STRENGTHENING POLICY RESEARCH

Role of Think Tank Initiative in South Asia

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Sustainable Development Policy Institute

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INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT AND A BRIEF HISTORY

Established under the National Conservation Strategy (NCS) 1992, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) pivoted its activities around environmental issues in its nascent period. The foresight of its founders is visible from the fact that they started talking of 'sustainable development' in the country two decades earlier than the formal introduction of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Pakistan.

In the beginning, SDPI’s research programme featured sustainable agriculture and forestry, energy and environmental conservation, population, gender and other areas which helped in the accomplishment of NCS. Initiating or becoming a party to public interest litigations was how SDPI engaged itself with the society in its beginning phase. In addition, SDPI also started building a cadre of people who could help in delivering on the NCS through Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) that funded Pakistan Environment Program.

After successfully performing its mandated role to become a knowledge and information hub for smooth implementation of NCS, the focus slightly shifted towards the economy during the late 1990s. By
that period, the World Bank (WB)-funded ‘structural adjustment programme (SAP)’, which had begun in Pakistan during the early 1990s, had matured. SDPI vigorously published its work focusing on socio-economic impacts of SAP.

In late 1999, General Pervez Musharraf toppled the then democratically elected government. Being an independent policy think tank, SDPI shifted its focus on pro-democratic research policy initiatives in general and gender and human rights in particular. Initiation of World Trade Organization (WTO) Doha Round (2001) brought globalization, food security and regional trade into SDPI’s sphere of work. By that time, SDPI had turned into a transdisciplinary think tank in a true sense.

In terms of funding, the decade of the 1990s was smooth and stable as it was also the post-Cold War period and there was sufficient supply of funding. By 2000, SDPI had grown in terms of size and scope and its expenses had also increased manifold. In the absence of an endowment or core funding, it was extremely difficult to meet organizational expenditures. Moreover, changing dynamics of the politico-economic environment in the country and the region during this decade did have an impact on the ability of SDPI to build a stable financial support base. In the later half of the previous decade, SDPI struggled to secure its funding since absence of funding impaired its human resource base. There was a point when SDPI even faced a threat of losing its existence.

By 2007, SDPI was in a state of financial loss. Most of the senior researchers had left the organization, and without them, it was difficult to fetch new research projects. Research quality also suffered, but not in terms of credibility. Rather it was difficult to adopt transdisciplinarity which was a key characteristic of SDPI and also a tool for remaining relevant.

To translate research into action, policy outreach remained part of SDPI’s activities since its inception. Policy briefs, seminars and conferences were major tools used to successfully reach out to a wider audience. To cite a few, we were able to trigger the enactment of Pakistan Environmental Protection Act, 1997, through targeted campaign on an environmental conservation issue. SDPI also played a role in
catalysing modifications in major hydropower projects as an outcome of its research-based critique of Ghazi Barotha project. We managed to prevent construction of an electricity grid station at a location designated for a park in Islamabad. Our study forced an industrial unit to abandon its proposed import of a hazardous technology. SDPI was also able to convince the Government of Pakistan (GoP) to abstain from endorsing WB's *Pakistan: Country Gender Assessment* report. The institute highlighted the technical deficiencies in the report. Through our advocacy, we successfully managed to get 33 per cent of seats reserved for women in the parliament of Pakistan.

WHERE IS THE THINK TANK NOW?

The period from 2008 to 2010 was the most difficult period for SDPI. To keep the organization alive, the team members along with the leader of the organization accepted cut in their salaries. However, by 2018, the think tank witnessed a turnaround and the University of Pennsylvania even placed SDPI among top 100 think tanks of the world in 13 different categories. Many factors helped in achieving this turnaround, including International Development Research Centre’s (IDRC) multi-year competitive grant through the Think Tank Initiative (TTI).

ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Organizational performance is a function of human resource development, financial management, implementation of best policies and practices, and capacity enhancement. One of the lessons that SDPI learned from its financial crunch was the need for revision of policies and procedures (such as raising an endowment and not keeping gratuities and provident fund in SDPI’s general accounts). Over the years, SDPI has improved its policies and procedures, and has strengthened its financial safeguards. IDRC’s grant helped in breaking the vicious cycle between lack of trained human resources due to budgetary constraints and weak capacity of raising funds due to lack of skilled researchers. After receiving the TTI grant, SDPI was able to attract and retain trained human resources through monetary and
non-monetary incentives. The systems of knowledge management and management information system (MIS) services were improved, and new programmes for capacity enhancement were introduced. These all collectively improved the organizational performance in different aspects discussed below in detail:

1. **Human resource development**: ‘The IDRC grant enabled to strengthen our human resource base’ which helped in the production of innovative policy solutions and cutting-edge quality research on sustainable development. Recruitment of senior-level staff not only built SDPI’s profile externally but also helped bridge the gap in mentoring of junior and mid-career staff in research and support units. As a result, research quality and staff retention improved.

Some new initiatives that took place at the beginning of TTI Phase 1 included establishment of a television (TV) station within SDPI. The station helped revitalize our policy outreach. SDPI revived its Urdu publications, complementing the formal policy outreach approaches with informal channels such as lobby meetings, book launches, holding commemorative references and a meticulously planned monitoring and evaluation framework. Our Strategic Work Plan documented the deliberations held in retreats. Towards the end of TTI Phase 1, Research Coordination and Proposal Development Units were established.

The process of revival continued even during TTI Phase 2, whereby the English Editorial Board was strengthened for improving research writings. The Centre for Capacity was transformed into Centre for Learning and Development with a renewed and demand-driven capacity-building approach. The Human Resources Unit was remodelled as Human Resources and Organization Development Unit. This step helped systemize the mentorship activities and better stocktaking of the staff’s training and capacity-building needs.

2. **Capacity enhancement**: TTI support was used in SDPI’s capacity-enhancement programme as well as other assignments for its team of researchers. SDPI is part of different regional and international networks (Asia-Pacific Research and Training Network on Trade [ARTNeT] of United Nations Economic and Social Commission
for Asia and the Pacific [UNESCAP], Climate Action Network South Asia, etc.). The meetings/workshops/seminars held by those networks are also a source of capacity enhancement for SDPI staff. These opportunities are provided to all cadres of research faculty, whereas special exchange visits and capacity-building courses are arranged for research support staff. These measures have helped in better succession planning.

Exchange programmes helped research team become better and understand staff of other think tanks. Building of such relationship paved the way to plan and implement multi-country and consortium-based projects. Such projects also increased its financial stability.

In addition to learning through external platforms, internal knowledge sharing and brainstorming were promoted through regular brown bag research meetings (BBRMs) and mentorship programmes. Researchers share their research ideas with peers and get helpful feedback in BBRMs.

3. **Strengthening regulatory framework**: Since 2010, SDPI regularly (once in three years) conducts a policies and procedures audit. The findings of those audits are taken seriously and used to improve its regulatory framework (management practices). As a result, today, SDPI is using the latest version of accounting software, ‘QuickBooks’. It also has an internal audit system. Ernst & Young, one of the big four auditing firms in Pakistan, audits SDPI’s accounts. In 2016, Pakistan Centre for Philanthropy (PCP) thoroughly audited SDPI’s finance system. PCP awards accreditation to non-profit organizations with sound structures and systems to deliver services effectively and efficiently. For last three years, SDPI has been placed among top 100 think tanks worldwide for their ‘policies and practices on quality assurance and integrity’ by University of Pennsylvania’s Global Go To Think Tank Tanking.

4. **Changes in accountability, monitoring and evaluation**: Progress review of all the projects being implemented at SDPI started being carried out by Research Coordination Unit. It reviews the project’s progress as per the contractually agreed implementation schedule. Progress reports of projects are directly shared with the executive director of SDPI and suggest recommendations on the basis of projects’ progress. The project lead and team are accountable for delivery
and provide all sort of institutional support that project team needs to complete the project on time.

