



LOCAL CONFERENCE  
South Asia 2021

June 15, 2021

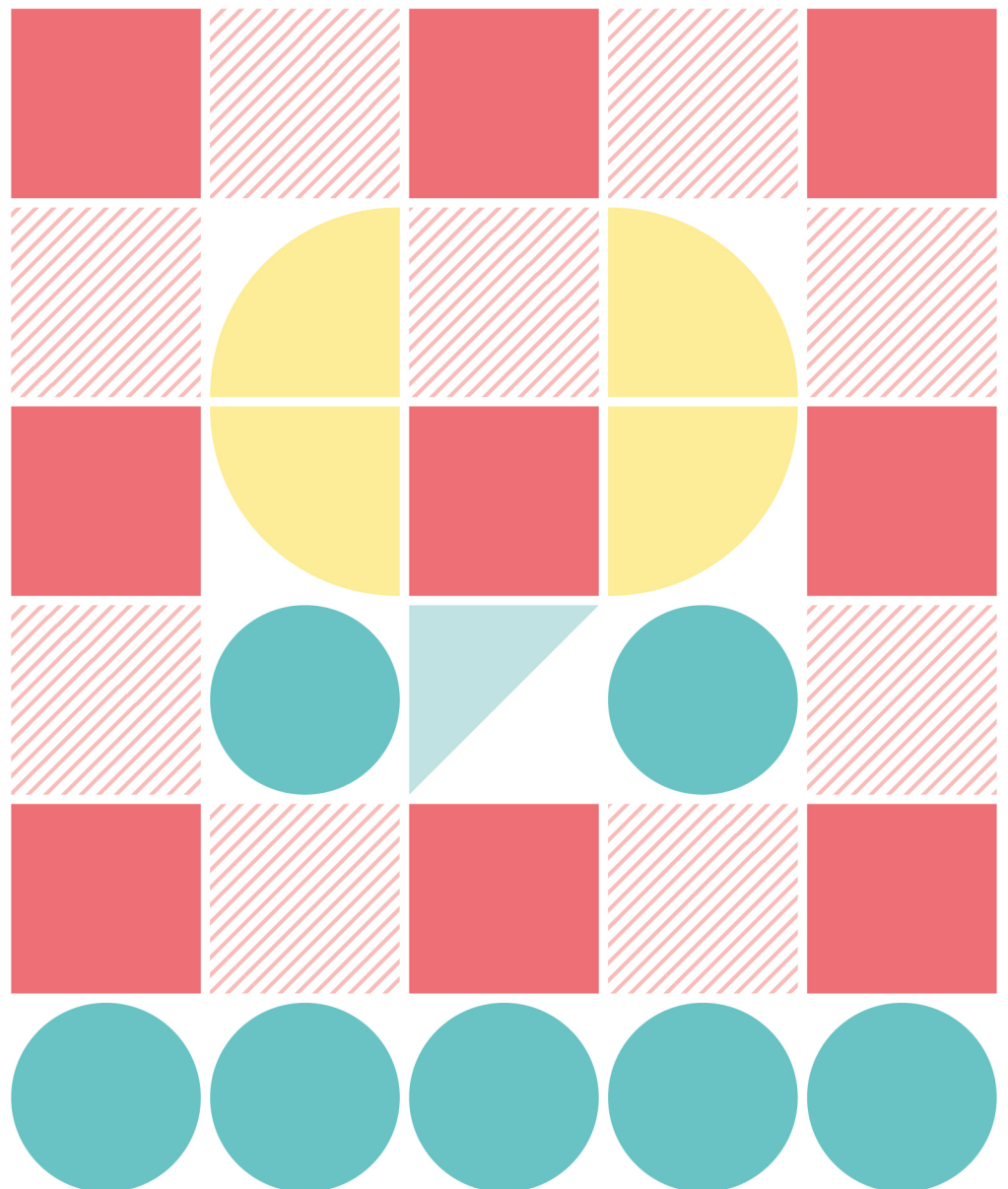
# Challenges and Lessons from the Pandemic: What Has to Change?

## Report

ORGANISED BY



#OTTConference



## Background

The On Think Tanks (OTT) South Asian Local Conference 2021 held on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June was hosted by Public Affairs Centre (PAC) and Public Affairs Foundation (PAF), not for profit think tank based in Bengaluru. This conference sought to address the “Challenges and Lessons from The Pandemic: What Has to Change?”

