

# Unlocking Research for Development in-and-for-Countries in South Asia



Research plays a crucial role in tackling global challenges by providing evidence-based insights that inform policies and drive sustainable solutions. This report by the Global Development Network explores the impact of research for development in South Asia, focusing on the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s contributions from 2016 to 2023. It highlights the importance of policy-relevant research, local leadership, and cross-sector collaboration, while underscoring the need for sustained investment to maximize impact. Through key areas such as Climate-Resilient Food Systems, Global Health, Education and Science, Democratic and Inclusive Governance, and Sustainable Inclusive Economies, the report demonstrates how research can foster resilience, inclusion, and long-term progress across South Asia.



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# 1 Why Research for Development?

Not all knowledge is equal—especially when it comes to driving sustainable economic growth and promoting social inclusion in a world tackling unprecedented climate and environmental challenges. As the world faces these interconnected crises, knowledge that is research-based, evidence-based, policy-relevant, locally generated, open, inclusive and collaborative holds the greatest promise to create meaningful and lasting change.

Knowledge that is grounded in data, analysis, and systematic inquiry, that is research, can identify the root causes of challenges, propose solutions, and evaluate the effectiveness of actions. It can offer the critical insights needed to develop evidence-based policies that drive change and impact.

If research aligns with the needs of policy, then it is directly applicable to current societal issues, enabling governments and organizations to craft effective strategies, policies and interventions.

Empowering local research ecosystems helps ensure that interventions are not only relevant but also culturally appropriate and feasible, leading to more ownership, and more successful and sustainable outcomes, along with more cost-effectiveness. Localizing research capacity is key to serving the interests of people within their own social, economic, and political context, while also contributing to global debates.

Research that is collaborative—spanning sectors, disciplines, and countries as appropriate—is more likely to address complex and urgent questions, with greater confidence.

Open research and science, that is research that shares openly data, methodologies, designs and results allows for greater innovation, and more effective dissemination. It empowers more people to contribute to solutions, ensuring all participate in, and benefit from, advancements in science, technology, and policy.

Finally, research that is inclusive, promoting diverse voices and a range of perspectives, is essential for fostering inclusion in broader society.

**This is the essence of what research for development aspires to be.** This report, representing a collaboration between the Global Development Network and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), explores the achievements and impact of research for development, with a focus on IDRC's work in South Asia over the last decade.

The aim of this report is to spark interest and revamp commitment for creating a broad coalition in support of more research for development across South Asia.

# 2

## Is All Research Funding Equal?

*Funding research and funding research that drives development impact are not the same task.* Research funding agencies worldwide focus on advancing knowledge through excellence—a critical component of progress and innovation. However, excellence is necessary but not sufficient to address the most urgent societal challenges or inform today’s policy debates. Moreover:



Not all South Asian countries have the same capacity to fund research domestically.



Often, national research funders have a mandate to fund excellent research, irrespective of its policy relevance. This moves incentives away from addressing urgent social, political or environmental questions that often require deep dives into specific places, fit-for-purpose ways to research them, and long-term commitment, over methodological sophistication.



Typically, national research funds cannot systematically support international collaborations or research-policy and research-practice interactions, even within the same region and country.

In short, development research requires dedicated champions and specific funding channels. Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is one of few national institutions operating with this mandate on a global scale. It works collaboratively with peers through a network of national and international funders to increase resources for local researchers, create opportunities for development research, and drive impactful research that improves policies and enhances people’s lives.

*The objects of the Centre are to initiate, encourage, support and conduct research into the problems of the developing regions*

*of the world and into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions (art. 4.1)*

*Research includes any scientific or technical inquiry or experimentation that is instituted or carried out to discover new knowledge or new means of applying existing knowledge to the solution of economic and social problems (art. 2)*

International Development Research Centre Act (R.S.C., 1985, c. I-19)



# 3

# IDRC's Work in South Asia

Figure 1: IDRC's presence in South Asia



IDRC's work in South Asia reflects its commitment to promoting impactful research to address diverse challenges within the region, across five thematic areas:

- **Climate-Resilient Food Systems**
- **Global Health**
- **Education and Science**
- **Democratic and Inclusive Governance**
- **Sustainable Inclusive Economies**

Complementing these is a fund (called Catalytic Fund) to explore new avenues for programming.

Over seven years, IDRC has invested an estimated CA\$277 million in South Asia, supporting 233 projects across 121 programs. By providing financial support to research teams and their partners, these initiatives target a wide range of regional challenges. With an estimated average annual investment of CA\$40 million, IDRC's funding plays a crucial role in fostering impactful research and development across South Asian countries.

Area	No. of Multi-Grant programs (actual)	Amount (C\$ mn) (estimate)	% of Funding per Area (estimate)	% of Projects per Area
Catalytic Fund	4	2,250,000	1%	3.31%
Climate-Resilient Food Systems	30	193,250,000	70%	24.79%
Democratic and Inclusive Governance	28	20,000,000	7%	23.14%
Education and Science	10	12,750,000	5%	8.26%
Global Health	12	6,000,000	2%	9.92%
Sustainable Inclusive Economies	16	16,000,000	6%	13.22%
Sustainable Inclusive Economies (Think Tank Initiative 2)	21	26,750,000	10%	17.36%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>277,000,000</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Figure 2: Distribution of projects by IDRC program area