5. Bridging research policy gaps: With its 25 years of track record on research quality, credibility and intellectual independence, SDPI has earned the convening power to bridge research and policy gap in Pakistan. The TTI support further helped us undertake unsolicited and non-funded research projects, projects where SDPI team wanted to work but was not able to find a collaborator who would pay for the time of the researchers. Our flagship on unfunded work include Pakistan Power Sector Outlook: Appraisal of KESC in Post Privatization Period (2011), Multidimensional Poverty Assessment (2012), work on green economy for Rio+20 conference, resolution on mercury issues, Political Barometer, post-budget analysis, political parties manifesto series, Election Monitoring Cell, and policy contributions for Conference of the Parties (CoP) 20, COP 21 and COP 22. Likewise, the TTI support helped SDPI's senior researchers devote their time in gratis policy community services, such as serving on different high-level policy-making forums, advisory bodies and steering committees. This participation has significantly improved our research policy bridging capacity.

RESEARCH QUALITY

Research drives other pillars at SDPI, that is, policy engagement and capacity building.

1. Consistency in research outputs: During 2001–2010, the number of two important research outputs (policy briefs/papers and working papers) had declined (Figures 7.1 and 7.2). In 3 of the 10 years, no policy brief/paper was published. In the post-TTI period, this trend increased consistently. On an average, 5.9 policy briefs were published per year in the period 2011–2017.

   Like policy briefs, the number of working papers also witnessed consistent rise. During last seven years, more working papers were published compared to the earlier period.

   As we are approaching the culmination of TTI Phase 2, SDPI can claim that it has not only successfully increased the number of research outputs but also diversified its research outputs. In 2017,
the first volume of SDPI's *Journal of Development Policy, Research and Practice* was launched. This transdisciplinary scholarly annual journal aims to provide a diverse array of research and working papers, policy briefs and argumentative essays covering wide range of issues pertaining to sustainable development.

2. **Quality assurance mechanisms/indicators developed by the institution:** At SDPI, research quality is assured through a rigorous peer review process. Different categories of publications go through different types
of reviews, ranging from double-blind external peer review for SDPI journal publications to signing off by the executive director in case of policy briefs/reviews. Youngsters are encouraged to contribute their op-eds (or opinion pieces) in the mainstream newspapers. Supervisors review the op-ed pieces before they are submitted for publication.

3. Quality of publications: The quality of policy research-based publications is determined by not only the soundness of methodology or credibility of evidence but also the ability of that publication to bring about societal change. The other criteria used are the independence of facts and opinions used. The quality-assurance mechanisms in SDPI have helped achieve both the objectives. For instance, our food security research was translated into a nationwide Zero Hunger Programme. The recommendations of a study on institutional arrangements for managing climate change have been reflected in the Pakistan Climate Change Act, 2017, while a bill on non-Muslim-sensitive educational reforms, an outcome of SDPI’s study, was tabled in the National Assembly (NA) in 2015.

SDPI’s Political Barometer publications are the best example of its transparency and independence. Although SDPI’s representatives sit in various governmental task forces, advisory councils and steering committees, in one edition of Political Barometer we reported that the ruling party was losing its popularity demonstrating independence of the organization.

4. Research ethics: Research ethics are important contributors for SDPI’s research credibility and quality. SDPI is a signatory of Anti Sexual Harassment (ASHA) at Workplace Code of Conduct. It also follows Higher Education Commission of Pakistan’s guidelines on conducting research. We have zero tolerance for plagiarism, and our employees declare conflict of interest.

Ethical concerns/issues are thought about from the beginning—when the research is being designed. For instance, even prior to data collection, the enumerators are sensitized about the ethical norms of administering a questionnaire. Voluntary participation of the respondents is ensured, and their permission is sought if their identities have to be disclosed. Survey coordinators conduct random inspections to monitor and ensure good quality of data collection.

