

Local research for local problems | The Express Tribune

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Since its inception, Pakistan's policies have largely been formed by the dictates of international financial institutions and multilateral donor agencies. In the absence of democratic norms and with rent-seeking, opportunistic politicians occupying the helms of key ministries, and the nation seems to have forfeited its sovereignty in exchange for loans and grants from global powers. The Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, through its Research for Social Transformation and Advancement (RASTA) initiative, has sought to incubate, promote, and facilitate local scholars and researchers in an effort to foster a culture of localized knowledge production.

Academia in general around the world seems to be going through a crisis of credibility. The political economy of the sector is such that researchers are heavily dependent on grants in order to survive. Unfortunately, those in the position to offer sizeable funding almost always have a particular agenda in mind – which forms the set of conditions prospective researchers must religiously abide by.

The overall effect this has is that those in power, measured by access to capital, determine what kind of knowledge is produced and circulated in society.

This has been the case since World War II, when British colonists in parts of Africa abruptly extended the rhetoric of liberty, equality and dignity to include the communities they were governing in an effort to save face in the context of declining credibility due to the war effort. Thus began a movement away from explicit control and intimidation to implicit influence and co-optation, via 'development' assistance. Colonialism thus transformed into imperialism. This approach defined geopolitical strategy for the West during the Cold War as well, whereby countries were offered large sums of 'aid' money in order to contain the growing influence of the Soviet Union.

With extractive institutions already in place due to colonialism, it was always a fairly straightforward task for foreign elites to work in tandem with their (unaccountable) local counterparts in pursuit of instrumental ends. This is largely also the explanation for 'reform'

always being packaged in the form of deregulation, privatisation and the protection of property, despite the fact that success has hardly been achieved in several regions where this approach has been implemented, the most salient examples being SubSaharan Africa and Latin America, where growth rates actually plummeted following their introduction.

The 'research' that emerged (and indeed has been emerging) from these efforts has always been based on a 'tinkering at the margins' approach whereby a set of technical policy prescriptions are jotted down in elaborately designed reports and handed over to government agencies to implement. The problem, of course, is that these 'insights' are devoid of context, purely theoretical, and perhaps worst of all, carrying certain political objectives geared to promoting the geostrategic interests of the donor country. In the rare cases projects are mostly implemented, economic and social fundamentals remain weak, and are justified by the claim that 'full' implementation (virtually impossible) wasn't achieved. A built-in excuse, therefore, is omnipresent. 'You lack expertise. Let us help. Still not performing? Could be due to a failure of implementation, perhaps because you lack expertise. Let us help.' Ad infinitum.

It is with this backdrop that RASTA came into being at PIDE, recently hosting its first conference at Bhurban. Covering everything from market regulation and social sector development to political economy and public service delivery, this initiative sought to leverage the expertise of local experts from across the nation. The objectives of RASTA are fivefold: stimulate economic and social science research/debate across Pakistan; foster thought communities around locally produced knowledge; offer a knowledge sharing/generating platform that allows all parties to leverage mutual networks; shape the decision-making process in policy circles; and create linkages between key stakeholders to build capacity by harnessing collective skillsets/resources.

The only way Pakistan can hope to progress is via nuanced, context-specific, and truly independent research that is evaluated exclusively on the basis of its merit. Let us embrace home-grown expertise.