Executive directors from leading Think Tanks from the South Asia region spoke on a specific question vector, giving insights into the changes they have adapted and also foresee, as a result of the pandemic. The Conference was represented by 5 Executive Directors from prominent Think Tanks in South Asia, 2 Observers, a Facilitator and the Founder of On Think Tanks. The conference was conducted with a motive to:

- Demonstrate the work of the Think Tanks from the Global South
- Present and strengthen the work done by Civil Society Organisations (CSO) and their role in the government has to be institutionalised and strengthened
- Present the voice and concerns of the people by partnering with governments in their respective countries in a systematic and structured way
- Demonstrate the application of data science in public policymaking, programme, designing and problem-solving
- Show Think Tank’s positive and effective role in respective countries.

## Overview

The Conference was organised into 2 rounds. In Round 1 the Panelists shared their experience/challenges in addressing the pandemic and the Observers provided their comments. In Round 2 round, the Panelists shared 2 key challenges that responded to the questions that were assigned to them (mentioned below each panellist in this report). Followed by a question and answer session, as well as observations from the 2 Observers, who were part of the Conference. The panellists pondered and offered their ideas on issues based on the epidemic and the preceding discussion session in the second round. This was followed by more remarks from the observers as well as questions and answers from the participants. The Conference was attended by over 50 participants.

The Panelists, Observers and Facilitator included

# Panelists, Moderator & Observers



**Panelist**  
**WIJAYA JAYATILAKA**  
Centre for Poverty Analysis (Srilanka)



**Panelist**  
**DR. ABID QAIYUM SULERI**  
Sustainable Development Policy Institute (Pakistan)



**Panelist**  
**SALAI NGUN LIAN SANG**  
Centre for Development and Ethnic Studies (Myanmar)



**Observer**  
**DR. JAI ASUNDI**  
Centre for Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (India)



**Observer**  
**NITIN PAI**  
Takshashila Institution (India)



**Panelist**  
**KANCHAN MANI DIXIT**  
ISET-Nepal (Nepal)



**Panelist**  
**DR. FAHMIDA KHATUN**  
Centre for Policy Dialogue (Bangladesh)



**Moderator**  
**GURUCHARAN G**  
Public Affairs Centre (India)

## Webinar Discussions

Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, Executive Director, Public Affairs Foundation, welcomed the panellists, participants, and audience to the conference. She briefly shared the significance of the conference and welcomed Gurucharan G, Director, and Facilitator to begin the sessions.



Gurucharan G,  
Director,  
Public Affairs Centre,  
Bengaluru

*“The conference was important because South Asian countries face largely the same issues, of human development.”*

Gurucharan commenced the conference by welcoming all and formally introduced the panellists and observers. The challenges and solutions to be presented will help in learning and collaboration opportunities and the regions grow better and faster. This, in turn, shifts the focus from the Global North to the Global South, putting South Asia at the forefront of resource discourse.

He then briefly introduced Public Affairs Centre, its sister organisation Public Affairs Foundation and an important vertical, Centre for Open Data Research (CODR). He invited the panellists to think along the lines of; how Think Tanks can better connect to their roots so that they can represent people more accurately, how to institutionalise discourse between Think Tanks and their governments, how to advance data science for development strategies, and how might Think Tanks in South Asia collaborate as a collective. With that, the forum was opened for discussion.

### Round 1: Reflections from Executive Directors from South Asian Think Tanks

#### Panelist 1: Wijaya Jayatilaka



Executive Director,  
Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA),  
Sri Lanka

*“A multidisciplinary approach can help in strengthening the public health subsequently building a better place for ourselves and the importance of collaboration to aid in this multi-pronged solution is relevant”*

Jayatilaka began his presentation by remarking that the pandemic provides a unique situation where even in the downturns, Think Tanks can find opportunities to re-strategise their approaches and strengthen borders and re-direct themselves towards the issues that have cropped up because of the pandemic.

He then shared the situation in Sri Lanka. He pointed out that almost the entirety of Sri Lanka had a severe outbreak of COVID-19, yet the country still managed to keep its death ratio on the lower side of the global death ratio. That is, Sri Lanka had a death ratio of 0.92% while the global death ratio stands at 2.16%. This bodes well for the country and its infrastructure.

Building from this, Jayatilaka spoke on the issues that were plaguing Sri Lanka. He touched on the fact that despite research being conducted by Think Tanks, the research is largely not considered nor taken into account by the government. This causes a large gap in understanding and hence is a failure when solutions are presented. In the instances the benefits that do go to the affected citizen, they are not equally distributed. The benefits are used for political reason and hence have a skewed delivery. This is accompanied by an information overload, especially on the internet, which is not monitored. In addition to this, beyond the fact that funding is low; when funds are presented to make use of for the pandemic, large amounts of the donations are used towards the interest of the donors and not towards objectives that require it. This leaves large gaps in the welfare distribution of society.

