

ESPA Event Report

Building Impact & Research Partnerships in South Asia

Wednesday, 9th & Thursday, 10th March 2016

The Taj Mahal Hotel, New Delhi, India



→ Summary

Read Jyotiraj Patra's [blog](#) on the event, ESPA's Regional Evidence Advisor for Asia. Contact Raj to receive his monthly regional digest: asiainpact@espa.ac.uk

The ESPA Directorate brought together ESPA researchers, project partners, funders and research users at two Building Impact and Partnerships events this month, one held in New Delhi and the second in Nairobi to discuss strategies and objectives around impact.

The events also provided an opportunity to formally launch ESPA's new Impact Strategy to raise awareness of the programme's renewed focus on impact, to clarify how the new strategy document supersedes earlier strategy documentation, and to develop a shared understanding around the impact agenda ensuring conceptual clarity.

The second day of each event gave project participants the opportunity to develop their own impact pathways as well as bring participants in contact with funders and research users in order to share perspectives and good practice and to build partnerships.

→ 10 Key Lessons for Impact

1. Understand the demand side – what is the need, and how is/ will the research be used?
2. Develop shared value propositions and a common understanding with local partners.
3. Understand the drivers of change and the political economy of the environment.
4. Develop effective and purposeful multi-stakeholder partnerships for enhanced impact.
5. Find champions of change and work with “connectors”.
6. Listen and learn: adapt to political and social realities to stay relevant.
7. Keep it simple! Communication is key.
8. Be creative! Engage hearts as well as minds with stories, films, metaphors and memes.
9. Be alert to windows of opportunity, adopt a flexible and responsive approach.
10. Build in a transition strategy to track impact beyond the time frame of the project.

→ Building Impact and Partnerships in South Asia

Jyotiraj Patra, ESPA's Regional Evidence Advisor for Asia, opened the workshop with some comments on the objectives of the workshop, in particular, the aim to build a shared vision around impact and leverage existing and new partnerships to enhance and build the ESPA programme's impact.

Ms. Jean-Marion Aitken, Head of the DFID- South Asia Research Hub (SARH) gave the welcome address, and urged the audience to rebalance the emphasis between supply and demand. She noted that the UK government is increasingly recognising the importance of research for poverty alleviation. However to provide justifications to support increased investment in research to ministers and the tax-payers alike, we need to improve what we know on the demand side, where the need is and how our research is being or will be used. She also highlighted the importance in embedding learning in our work, looking back at previous programmes to identify what worked and what didn't as well mapping clearly pathways to impact and communication dissemination strategies.

Dr. Jim Jarvie, Network founder and strategic advisor of the Asian Cities Climate Change Resilience Network (ACCCRN) framed the day's discussion with his presentation on *Research, Impact and Political Economy*, which clearly demonstrated that effective programming is context-specific, dynamic and an inherently political process. He drew on his breadth of experience to strongly argue that understanding power and power-relations is central to ensuring the production of relevant research evidence that can be put in use. Being aware of some of the key political economy drivers and the power dynamics is important to delivering an effective programme. Through this researchers can understand ways in which these broad and mega agendas could become more inclusive and equitable in a real sense through local and community level engagements.

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He highlighted the following mainstream myths:

- Rational policy and planning processes exist
- Policy and practice are technical issues rather than about politics and power
- Working law and enforcement of regulation is the norm

Development support and technical advice focuses on planning as a technical, capacity dependent exercise but it is, in fact, closely related to the legitimacy and the authority of the state. Planning outcomes are largely focused on election cycle dependent, tactical, cash-rich infrastructure development instead of long-term urban strategies protecting constituencies. In these scenarios, weak enforcements can be used to legitimise questionable practice and allow elite resource capture and urban expansion can arise from strong actors amassing benefits.

ACCCRN's theory of change rests on

- Explicit recognition of implementation challenges
- Developing "shared value propositions" with power centres particularly the private sector
- Addressing critical issues of knowledge and power
- Putting pro-poor values centre stage including justice, rights and well-being
- Building public/private engagement and information freedom
- Using the power of information freedom, media and advocacy.

Dr. Jarvie also noted the importance of framing the concept of resilience. He noted that resilience bridges the discourse on mitigation and adaptation and could help us address complex and dynamic systems over the long-term. It also assumes adaptive learning and flexible institutions. However, the term resilience which has dominated the discourse of the global north overlooks power and politics. He argued that the concept of resilience needs to be meaningful and placed in context. The following three questions need to be made explicit: what is having it resilience built? Who is benefiting? And under what authority are measures being built? These issues must be understood to ensure resilience is based on inclusion and social justice, has pro-poor outcomes and does not just benefit power brokers.

Becky Murray, Impact Advisor for the ESPA Directorate, introduced the new Impact strategy with her presentation *Renewing our focus on Impact*. She noted the impact strategy, which was based on extensive consultation, was designed to refocus ESPA work within the Directorate, among research teams, and local partners to amplify impact during the final phase of programme delivery. It supersedes ESPA's previous Impact, Research into Use, Capacity Building and Communication strategies in order to provide a unified vision for Impact among the ESPA community and beyond. The Impact Strategy uses a theory of change approach to highlight various pathways to impact. The strategy can be accessed [here](#).