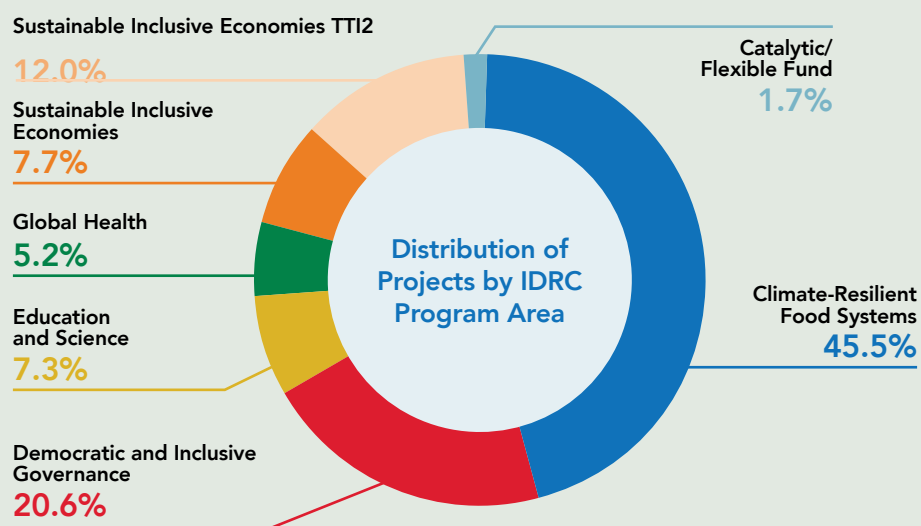
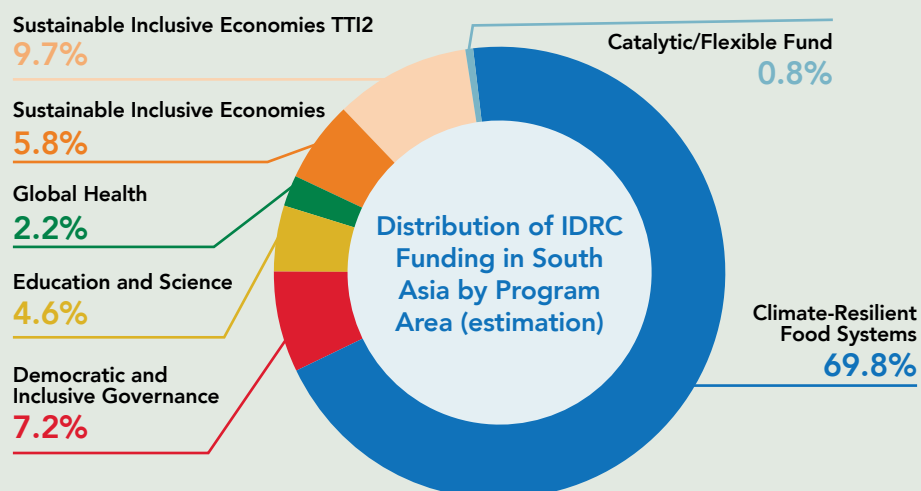


Figure 3: Distribution of IDRC funding in South Asia by program area



IDRC-funded projects in South Asia vary widely in size and scope, reflecting the diverse needs and challenges of the region. **Nearly 69% of grants are below CA\$1 million**, with a duration of two to five years. Often, this timeframe covers both the development and the application of research results. India leads as the top recipient by number of grants, with close to one third of all projects in the dataset. Thirty percent of grants in IDRC’s grant dataset for

South Asia are awarded to international institutions (e.g., organisations registered in and operating from Canada, Japan, the UK, and the USA) that lead collaborations with counterparts in the region. The remaining 70% of grants were awarded to institutions based in South Asia, in line with IDRC’s goal to empower local researchers and institutions to take the lead in identifying and addressing development challenges.

Figure 4: Distribution of different grant sizes (data from IDRC database and survey)

What was the size of the grant you received? (CAD)

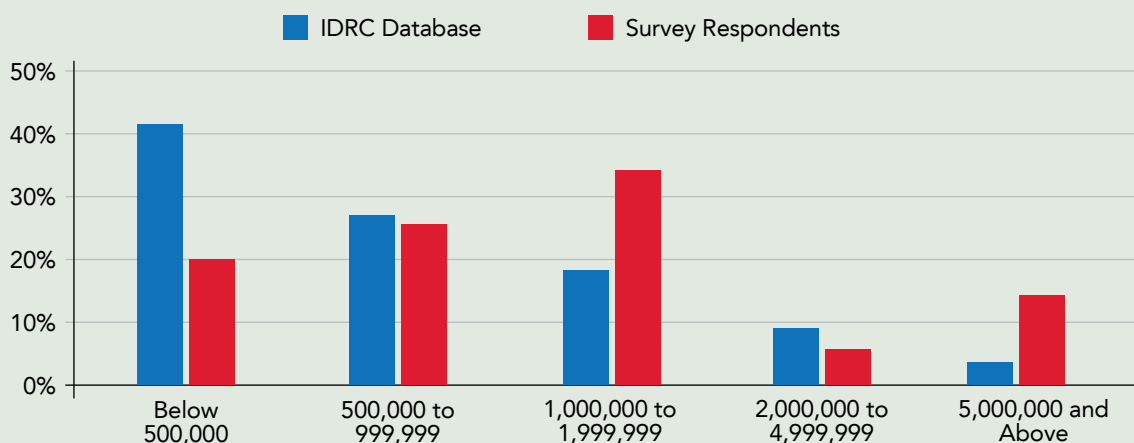
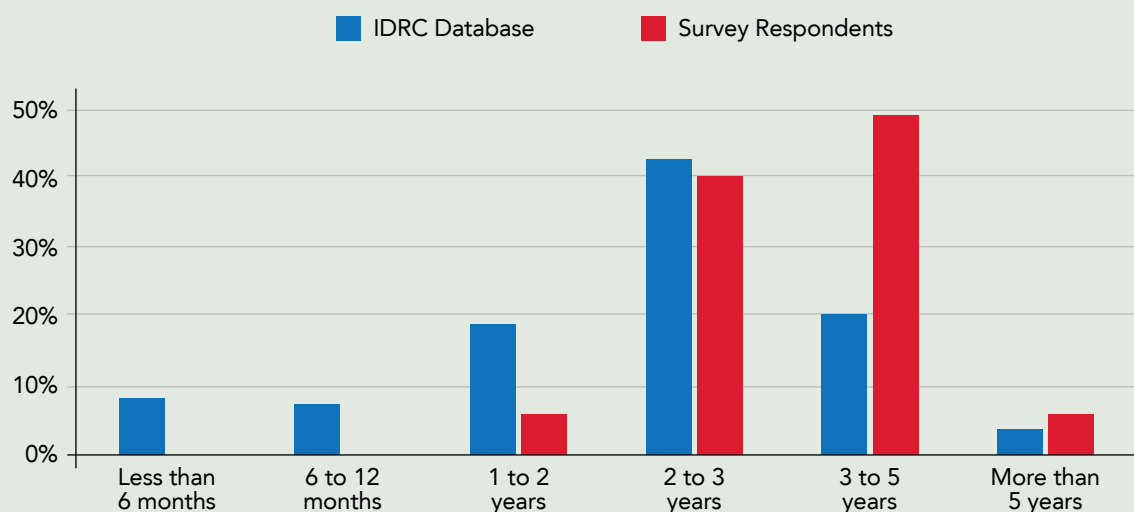