Dr. Jayatilaka concluded that there should be platforms, where policy briefs and research is shared, can help Think Tanks move more skillfully. He also called for this platform to be backed by a coordinated effort from Think Tanks and regional collective strength from the people.

#### Panelist 2 - Dr. Abid Qaiyum Suleri



*Executive director,  
Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI),  
Pakistan*

*“Reduction in funding from national and international sources had a negative impact on the functioning and research at SDPI”*

Dr. Suleri provided an overview of the condition of COVID-19 in Pakistan and its present status. He then expounded on the changes that had been brought on in SDPI since the lockdowns started. The first change was the shift to working from home and working remotely for a year and a half. He admitted that it was difficult and expensive at first, with the change in location and the software needed to ensure smooth functioning. The outcome of this, however, was a higher work efficiency and enhanced output which they had not anticipated. The flexibility of the work-from-home situation boosted productivity.

Dr. Suleri added that the reduction in funding from national and international sources, because of the re-direction towards healthcare, had a negative impact on the functioning and research at SDPI. What helped in these times was the fact that SDPI has a multi-disciplinary base? As a result of the varied interests, they smoothly redirected themselves into social issues that needed addressal at that moment. This included social protection for the right target group, food security, and strengthening public health infrastructure.

Dr. Suleri moved to the work that SDPI was engaged in during the pandemic. The first 6 months were largely dedicated to webinars and roundtables for stakeholder consideration. Dr. Suleri also worked on policy recommendations for the Government of Pakistan which were adapted by the Government. One such was a food security portal which gave real-time information on food stocks, the demand and price fluctuations. Dr. Suleri also emphasised the importance of social media in the time of lockdowns and online communities. SDPI launched a vaccination campaign on their social media to encourage citizens to get their shots and be safe. This also helped them work closely with stakeholders, both national and international.

He concluded by highlighting the importance of flexibility and having a varied approach as that is what helped SDPI stay active and relevant in these times.

#### Panelist 3 - Dr. Fahmida Khatun



*Executive Director,  
Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD),  
Bangladesh*

*“Despite the large data collection exercise that Think Tanks were participating in, there seemed to be a disconnect from the government in receptivity”*

Dr Fahmida Khatun began by noting the timely initiative that the conference was; with the positive effect that sharing of lessons each Think Tank has learnt and using the takeaways in your own strategies. Dr. Khatun then went onto echo Dr. Suleri with the difficulties of a new working environment and the need to adapt quickly.

She remarked that the online working system also allowed scope for more increased efficiency and skill enhancement. On the downside, however, was the fact that working hours had dramatically increased. She noted that as the entire world was working online, they were connected to their devices for longer hours, and had to be more accessible. The breakdown of working hours, paired with the stress of the pandemic, leading to high work pressure. This was paired with the confinement and isolation that the lockdowns brought upon for each one of them.

One of the key takeaways that Dr. Khatun noted from such an experience was the need for better technological infrastructure. With employees having different digital devices and different connectivity, the management of

human resources was more difficult. In addition to this, online resource use dramatically increased with survey, interviews and data collection now taking place over the internet. This increase in online resource use has to be backed up by infrastructure.

Dr. Khatun went on to speak on the disconnect between Think Tanks and governments in Bangladesh. Dr. Khatun believes in research and data-backed policy recommendations, yet the government was disinterested in recommendations from non-state actors which she noted is a bureaucratic exercise. This is in light of the fact that the government does not have their own data that they rely on.

In her conclusion, Dr. Khatun expressed the idea that this is the time to contribute. Generation of research and data is critical to arrive at policy recommendations.

#### Panelist 4 - Kanchan Mani Dixit



*Executive Director,  
ISET-Nepal,  
Nepal*

*“The government is slowly recategorising Think Tanks and seeing the growing influence they have on the government”*

Kanchan began his presentation with a reflection of the situation in Nepal. He shared that the deaths caused by COVID-19 has been relatively low in the country but the situation has nonetheless been extremely difficult. In the first wave, the age group affected was elderly but with the second wave, adults between 20-40 were largely affected too. This is also furthered by the fact that in the first wave, there was a rush for sanitisers and masks, but in the second wave, there was a rush for oxygen, ventilators and hospital beds. Kanchan also brought forth the efforts of the government with isolation centres and quarantine centres which were then replaced with home isolation in the second wave.