Ms. Murray noted that going forward the ESPA community must:

- Proactively anticipate and drive demand
- Intelligently scope the external environment to identify key moments of leverage
- Work effectively with the relevant organisations & individuals to catalyse change
- Deliver a set of coordinated, complementary interventions at the global, regional, national and/or local levels

And that there was much scope to add value:

- At the project level – planning for impact but also responding to opportunities as they arise
- At the programme-level – synthesising evidence across the portfolio, responding to decision-maker demand to ensure that the ESPA whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts

Dr. Khairul Islam, Country Representative of Water-Aid Bangladesh chaired the mid-morning panel discussion on *Understanding Research Impact* which included panellists Dr Nafees Meah, Director of RCUK-India; Ms Varnali Deka, Joint Secretary, Urban development department of the Government of Assam; Professor Pramod Aggarwal, Regional Program Leader, CGIAR; and Dr. Cristina Rumbaitis del Rio, Regional Programme Manager Action on Climate Today, Oxford Policy Management.

Dr. Meah noted the UK had a very substantial research partnership with India, with £150 million committed to India-UK joint research since 2008, spanning over 85 projects. He emphasised the importance of building partnerships to achieve impact, demonstrable benefits to society and the economy. He highlighted new opportunities to focus research on the energy-food-water nexus and to build new models to support research into use, involving researchers, end-users and policy-makers etc.

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Ms. Deka drew attention to the '2030 Vision – Everything for Everyone - Achieving Inclusive and Sustainable Development' unveiled by the state of Assam, making it the first state to have a vision document on the sustainable development goals. It envisions a "transformed future" for the people of Assam free from all forms of deprivation, inequities and insecurity within the next 15 years. Ms. Deka noted that to achieve the vision, research was needed and the Government of Assam supported the ecosystem based approach and was keen to build strong partnerships with ESPA and ESPA researchers. She cautioned, however, that research must be better communicated, and findings more clearly translated. Current research was often too dense, technical and jargon heavy to be of practical use.

Professor Aggarwal argued that research was too supply driven and must be more demand-led. He noted that developing appropriate partnerships was key to achieving impact as was developing better communication strategies, and identifying different ways of dissemination.

Dr. Rumbaitis del Rio spoke about the need to develop smarter metrics to measure impact, moving beyond looking at numbers of citations, and number of publications produced to assess research impact. She spoke about the need to develop better communication strategies, using story-telling, for example, to engage hearts and minds. She again reiterated the need for a greater focus on the user "demand side" and a deeper understanding political economy drivers.

Mr Kamal Kishore, Member of National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), Government of India spoke about the need to focus attention on not just reducing losses from disasters but also the risk of losses and how ecosystem services help manage risks and build resilience. He spoke about the importance of partnerships to ensure a sound implementation of research findings and the potential of identifying "connectors" – individuals who have experience in both the academic and practitioner field who can act as effective communicators.

The final panel on *Research Impact: Experiences and Insights* was chaired by Mr Joydeep Gupta, South Asia Director of The Third Pole Net. The panellists included Dr. Joachim Schmerbeck, Team Leader, GIZ India; Dr. Kallur Murali, Senior Programme Manager, IDRC; Mr. Anirban Ganguly, Research Specialist, DFID-SARH; Mr. Sunandan Tiwari, Deputy Director, ICLEI-South Asia; Ms. Ratri Sutarto, Director, ACCRN; and Mr. Vijay Vardhan, Regional manager for the South, ITC Limited.

Each of the panellists gave examples of successes and in some case failures of Research Impact from their own personal experiences and lessons learned. In particular, Mr. Tiwari spoke about the importance of developing a common understanding of the problem and ways forward with local stakeholders and the need to avoid unrealistic expectations. Mr Murali noted that achieving behavioural changes was key to impact but achieving this did not necessarily have to be through policy. Ms. Sutarto reiterated the importance of developing partnerships and leveraging expertise and the importance of understanding political economy drivers and ensuring ownership from government and local stakeholders. Mr Vardhan, representing one of India's leading corporates, elaborated ways through which research-evidence is used in the company's flourishing agri-business programming and investment decisions. Mr Gupta highlight the importance of bridging gaps between journalists and researchers and the need to work jointly to ensure better communication and better translation of jargon and academic concepts.

Jyotiraj Patra closed the workshop with some comments identifying issues and opportunities for growing impact in Asia and the opportunities the workshop presented to build and identify partnerships going forward.

On Day 2 of the Workshop, participants were asked to break up into their respective projects and to review their impact strategies and impact pathways. A rapporteur was appointed who briefed back in plenary. Each project made a start on developing their theories of change and the Directorate will collate this information and continue this process with each project separately. The theories of change developed will guide the impact strategy for each project going forward and will be used as a basis for monitoring and evaluation. For details on the projects see the [agenda](#).