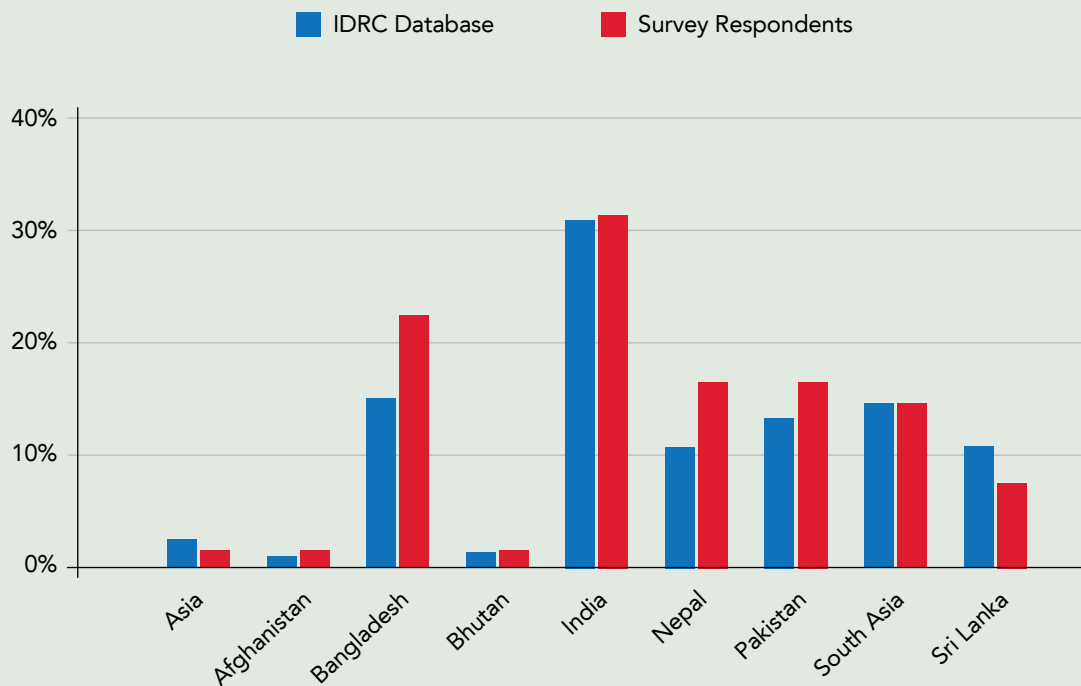
Figure 5: Variation in length of projects (data from IDRC database and survey)

How long did the project last?