Kanchan then delved on the impact that the pandemic had on technology. On one hand, because of lockdowns and social distancing, farmers in Nepal have had greater access to technology which has helped them to be directly in touch with consumers. This has helped them understand where their primary markets are. On the other hand, for organisations working from home, there have been problems with network and Wi-Fi. He furthered this by echoing Dr. Khatun on her view on the confinement and isolation felt by employees.

He then went on to expound on the workforce issues that has been plaguing ISET-Nepal, in particular with managing and retaining staff. Employees have been facing intense isolation and alienation, sickness of their own or family members and in some cases the death of a family member. In these cases, it has been hard to garner productivity and retain employees.

Leading into the government efforts during COVID-19, Kanchan commented on the lack of recognition that the government of Nepal has for NGOs. He noted that the government believes that all NGOs are the same, and thus approaching and giving recommendations to them has been a hurdle.

The government has also required 20% of budget to go towards COVID-19 relief which has been another obstacle since donors and funders didn't agree with the allocation. Mr. Dixit noted then that his approach had to be different. The solution, he explained, was to modify the work plan to involve a COVID context but to keep to their original objective.

Kanchan concluded by speaking on the challenges that data collection has had; with lockdowns and social distancing, on-ground data has been severely impacted. The need for RT-PCR tests to have participation in studies has also caused participants to be hesitant in joining. Mr. Dixit sees the way forward with citizen built databases, involving teachers, students and other members of society to help in gathering and analysing research.

#### Panelist 5 - Mr. Salai Ngun Lian Sang



*Executive Director,  
Centre for Development and Ethnic Studies  
(CDES),  
Myanmar*

*“The pandemic was a blessing in disguise; because of the online platform, meetings and informal discussion happened more frequently which allowed work processes to move faster”*

Salai Ngun Lian Sang’s presentation began with an introduction of his organisation, Centre for Development and Ethnic Studies, and the work that they engage in. He went on to talk about the COVID-19 situation in Myanmar, with the challenge shift to work from home because of lockdowns. The first three months were the most difficult as they had to review and change their activities based on situations presented by the pandemic. Mr. Sang also commented on the fact that the government promptly reprioritised and made COVID-19 response at the forefront of activities. This was further by civil society organisations too diverting funds into rehabilitation, in particular with labourers.

Asang also proudly commented that he has managed to retain his entire team and report that they have been healthy and safe. He also furthered this positive note by commenting on the fact that He spoke on the hold that the military have in Myanmar is currently under. People have not taken kindly to the coup and have come onto the streets to show their dissent. Health workers are engaged in civil disobedience and there has been a slow-down in all processes. Data collection and research has also slowed down to a crawl. Mr Sang explained that in the midst of this, CDES could not take a neutral position; the military has been unjust and they must dissent too. Hence, they are currently not engaging with the government. Instead, they are supporting citizen, democratic people and democratic officials of the government.

Asang concluded by stating that the CDES is not able to function as it usually does because of the state of the government. His staff is spread out nationally and internationally, and he too is in constant movement to ensure his safety. He concluded with a plea to the audience, to support the country and citizens of Myanmar in these difficult times, and to put pressure on the militia government.

#### Observations from Discussants



*Dr Jai Asundi,  
Executive Director,  
Centre for Center for Study of Science,  
Technology and Policy (CSTEP),  
Bengaluru*

Dr Jai Asundi began by discerning the significance of science and technology in these critical times and the issues of food security, social protection and health care issues of climate change will be unsettled for a long period of time, then again the interest in clean energy and medical services can fundamentally change the social orders to go ahead. In the recovery phase, the government should determine investing in these sectors.

Dr Asundi also highlighted his view on “no-cost extensions” and put forth that “the cost is to the donor and not the entity”. He proceeded by up Asang and Myanmar in these difficult times and with a positive hope for the restoration of democratic government. He concluded by emphasising that with this new normal there is a possibility of reduction of fixed cost which can be diverted to the other operational projects.



*Nitin Pai,  
Co-Founder & Director,  
Takshashila Institution,  
Bengaluru*

Nitin Pai emphasised by sharing the following:

- i. Think Tanks that have a diversity of subjects have a better chance of coping with a crisis like a pandemic. This also requires personnel to be skilled and have competencies to adapt to these different projects and is the way to obtain affordable strategy
- ii. The role of technology in the continuity of working space is now becoming prevalent for operational and analytical fields, however, creative solutions and brainstorming has suffered. Specifically, the institutions that are involved in the domains of human rights, justice, service delivery, and listening to people have also been hindered. Pandemic has also become one more tool for suppression
- iii. There is a need for effective political leadership with the right political agenda to engage a national approach. Budgeting which a predominant tool for development, the government should make an appropriate and optimal budget towards science and technology which can help in moving away from challenges faced currently.