5. Collaborative research: ‘Since its inception, SDPI has been part of different national, regional and international networks. It has always
worked on collaborative research and advocacy projects.' It is member of a consortium comprising of Overseas Development Institute, London School of Economics and others that won a competitive grant on climate change, ‘Pathways to Resilience in Semi-Arid Economies’. Short-term collaborations have also been made, with national and foreign institutes, including but not limited to Social Policy and Development Centre, Pakistan; Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, India; Consumer Unity & Trust Society, India; South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment, Nepal; Institute of Policy Studies, Sri Lanka; and South Asia Network on Economic Modeling, Bangladesh.

SDPI is also reaching out to universities for collaborative research. We have begun submitting proposals in collaboration with academia to synergize. This approach involving high-quality, evidence-based research would help bring about policy changes.

The institute is member of networks such as Climate Action Network South Asia, International Union for Conservation of Nature and the International Society of Doctors for the Environment (ISDE). Keeping in view the recent developments in regional political–economic context, SDPI is a member of Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC) Think Tanks Network (CTTN) advisory panel.

6. Shaping research agendas and adding new research areas/themes to portfolio such as gender and others: Research agendas are regularly revisited and revised in the Policy Research and Advocacy Meetings and Annual Retreats. The research areas are prioritized according to the changing national and local contexts. For instance, in 2017, Pakistan was completing 70 years of independence and our overarching policy analysis pivoted around 70 years of Pakistan. This emphasis was also reflected in the thematic focus of the institute’s annual Sustainable Development Conference (SDC). The theme of the 20th SDC was ‘Seventy Years of Development’. Similarly, the advocacy events held in 2017 reflected upon the role of institutions in a democratic dispensation as the democratic process in Pakistan has become stable. For 2018, we focus on two major themes—regional connectivity through economic and knowledge corridors and SDGs.
Although the research priorities are revised according to national and international contexts, our focus does not shift away from the transdisciplinarity. We review the issues in totality and provide integrated solutions. Sustainability is the cross-cutting theme in every analysis that we do and every recommendation that we make. Our analysis and advice are always multipronged.

7. Achievement and gaps: SDPI is the oldest independent think tank of Pakistan. It ranks 14th among think tanks in East Asia (comprising East and South Asia excluding South Korea, Japan, China and India) and Pacific, and 1st in Pakistan. Its major achievement is its acceptability across the political spectrum in Pakistan. It is present on different high-level policy formulation bodies in Pakistan, in both public and private sectors.

**POLICY ENGAGEMENT**

Since its inception, SDPI has conducted policy research and engaged in policy dialogue. As the quality of our research improved, we devised new methods of policy engagement. Informality, ownership and proactivity were introduced in policy engagement approach without compromising on the research quality. Policy-makers, politicians, representatives from bilateral/multilateral institutions and academicians are invited to formal and informal meetings conceived as platform for communication. Such platforms are also used to disseminate policy advice in non-technical language. Movers and shakers of policy corridors are invited as keynote speakers in the high-profile events for ownership. SDPI remains proactive to meet knowledge demands of decision-makers. Our ways of policy engagement such as SDPI's online TV (started from TTI support in 2012) and use of social media have created our niche in policy outreach.

1. Visibility and brand building: These investments have helped SDPI develop its brand. SDPI’s visibility is manifested in its think tank ranking.

2. Achievements and gaps: Experimentations have enabled SDPI carve its niche as a credible policy advocacy and outreach organization. But SDPI needs to further build its capacity for advocacy and outreach.
3. **Research uptake:** SDPI has many stories of impacts during the past eight years on the basis of our policy research and advocacy. The following list provides few according to different themes:

- **Bill on non-Muslim-sensitive educational reforms:** SDPI's analysis of curricula for a study ‘The Subtle Subversion: The State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan’ showed that for over two decades, the curricula and the officially mandated textbooks contained materials that are directly contrary to the goals and values of a progressive, moderate and democratic Pakistan. In 2015, based on an SDPI study, a bill on non-Muslim-sensitive educational reforms was tabled in NA. Before it could be tabled in NA, SDPI continuously engaged with the members of Non-Muslim Parliamentarians Caucus. That engagement generated their buy-in to table the bill in NA. The bill proposed to establish a national commission on education for minorities in order to monitor the progress. The bill is lying with the parliamentary committee for further discussion and recommendations.