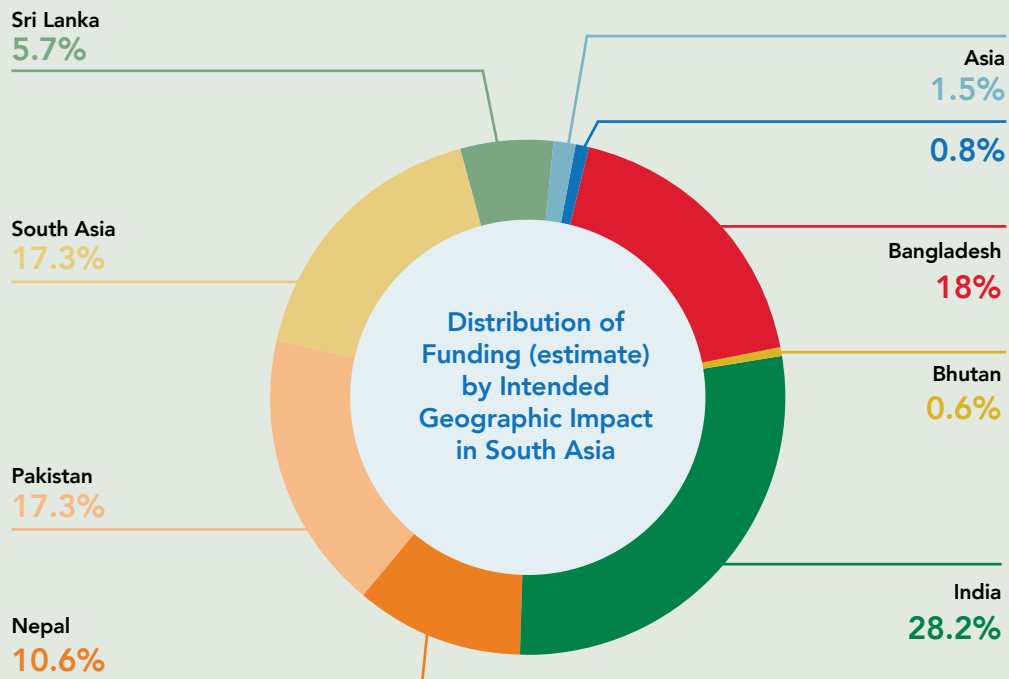


**Figure 6: Distribution of IDRC projects in South Asia (data from IDRC database and survey)**

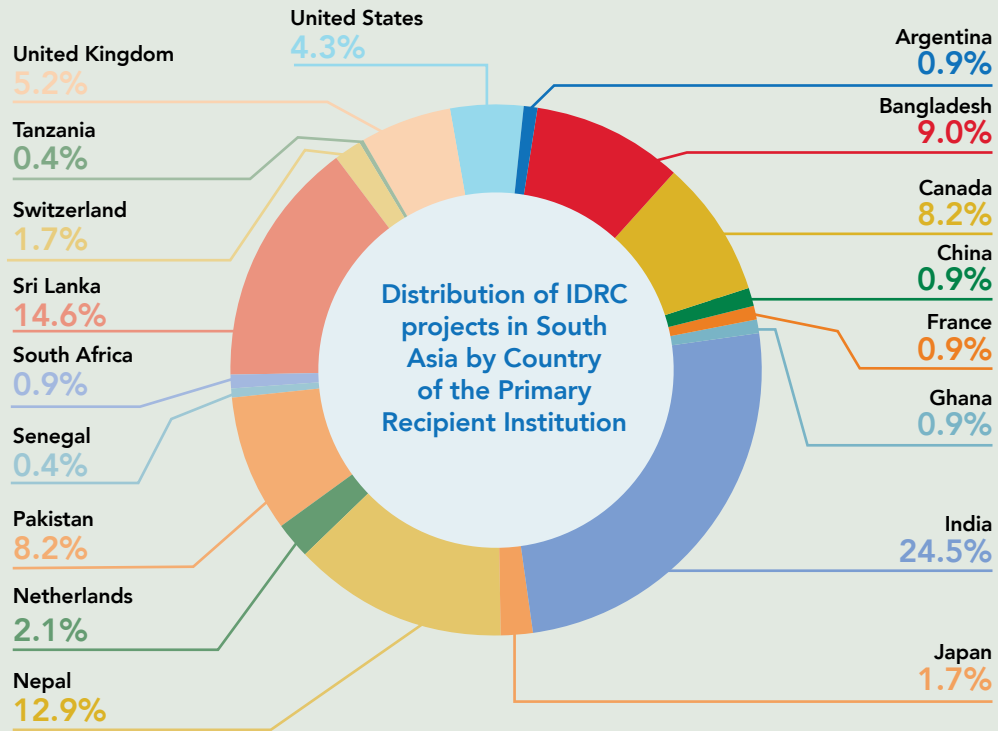
**Distribution of IDRC projects in South Asia by location of intended impact**



**Figure 7: Distribution of funding (estimate) by intended geographic impact in South Asia**



**Figure 8: Distribution of IDRC projects in South Asia by country of the primary recipient institution**



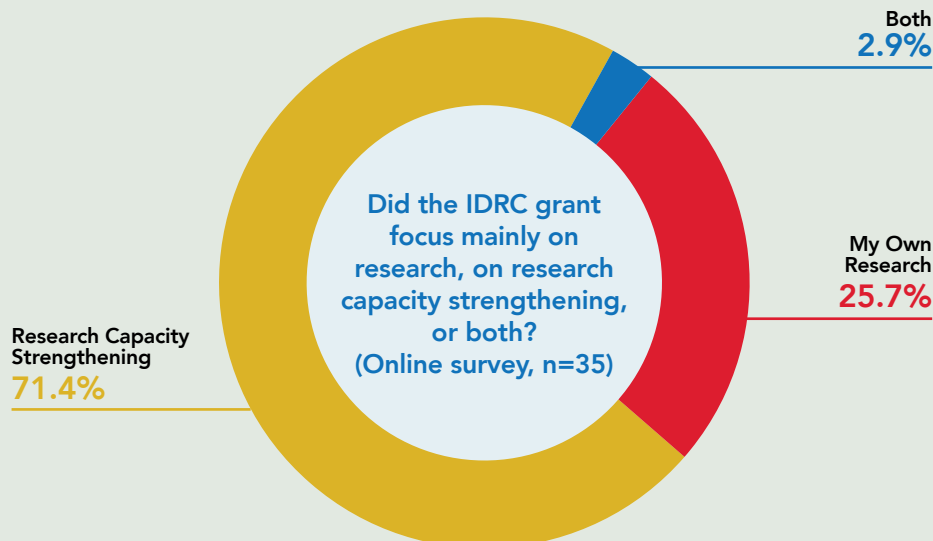
Irrespective of the grant holder identified by IDRC, many of the projects are partnerships that bring together regional and international institutions, connecting local and international expertise.

According to the survey respondents, over 70% of

the grants were used to directly conduct research and implement projects, while 26% reported using the grant to support local researchers and organizations in carrying out their own work.

Additionally, 3% utilized the grant for both purposes.

**Figure 9: Focus of IDRC grant**



# 4 Impact Stories

In the following pages, we feature 11 project stories that illustrate the range of impacts international funding disbursed by IDRC in South Asia catalysed between 2016 and 2023.



