79 | 48 | 69 |
| International university-based research institutes | 67 | 72 [^] | 82 [^] | 59 | 73 | 56 | 59 [^] | 71 [^] |
| International agencies | 58 | 53 | 66 | 59 | 59 | 53 [^] | 48 | 66 |
| National university-based research institutes | 41 | 50 | 57 | 52 | 30 | 35 | 24 ^v | 43 [^] |
| Government-owned research institutes | 34 | 45 | 57 [^] | 33 | 24 | 26 [^] | 23 [^] | 35 |
| Relevant government ministries/agencies | 33 | 55 | 45 | 42 [^] | 18 | 29 [^] | 28 | 26 [^] |
| Local/national advocacy NGOs | 28 | 32 | 24 | 40 | 7 | 38 | 19 | 28 [^] |
| Industry associations | 23 | 32 | 19 ^v | 29 ^v | 13 | 13 | 48 [^] | 19 ^v |

[^] represents increase of 10% or more from 2011 to 2013. ^v represents decrease of 10% or less from 2011 to 2013.

Source: GlobeScan (2014).

and advice (Custer et al 2015). Policymakers surveyed in another study (Datta et al 2011) mentioned that they are more likely to focus on an issue if it has been highlighted as a priority by a top political leader. In some cases, research provided by various sources (including think tanks and international agencies) influenced the policy processes, when aligned with a predetermined policy position or stated government objective (Newman et al 2013; Custer et al 2015).

Moreover, sometimes high quality research is not easily comprehensible (academic or technical representation of information is hard to relate to) and may hence be ignored. Policies are instead based on political expediency, prevalent ideology and other factors (Du Toit 2012). Policymakers are faced with a dilemma of surplus evidence pointing in different directions; while some evidence “overstate the certainty,” others understate assumptions and overlook several considerations (Du Toit 2012: 6). Further, policymakers are a heterogeneous group and work at different levels of hierarchy, with different degrees of knowledge and narratives regarding policy problems (Weyrauch and Leandro 2015). Hence, policymakers’ involvement in the research and analysis process right from the beginning and access to key data and assumptions can enable relevant evidence to be part of the policy process.

Accessibility to information is also linked to the format in which it is made available. According to PCS-II, a majority of the demanders in each of the five countries chose websites, print and email—in that order—as the three most preferred formats for receiving information they needed for policymaking (GlobeScan 2014). In India, in-person (face-to-face/telephone) came very close in preference rating to emails. Very few demanders actually stated preference for social media (Facebook, Twitter etc.) and blogs. Both elected and non-elected government officials across five counties expressed similar preferences. These are important lessons for donor agencies who continue to stress the importance of social media and blogs. Surprisingly, a relatively low preference was expressed for social media even by the political

leadership who tend to frequently use it otherwise. It does appear that although social media continues to flourish in these countries, it is yet to acquire the credibility required of a serious source of evidence.

Conclusions

In South Asia, the policymaking process is complex. It is deeply influenced by democratic institutions, economic agendas and changing sociopolitical dynamics. Though the role of policy research and the demand for it cannot be emphasised enough, it has not been fully understood. Lack of statistical significance of the above survey results notwithstanding, the surveys do throw up indicative findings—some of which underscore our understanding and widely held perceptions and some challenge the existing notions. Some of the findings shared above point more towards the need for a further and deeper examination than state conclusive outcomes.

Even as efforts continue to be undertaken by research practitioners and donors engaged in the think tank community to improve the quality of policy research and its accessibility and formats in which it is delivered, the underlying factors contributing to demand can vary widely. This issue requires further investigation for a more nuanced and accurate demand assessment. A broader research agenda, under which these aspects may be studied, could evaluate what attributes of quality are relevant for policy research in South Asia, whether the uptake of good quality evidence in public policymaking is increasing over time, and how could research and evidence providers customise their outputs for improved and effective outreach.

We hope that such a start would trigger more in-depth and scholarly work, which would eventually help knowledge producers to target policy actors better and more effectively, on the one hand, and on the other help public policymaking processes become more inclusive, dynamic and evidence-based.

NOTES

- 1 According to one estimate, “while universities are the locus of academic research, there are more than 200 government research institutes and autonomous research organisations which undertake social science research as well” (DFID 2011).

- 2 For more details about TTI, please visit www.thinktankinitiative.org.
- 3 Interviews of 244 respondents in 2011 and 242 respondents in 2013 (in the South Asian region) were completed through a combination of online and offline survey methodologies. A sample list comprising about 2,365 potential respondents were identified (of which IDRC and supported think tanks identified 40%; the remaining were identified by GlobeScan).
- 4 GlobeScan surveyors made an attempt to achieve a balanced quota of respondents by categories in the two time periods. The share of stakeholder category per region total, varied in the range of +8% points to -11% points. Illustratively, respondents from Bangladesh NGOs comprised 23% of the 40 country respondents in 2013 as opposed to 15% of 40 in 2011. Similarly, in the 2013 survey, there was a lesser participation of Pakistan’s non-elected government stakeholders (10% of 40 respondents in 2013 versus 21% of 39 respondents in 2011).
- 5 Independent policy research institute was one response category in the 2011 survey, but was segmented into national and international in the 2013 survey. Data is therefore repeated across national and international samples for comparability between years.
- 6 AidData is a research and innovation lab that seeks to make development finance more transparent, accountable, and effective. It publishes a comprehensive development finance data portal, and also creates tools, analysis and training to make information useful in research, program planning and advocacy. For more details, see <http://aiddata.org/>

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