- **Pakistan Climate Change Act, 2017:** In 2011, SDPI published a report on *Institutional Arrangements for Climate Change in Pakistan*. The report proposed three institutional measures: (a) a Committee on Climate Change headed by the prime minister, (b) a National Authority on Climate Change and (c) a National Climate Change Fund. In 2017, NA of Pakistan enacted the Pakistan Climate Change Act. When the Ministry of Climate Change was in the process of enacting the law, it consulted with authors of the study on the institutional arrangements. Review of the Act would reveal that it also promulgated three institutional measures for more effective climate action, that is, Pakistan Climate Change Council chaired by the prime minister, Pakistan Climate Change Authority and Pakistan Climate Change Fund.

- **SDPI’s research becomes part of curriculum:** The Institute of Business and Management, University of Engineering and Technology, Lahore, has included the SDPI study ‘Pakistan Power Sector Outlook: Appraisal of KESC in Post Privatization Period’ in its curriculum. A first of its kind, the report suggested measures for improving the power sector governance.
• **Affecting change in fiscal governance:** SDPI conducted extensive work on provincial tax reforms, trade policy reforms and improving private sector’s voice in preparing election manifestos. The combined effects of research and advocacy carried under them are as follows:

- In the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) budget 2017–2018, a key recommendation gleaned from SDPI consultations and official meetings in Peshawar, in which Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Revenue Authority had also participated, was included. The recommendation enhancing KP government’s outreach towards potential taxpayers was to be carried out in public-private dialogue mode. Furthermore, we had noted that tax facilitation centres across the province were weak and too little in number. The KP government has announced an increase in tax facilitation centres across the province. Also, Finance Minister Muzafar Said has accepted that the province was slow in increasing tax collection through ‘progressive’ tax bases and committed that the provincial government would increase revenue base.

- Following discussion, the Government of Punjab’s Planning & Development Department has sent a letter to Federal Ministry of Finance in Islamabad to move towards streamlining/harmonization of federal and provincial tax regime in the interest of improving the cost of doing business. They are proposing the federal government to notify intergovernmental tax working groups—in line with the recommendations presented to the finance minister of Punjab.

- Two provincial revenue authorities have signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) for sharing resources and proceeding under input adjustment tax. The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) has decided to expedite the streamlining of tax policy coordination and complete its MoUs with all the provincial tax authorities.

- On the basis of SDPI’s research on widening the formal economy of Pakistan, the corporate tax rate has been reduced to 30 per cent for 2018 and threshold level of advanced tax has been increased.
4. **Membership of policy-making group:** SPDI has presence on key policy forums such as National Economic Advisory Council; National Advisory Committee of Planning Commission; National Advisory Council of UNDP on Inclusive and Sustainable Growth; Higher Education Commission’s Education Testing Council; National Advisory Committee on Food Security and Nutrition Strategic Review; and Climate Change Commission (formed by the Lahore High Court).

In addition to the permanent bodies mentioned above, GoP recognizing our research on climate change has designated SDPI part of official delegations to CoP to Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement. Other achievements are as follows:

- **Youth ambassador:** In 2015, SDPI’s Ali Shahbaz was elected as the youth ambassador by the UN General Assembly president to speak at the ‘High-Level Thematic Debate on Strengthening Cooperation Between the UN and Regional and Sub-regional Organizations’, held in New York.