# ENVIRONMENT ECONOMICS



## TITLE

Economics for the Environment: Research Capacity Building in South Asia



## TIMELINE

2014 – 2017



## FUNDING

CAD 1,879,600 and others CAD 2,323,223



## PARTNERS

SANDEE, ICIMOD



## LOCATION

Nepal

## Challenge

Before the South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics (SANDEE) was established in 1999, research in environmental economics was virtually non-existent in the region. SANDEE is a network that operates across all South Asian countries, with the aim of tackling lack of research in this field through two parallel approaches.

- Promotion of the teaching of environmental economics in universities and building the capacity of faculty members and researchers to produce high-quality research that can inform policy decisions.
- Generation of an evidence base, combined with a critical mass of human capital, both of which can support policymakers.

## Solution

SANDEE runs a flagship summer school in environmental economics that features internationally renowned professors who teach and help build research networks for trainees. SANDEE also has a system of competitive research grants and receives around 500 applications each year for 10 to 15 grants, each worth up to \$30,000 USD for two years. Applicants propose their own topics but they must fall within subject areas that connect development and environmental issues. Proposals are evaluated by a jury, and the selected ones are further reviewed by two scholars. Selected proposals are presented at SANDEE's biannual workshop, and only a few are funded which are provided with financial support, personalized mentorship and technical assistance from international scholars. During the IDRC supported project period (2014-2017), 18 grants were awarded across three areas: the economics of climate change, ecosystem management, and policies and programs for greener development.

## Impact and Results

Approximately 40% of the grantees were women, and the grants covered a variety of topics, such as ecosystem services, pollution and health, water, and sustainable agriculture. In total 44 working papers and 33 policy briefs were published as direct outputs of these research grants. In 2024, members of the SANDEE network, including current and former grantees, published more than 50 peer-reviewed

articles. In 2019, SANDEE conducted a survey: of the 150 respondents, around 50% reported an impact on teaching environmental economics or related courses, and 70% secured further grants, which in some cases led to the publication of results from SANDEE-funded projects. Additionally, 40% indicated that their work had influenced policy at the local, national, or regional level. The survey was repeated in 2022, yielding similar results. Research capacity building remains crucial in South Asia; long-term program funding promises more impact than project-based funding.

## Future Prospects

Until 2017, SANDEE received core funding from IDRC, which accounted for about one-third of its total operating budget. SANDEE would then administer research grants and training programs with this funding. In 2017, however, IDRC changed its funding policy, replacing core funding with project-based funding. SANDEE has continued to receive IDRC project funding on several occasions, but this funding is tied to specific projects and does not support the long-standing research capacity and academic leadership development program. The current SANDEE project focuses on the forest restoration programs of governments in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The end of core funding from IDRC in 2017 was mitigated by the continued funding from ICIMOD which has allowed SANDEE to provide grants to local scholars, although to a lesser extent than before.

## Role of IDRC Funding

IDRC played a key role in establishing strong, continuous institutional support for SANDEE from the outset, recognizing the significant research challenges the region faces, and it also sits on SANDEE's board. The progress and impact achieved by SANDEE in the region are, in part, due to the continuous support from IDRC in helping researchers in the region.

By allowing researchers to select their own topics, which are aligned with the environmental and societal needs of the region, it has been instrumental in generating interest at the policy level. Over the past 25 years, a critical mass of trained researchers and a wealth of locally grounded evidence has been created, and today the region plays a prominent role in discussions on climate change and biodiversity loss.

# HEALTHY DIETS



## TITLE

Strengthening Fiscal Policies and Regulations to Promote Healthy Diets in Sri Lanka



## TIMELINE

2020 – 2023



## FUNDING

CAD 315,300



## PARTNERS

Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS)



## LOCATION

Sri Lanka

## Challenge

The high prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in Sri Lanka poses a significant health challenge. Nearly a third of adults in the country are overweight or obese, and the incidence is rising among young adults. Sri Lanka has committed to measures aimed at controlling NCD risk factors which includes social habits, learned food preferences, unhealthy food marketing, the unaffordability of healthy food options, and a lack of information on food packaging. The country has implemented taxes and traffic light labels on sugary sweetened beverages but there was no evaluation of the effectiveness of these measures before implementation.

## Solution

The project assessed the effectiveness of two recently introduced fiscal and regulatory interventions designed to reduce unhealthy food habits: a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages and a food labeling system aiming at behavioural change. In the face of COVID-19 and lockdown the project had to adapt and shift the focus of its evaluation from school canteens to the diets of low-income families in selected locations around Colombo. A deep economic crisis hit Sri Lanka in 2022, and the study expanded its scope to examine the effects of the crisis— including inflation and import restrictions— on food environments. The study also included a political economy analysis to assess how the policy environment is related to the issue.

## Impact and Results

The study used household expenditure data from 2016 (pre-tax) and 2019 (post-tax) to measure changes in spending patterns and analyse how price changes affect the demand for different beverage categories. The effects of newly introduced taxes were less significant than initially assumed and, as soon as the tax proved ineffective, industries reverted to producing and marketing high sugar

content after short-lived experimentation with new and healthier products. The study generated counterintuitive findings: for example, the diet of people in the neighbourhoods studied improved during the pandemic, due to the sales of fruit and vegetables door-to-door. The project was featured on national media and disseminated within the relevant ministries. It also achieved international visibility with Sri Lanka being one of the few countries to have implemented such policies in the region.

## Future Prospects

The ongoing economic crisis in Sri Lanka presents some opportunities for initiatives in this area. For example, the government is looking for ways to increase revenue, and raising taxes on sugary drinks has once again become part of the agenda. At the regional level, there is an ongoing project in which Sri Lanka is sharing its experiences with countries that have yet to introduce such taxes. The goal is to establish a regional regulatory framework, similar to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, to advocate nationally and regionally for these types of policies.

