



# ARE WE AFRAID OF EVALUATION?

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The stable economies around the globe are well documented. While, in Pakistan, the culture of reluctance to documentation and subsequently to evaluation pervades. An evidence-based policy making is virtually non-existent in Pakistan. The reasons are multifarious. For a stable economic growth, it is inevitable that the economic and policy decision making should be an offsprung of dependable and reliable evidence accrued from data.

In this vein, a discussion organized by PIDE attracts the attention of the audience with the dictum that “Data is a new oil”, which is valuable in its refined state. However, to invigorate the significance of data, data is rather considered as “the new soil”, having a capacity to sustain. Admittedly, the importance of data cannot be negated, provoking the thoughts that unlike oil, which once used becomes a liability to be discarded properly, data behaves like “soil”, providing a fertile medium to learn, experience and make good decisions. The data formation process is intrinsically positive, either it is the phase of learning experience, knowledge creation and accumulation or sharing. The inclusive use of data can eventually lead to sound decision making for the optimal use of resources to reap the benefits effectively. Generally, the public sector organizations use the data solely to justify the “need identification” for certain projects in education, infrastructure, health, security and other sectors.

The significance of data lies in the fact that data-based decision making renders the process transparent. In Pakistan, the institutions both public and private have no appetite for “transparency”, neither in their “results frameworks”, nor in their governance mechanism. The institutions in Pakistan are by default defiant to accountability and transparency.

PBS is an official federal agency of Pakistan, meant to collect, compile, analyze and disseminate the reliable data information. The availability of data by data-producers in Pakistan like PBS, NADRA, FBR has practical implications in policy making. PBS has conducted the first digitized census in 2023 in Pakistan, unlike the previously conducted pen-paper manual census. The use of digital technology in census makes the process transparent, enabling the relevant stakeholders to monitor the process, thus making census comparatively less controversial. It has the capacity to address the reservation of some provinces on the question of population size.

The availability of data does not ensure its use for policy making. Availability of reliable data can initiate good policy making, but this does not serve as an end itself. It is rather a starting post to achieve the objectives of the policy effectively. Planning done in the absence of data can hinder the achievement of excellence in national growth. How can data availability set the directions for bringing stability in Pakistan needs to be focused. For healthy economic and policy decision making, data availability should be ensured. For instance, data can help identify the actual match or mismatch between the demand and the supply sides to exactly identify the need. Similarly, the data from the census helps determine the budget share, the job quota, number of national and provincial assembly seats proportionally to the population size of the provinces. Moreover, demographic profiling can back good policy making regarding public investment decisions in many sectors. For example, the information about concentration of education level of a specific cohort of male or female students (demand side) can be snapped on the map against the number of schools (supply side) to identify the need for more investment.

To foster a culture of transparency, accountability ensuring good governance, the availability of digital data can be a starting point for the government (federal and provincial) to cultivate the results effectively and efficiently. To curtail the probability of corruption, the need is to make the stakeholders accountable to ensure transparency. One way can be to have some benchmarks embedded inherently in the policy backed by evidence to evaluate the process and its progress effectiveness. But the alarming situation is the absence of a “results framework”. The lack of transparency behind this escape can either be due to the non-availability of data or an inclination not to use the current data for personal gain. To add fuel to fire, the government lacks the deliberation to vet the credentials against data to make the stakeholders accountable. Non availability of data holds no one accountable, thus, escaping transparency. Therefore, the need is to put in place a “results framework” containing identified parameters to measure the outcomes of the publicly financed projects in the realm of health, education, etc. The same can be used to tag the governance mechanism of the established facilities on the geo map. Likewise, the digital census has enabled PBS to establish the first ever “Economic Frame” in Pakistan containing data on some 150 economic categories using a “bottom up approach”. This economic frame can enable policy makers to make policies backed by the evidence for growth in economic activities sectors like agriculture, livestock, etc. The estimation of provincial GDP is another prospect of PBS, since it is the need of the hour after the devolution act. To serve the purpose, the provinces will follow the standards set by System of National Accountability (SNA) and the provincial GDP will be aggregated by the federal PBS to avoid controversies. It is worth mentioning that PBS follows SNA 2008. Now SNA 2025 is in formative phases, which will change the landscape of data systems, making some data producers “stock”, while many would turn to be tributaries destined to flow their data to the stock. In this new landscape, next will be an era of data.

The use of data for evidence-based public policy is rare in public and private sectors. Generally, data is used to justify the need for investments in public sectors. The sectors are reluctant to provide data about the performance of their ongoing and completed projects for evaluation. Their corruption, nepotism, and personal interests are some of the factors counting for their fear of evaluations. Political interference and politicizing the issues are some other factors hindering the organization to share their information. This attitude has corroded the national institutions, making them corrupt and inefficient. This is an alarming situation. At this juncture, it is the responsibility of the academia and researchers to

explore the data to check the health of the prevalent policies for improvement. Policy makers should embrace constructive feedback to promote transparency.

In the end, this is apt to say that data dissemination is equivocally significant along with data collection and analysis. Data visualization can make findings accessible and comprehensible by the audience. For instance, PBS collects and publishes data in the form of voluminous reports with dozens of figures and tables, which are destined to be shelved. Data should be made available in interactive modes to be absorbed readily.

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