- **Observer’s status by International Monetary Fund (IMF) and WB:** SDPI is the only organization in Pakistan which was granted the civil society organization (CSO) fellow observer’s status by IMF and WB. Under this status, SDPI representatives attended IMF and WB annual meetings in Washington, DC, and provided input on country-related issues.

- **ISDE president:** SDPI’s Senior Adviser Dr Mahmood A. Khwaja was unanimously elected as the president of ISDE for a two-year term. ISDE has its members in over 35 countries, mostly in Europe, Canada, the USA and Australia.

5. **Impact on enhancing public policy space, public discourse, narratives and public opinion:** In December 2017, GoP notified more than 20 international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to quit their operations. SDPI led a campaign for convincing the government to provide an opportunity of explanation to those INGOs. In January 2018, GoP not only provided the INGOs an opportunity to present their case but also permitted them to operate until the final decision is made on their appeal.

6. **Other forms of contribution to policy, op-eds and media appearances:** Our researchers, seniors and juniors alike regularly place articles in the
popular press to reach out the wider audience with their policy advice. More than 50 articles are published in popular press every year. SDPI researchers also regularly appear on media to express their expert opinion on economy, energy, governance, international relations, environment, gender, health and other fields related to sustainable development. Now it has become an annual ritual for our researchers to capture the TV screens when federal and provincial governments announce budget.

**SUSTAINABILITY: GAPS, CHALLENGES AND THINKING AHEAD**

As the space for civil society is shrinking in terms of funding and freedom of choices/actions, SDPI will have to become more innovative and impactful. The infrastructural development made with TTI support has helped SDPI achieve financial sustainability. Our Strategic Plan (2015–2020) contains guidelines for the transition towards innovation and higher level of impact. The plan has identified pathways for the sustainability model for SDPI to adopt. This model prods the organization to keep looking for gaps in research. We will fill those gaps even if we have to use our savings for conducting research. This will make us leader of that particular subject and well positioned to engage with donors for long-term funding to conduct further research or put already conducted research into action.

Successful implementation of the plan would ensure financial and intellectual health of SDPI. This step is vital for materializing its vision to be a centre of excellence on sustainable development policy research, capacity development and advocacy in Pakistan.

We have created senior-level positions for resource mobilization and business development. Fresh monitoring evaluation and learning experts will support strengthening organizational monitoring/accountability, continuously learning about the best practices of peer think tanks. They will serve as internal knowledge managers and document strengths of SDPI for branding/marketing purposes.

Some changes have been brought in the top-tier management structure for ensuring a smooth succession and consistent leadership. To further improve some aspects of leadership such as effective
decision-making, giving candid feedback and taking initiatives, SDPI will hold capacity-building courses for senior managers on leadership, management and governance with TTI support.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The TTI support helped SDPI mitigate the vulnerabilities induced by exogenous factors. That stability has helped the organization gain strength. We are optimistic that SDPI will remain strong enough to withstand the exogenous factors such as shrinking fiscal and intellectual space for think tanks.

In this endeavour, we will remain in close contact with the networks of the TTI cohort. We will seek room for synergizing with fellow think tanks. In that journey, they would find SDPI always ready to collaborate.
Strengthening Policy Research: Role of Think Tank Initiative in South Asia is a vivid presentation of the diverse journeys of think tanks under the aegis of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) programme managed by the International Development Research Centre in South Asia. The book extensively discusses the three areas of TTI support to strengthen think tanks, viz., organizational performance, research quality and policy engagement. It emphatically demonstrates the crucial role of long-term core support in strengthening think tanks for more rigorous research quality as the basis for public policy-making. It presents a rich tapestry of complex pathways that each think tank adopts to engage in policy outreach in their respective domains. The book makes a strong, evidence-based case on how even limited yet assured funding to think tanks leads to enhanced organizational capacities for good quality research, effective policy outreach and improved sustainability. It firmly puts forth the view that governments need to work jointly with private funding organizations to strengthen think tanks, which is in the best interest of evidence-informed and effective public policy-making.

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