## Role of IDRC Funding

The IPS Sri Lanka had already participated in the Think Tank Initiative and received funding for various projects over almost eight years since this project began. This project is part of an ongoing collaboration that has lasted for 15 years. IDRC funding is thematic and broadly conceived, allowing ideas to emerge from the local organization. It is flexible, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic when the project needed to change a component and was allotted extra time to enable this without unnecessary complications. A significant limitation is that IPS cannot access regional funding due to national regulations, therefore the type of collaboration among research teams which is required for a project such as this in the Global South requires a facilitator, such as the IDRC.

# HEAT STRESS



## TITLE

Climate Adaptive Action Plans to Manage Heat Stress in Indian Cities



## TIMELINE

2017 – 2020



## FUNDING

CAD  
1,001,800



## PARTNERS

Integrated  
Research & Action  
for Development  
(IRADe)



## LOCATION

India

## Challenge

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that rising global temperatures will increase the frequency and severity of heat waves. In India, these heat waves are exacerbated by the urban heat island effect, which significantly impacts the health of vulnerable communities. According to the Indian Meteorological Department, more than 2,400 people died from heat-related causes in 2015 alone and this number is rising. However, public recognition of the magnitude of these hazards in India remains low.

## Solution

The project addressed these challenges by improving the management of heat stress risks in India through the development of spatially differentiated and gender-sensitive Heat Stress Action Plans (HSAPs) in Delhi, Bhubaneswar, and Rajkot. A key component of the project was generating data-driven evidence of rising heat in these cities to influence policy and planning. The project also aimed to understand how heat is impacting the most vulnerable, including low-income groups, children, and the elderly. With this evidence and analysis of the impacts, the project developed a plan to assist city planners and policymakers in coping with heat waves. Finally, the project focused on building the capacity of key stakeholders, particularly policymakers, administrators, medical officers, and groups essential for the development and implementation of the plan.

## Impact and Results

The project measured the loss of workdays and productivity due to heat stress. For example, Delhi recorded the highest wage loss at 36% and highest average monthly wage loss at INR 600. Productivity loss could range from 1 to 15 days, depending on the intensity of heat stress. The project provided water and buttermilk at more than 300 locations and, alongside this, it distributed 15,784 heat advisory pamphlets in local languages. Over 500 participants attended state-level workshops, and there were over 20 meetings with media and

50 meetings with representatives of municipal corporations.

The project achieved three scientifically sound Heat Stress Action Plans (HSAPs) which were developed and implemented by the municipal corporations/councils in the three cities. The project mapped urban heat islands to provide a detailed understanding of the impact of heat waves, particularly on vulnerable groups. This granular approach added an inclusive dimension by developing gender-sensitive heat action plans. Widespread early warning systems and awareness campaigns were established to issue heat stress alerts and, based on the insights from this study, there was a revision of the threshold for activating these alerts. City authorities adopted and implemented the HSAPs, despite delays caused by COVID-19 in the last year of the project. The project gained significant attention at international (New York Times, The Guardian) and national levels.

## Future Prospects

Negotiations with the Delhi government continued well after the project's conclusion to ensure the adoption of the HSAPs. Urban policies are being revised annually and disseminated by local authorities, with guidelines developed by the project being adopted by the Orissa State Disaster Management Authority. The project was designed to be replicable in other cities and this includes a gender-adaptive framework, which was implemented in three additional cities: Surat in India, Rajshahi in Bangladesh, and Colombo in Sri Lanka. Another notable outcome of the project is the creation of a permanent network supported by WHO and WMO—the South Asia Heat Health Information Network (SAHHIN) - to which more than 20 thousand people signed up.

## Role of IDRC Funding

This project was the first in which IRADe received funding from IDRC. The funding was practical, flexible, and adaptive to new circumstances, focused on supporting innovation, research, and making an impact on people's lives. Particularly during COVID-19 pandemic, IDRC granted extra time to complete the planned actions.

# FRUIT PRESERVATION



**TITLE**  
Enhanced  
Preservation  
of Fruits Using  
Nanotechnology



**TIMELINE**  
2014 – 2018



**FUNDING**  
CAD 357,432  
as part of  
CIFSRF



**PARTNERS**  
Industrial  
Technology  
Institute, Sri Lanka



**LOCATION**  
Sri Lanka

## Challenge

Close to 40% of fruit production is lost in tropical countries due to high perishability and improper post-harvest handling. Hexanal is a widely used natural compound known for its ability to preserve fruit quality and reduce losses. Building on a strong partnership, the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (India), the Industrial Technology Institute (Sri Lanka), and the University of Guelph (Canada) collaborated with research institutions in Trinidad, Kenya, and Tanzania to generate new knowledge on reducing post-harvest fruit losses. A previous project had researched several solutions and eventually developed a wax formula to reduce microbial diseases in fruits but this formula included chemicals that made it difficult for producers to adopt.

## Solution

During the second phase of the project, four novel products were tested and scaled up, and the methodologies and protocols for this process were shared across six countries: India, Canada, Sri Lanka, Trinidad, Tanzania, and Kenya. Examples of the fruit value chains benefiting from this cutting-edge innovation include mango, banana, papaya, and citrus fruits.

The products were centred around the bio-component, hexanal, which can extend harvest time (tree life), enhance shelf life, and improve fruit quality. Through the use of nanotechnology hexanal was incorporated into packaging materials for storage and transportation. In collaboration with scientists from the University of Guelph, who developed and patented an Enhanced Freshness Formulation (EFF), the project created packaging production systems using bio-wax dip treatments and bio-nanoparticles containing hexanal. Additionally, it optimized hexanal formulations for both pre- and post-harvest applications.

## Impact and Results

The project identified effective methods to facilitate market entry and promote wider adoption, with the explicit goal of commercialising functional products that had been tested. The project reached over 25,000 farmers, with 12,000 adopting an "Enhanced Freshness Formulation (EFF)" containing hexanal.