He concluded by putting forth his deep conviction in many of the challenges faced globally and added that the intensity is different in different countries.

### Summary on Round 1

Gurucharan G thanked all the panelists for their different and interesting views and highlighted 3 main points on which he believed we need to reflect upon:

1. How the pandemic has brought home the extent of inequality in our society where it became apparent with reference to life vs livelihood?
2. How gender has been pushed to the background. There has been a rise in domestic violence, along with an increase in common mental disorders like depression and anxiety in adolescent girls and women
3. The growing informalisation of the labour market and great digital divide of education for rural children

## **Round 2: Sharing of Key Challenges**

Dr. Jayatilaka shared that there is a need for a coherent in institutions in the Think Tank network. This can be done by creating a platform where Think Tanks share the work that they are doing. This can help in networking and building connections.

The generation of knowledge takes place in different sphere of life and work but is not being shared effectively. Thus a network to share and discuss knowledge and action plans. This would help regional agendas to synthesise this knowledge into a product.

Dr. Suleri who pointed out that an increased focus on Sustainable Development Goals is required. As a virtue of the pandemic, the government is focusing on impoverished sections of society and the momentum must be kept.

Further utilisation of virtual platforms to compensate for the loss of physical networking opportunities. This can be done through informal meetings and round tables.

Dr. Khatun, emphasised the role that data plays in making efficient interventions to arrive at right decisions. Data is also important to target the right social beneficiaries. She added that the use of medium-term strategies to grapple with COVID-related uncertainties. It is important that exchange and sharing of knowledge between South Asian Countries should become prevalent. In addition, understanding the sustainability of Think Tanks, on how they will function when their funds and objectives are jeopardised as was seen in these COVID times should be addressed.

Kanchan Mani Dixit pointed out that small interactions with minimal funds help networking and knowledge production and Nepal has not participated in many such interactions and looks forward to more conferences.



*Enrique Mendizabal,  
Founder & Director,  
On Think Tanks,  
Peru*

Enrique Mendizabal, the founder of On Think Tanks commented that the following needs to be addressed:

- Create and emphasise on networking and knowledge sharing opportunities
- Discuss and include the specific effect of COVID on staff, women, financial sustainability - how these contexts affect Think Tanks themselves?

### Observations from Discussants

Jai Asundi

- Infrastructure issues - the need for digital infrastructure and its development.
- Sustainability - the need for self-sustaining in operation and provision of value to society. This can be brought about through collaboration and knowledge sharing.

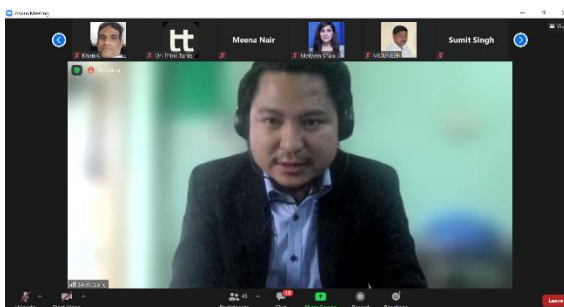
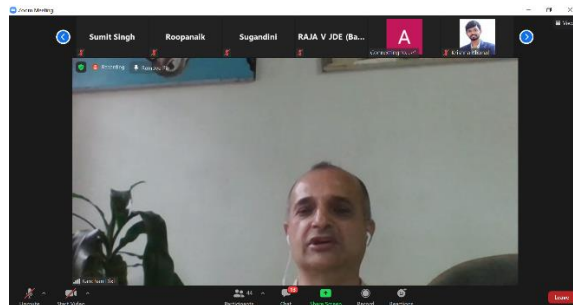
Nitin Pai

- There will be a large flow of funds in public health and digital technology - we must align ourselves to the same
- We should not rely on the state to provide data, third-party organisations will be required to gain this data.
- Invest in persuasion, swinging public opinion through interesting and innovative means is extremely important.

### Concluding Session

Gurucharan G concluded the Conference with a proposal for a South Asian Knowledge Exchange. It would work like an exchange, with a knowledge seeker and a knowledge provider. He then opened the floor to the audience and the following is some of the highlights:

Dr. Annapoorna thanked everyone by emphasising on the knowledge sharing aspects of the conference, both formal and informal. She also proposed bilateral and collaborative approach towards building better knowledge circles. She concluded by thanking all the Panelists, Observers, Facilitator, participants and On Think Tanks for supporting the event.



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