80% of farmers who adopted the EFF reported

increased income due to delayed harvests in the range of 10-15%, which is approximately an additional \$200 per acre.

Pre-harvest sprays of hexanal extended shelf life by 14-21 days in mango, 5-6 days in guava, and 4-5 days in grapes under ambient storage conditions. 51% of mango and banana farmers in India were able to negotiate a premium price in the market.

Additionally, the project created economic opportunities for female farmers in post-harvest activities. For example, during the cropping season in India, women had 12-17 days of additional employment in packaging. Women made up 32% of beneficiaries of the 4360 farm advisory services provided. 926 women and 183 men participated in 44 value-added trainings, and 35% of the women trained became small business entrepreneurs.

The project led to the filing of two patents in India for the bio wax formulation and Tree Fresh formulation, which were licensed to a private company for use in Sri Lanka and led to successful commercialization. It won five national and international awards and it resulted in over 30 peer-reviewed publications, including a special issue of the Journal of Tropical Agriculture with 12 articles on the use of hexanal.

## Future Prospects

In addition to the patents and technologies developed, the project also brought international recognition to ITI, which is currently working on a related initiative focused on food safety, specifically pesticide residue analysis in selected fruits and vegetables, including mangoes.

## Role of IDRC Funding

IDRC grants acknowledge that R&D alone is not enough and researchers need additional support to bring their research to market. To do this the project was structured in two phases to help the products reach the market. The project benefited from close interaction with IDRC program managers, and scientific teams of all six countries including field visits. Working with IDRC was efficient and timely; funding was received when needed, allowing for the purchase of research materials or the payment of encouragement allowances to researchers.

# THINK TANK INITIATIVE



## TITLE

TTI Phase 2 Institutional Support: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies



## TIMELINE

2014 – 2019



## FUNDING

Multi-year Core Funding



## PARTNERS

Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)



## LOCATION

India

## Challenge

Plurality of voices and access to public debate is a structural feature of democracy. Policy actors in developing countries are becoming more open to using research evidence for policymaking and placing a higher value on research data and analysis. However, local funding for local research institutions remains limited in the regions where the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) operates.

The TTI is a multi-donor program dedicated to strengthening independent policy research institutions—also known as "think tanks"—in developing countries, enabling them to provide high-quality research that informs and influences policy. Following an initial phase (2008-2014), TTI Phase 2 (2014-2019) funded 43 institutions to help consolidate their role as credible development actors both within their countries and, in some cases, regionally and internationally.

## Solution

Institutions receiving the TTI grant were required to use it for research activities, capacity building, and infrastructural development. The CSDS has been an independent and critical voice in India's public sphere for decades, as well as a hub for high-quality social science research. It regularly receives project grants, which are typically tied to specific activities. The TTI grant was directed toward developing capacity, optimizing governance, and making interventions at the infrastructural level. It was a substantial grant, understood as core funding that covered approximately one third of CSDS's annual budget, received over eight years (CSDS was also part of the first phase of the program). The grant enabled CSDS to expand its capacity and activities across various research themes, foster more direct engagement with policymakers, implement a capacity-building program, and enhance its infrastructure.

## Impact and Results

Among the many research activities funded through the grant, two programs stand out: the Indian

Languages Program and the Capacity Building Program. In India, the majority of social science research is conducted in English, but there is significant demand for research published in other languages. To address this, CSDS began publishing *Pratiman*, the only refereed social science journal in India that publishes in Hindi. This grant enabled CSDS to establish a regular training program for young scholars in India, with 25-35 participants per year, called *Researching the Contemporary*. The grant was also used to establish a visiting fellowship program, offering 10-12 fellowships annually.

Finally, the grant had an impact on infrastructure; it funded improvements to the library which included structural interventions such as the installation of solar panels on the rooftop and the addition of barrier-free ramps to improve access. After the conclusion of TTI funding, most of the activities initiated under the grant continued, including the Indian Languages Program, the *Pratiman* journal, and the *Researching the Contemporary* training program.

## Future Prospects

The current government's attitude towards social sciences is less favorable than that of previous administrations, and funding is now prioritised to universities. Nonetheless, CSDS continues its activities; *Pratiman* has become a reference for several regional universities, and the training program receives large numbers of applications.

## Role of IDRC Funding

The IDRC funding was very easy to manage and user-friendly, with regular monitoring of activities and field visits from the program officer, which helped CSDS to administer the grant. There was a great deal of flexibility in directing the funds where they were most needed. The reporting system was also simpler compared to other funders, allowing CSDS to focus more on how to use the funds rather than on the administrative tasks.

# DIGITAL POLICY



## TITLE

Turning Evidence into Digital Policy in Myanmar



## TIMELINE

2018 – 2020



## FUNDING

CAD 262,601



## PARTNERS

LIRNEasia



## LOCATION

Myanmar,  
Sri Lanka,  
India

## Challenge

When Myanmar opened its economy in 2013, the key question was how its people could benefit from digital technology. How could knowledge and research contribute to this journey? There was a need to understand and improve the internet ecosystem and infrastructure while laying the foundation for digital inclusion. With limited internet access and no governance framework, early efforts focused on determining basic connectivity levels. This later expanded to digital inclusion, capacity building, and policy influence. After two projects and five years of engagement, challenges remained in disseminating insights, continuing capacity-building, and advancing inclusive digital governance across South Asia.

## Solution

This research project offers both quantitative and qualitative insights into the progress made and the challenges that remain in the ICT sector since market liberalization began in Myanmar. Additionally, this grant allowed LIRNEasia to contribute to the drafting of a new broadcasting policy in Sri Lanka. It trained civil society members, parliamentarians, and journalists in areas such as economics, telecommunications, regulation, e-government, and citizen engagement. A key focus with media and civil society was to identify those who could use data and research and apply evidence to influence policy. LIRNEasia and its partners also provided input into the drafting of key policies.

## Impact and Results

There were a number of research outputs. For example, a study on labor automation in India that documented how technology is changing work, a literature review on female labour participation and how women's employment opportunities are changing, and a reflection on Myanmar's ICT sector, covering the economic, social, and political aspects of Myanmar's rapid adoption of ICTs.

LIRNEasia was able to directly influence policy in Myanmar. One example is the country's Universal Service Fund (USF) strategy, where LIRNEasia's research led to the inclusion of broadband as a service that needs to be universally accessible and

the recognition of people with disabilities as a group requiring funding for digital inclusion through the USF. It also contributed to the discussion around the new telecoms law and efforts to overturn problematic laws related to slander and misinformation. The project provided input to Sri Lanka's Broadcasting Regulatory Commission Bill and National Digital Policy, outlining the vision and roadmap for achieving Sri Lanka's national digital transformation goals. These outcomes were based on quantifiable research processes.

A series of monographs has documented Myanmar's journey toward digital inclusion but many of the reforms catalyzed by this and other research were put on hold when the military regained control of the country. The push for evidence-based legislation and change, alongside significant capacity building, represents the core success of the initiative, which continues to this day.

## Future Prospects

LIRNEasia helped nurture the Myanmar ICT Development Organization (MIDO), now Myanmar's leading digital activist group. Collaborating closely, LIRNEasia conducted research and policy advocacy through MIDO while also strengthening its institutional capacity in financial planning, strategy, and fundraising. The military takeover forced many MIDO team members into exile, but LIRNEasia remains committed to working with them on digital rights issues in Myanmar.

## Role of IDRC Funding

Since 2006, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has been LIRNEasia's largest and most consistent funder. Initially, funding focused on access and marginalization in digital technology, later expanding to agriculture, the gig economy (from 2015), and more recently, artificial intelligence (AI).

IDRC played a key role in developing a regional research agenda and supporting LIRNEasia's work in Myanmar despite its informal structure. It also helped navigate financial complexities to ensure field staff were paid and projects completed. IDRC project officers bring valuable on-the-ground expertise, enhancing research and implementation efforts.

# RESILIENT MOUNTAIN COMMUNITIES



## TITLE

Building Resilient Mountain Communities: Earthquake Reconstruction in Dhungetar, Nepal



## TIMELINE

2016 – 2019



## FUNDING

CAD  
1,228,200



## PARTNERS

International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)



## LOCATION

Nepal

## Challenge

On April 25, 2015, a powerful 7.8 Richter magnitude earthquake hit central Nepal, causing over 8,700 deaths and more than 22,000 injuries. Hundreds of thousands of homes were flattened, some 15,000 government buildings and 288,797 residential buildings were destroyed, and some 8,000 schools and 1,000 health facilities were damaged. Over half of Nepal's districts were affected by this event.

## Solution

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) implemented this project to rebuild infrastructure, support vulnerable households, and enhance disaster management in Dhungetar, Nepal. In collaboration with local NGO Sahayata Samajik Sanstha (SSS), the project had three phases. The short-term phase addressed basic needs and began reconstruction. The medium-term phase completed recovery efforts, while the final phase strengthened community resilience and piloted risk management strategies. The project provided insights for policy, advocacy, and eco-friendly, earthquake-resistant housing in mountainous regions.

## Impact and Results

By utilizing innovative tools and technologies and employing a participatory approach, the project built a disaster resilient infrastructure. ICIMOD forged a strategic partnership with the Nepal Reconstruction Authority (NRA) to integrate green solutions, such as the adoption of interlocking compressed stabilized soil blocks (CSSBs) technology for housing and public infrastructure. The use of CSSBs was cost-effective and utilised local labour and material, harnessing indigenous knowledge and practices to ensure sustained development. The technology was used to rebuild an entire village comprising about 100 houses, resulting in 35% less carbon emissions than conventional burnt bricks.

ICIMOD blended the reconstruction activities with a strategy for livelihood recovery. The project created employment-intensive reconstruction work, developed the skills of the villagers, promoted enterprise development and micro-finance, increased agricultural productivity and facilitated access to markets. At least 8 community skill training programs were conducted in CSSB blocks production, social mobilization, kitchen

gardening, liquid soap making, laundry soap making, incense stick making, crystal jewellery making, poultry farming, and animal husbandry. The project set up an agricultural model, and improved 2 blacksmith work sheds and 2 watermills. Different community groups, such as Reconstruction and Development Community, Mothers' Group of Dhungetar, and Children's Group of Dhungetar, were formed to entrust greater decision-making responsibility to the community. The Community Based Reconstruction Committee was formed for participatory decision making on implementing the project activities.

## Future Prospects

The MoU between ICIMOD and NRA gave national recognition and united public and private stakeholders. ICIMOD partnered with SSS and private entities, bringing in resources and development initiatives like cooperatives, social enterprises, smart agriculture, and vocational training. The project's comprehensive approach supported various aspects of Dhungetar's development, aligning with multiple SDGs in Nepal, including no poverty, gender equality, clean water, clean energy, economic growth, sustainable communities, climate action, and partnerships (SDGs 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 17).

## Role of IDRC Funding

IDRC funding was flexible and supportive, allowing ICIMOD to adapt during project challenges. Additionally, IDRC's approach promoted a collaborative, problem-solving environment, enabling a responsive and impactful project.

*"One aspect that differs IDRC funding from others is the focus on research for development. I also appreciate the practical and flexible approach that IDRC undertakes that allows projects to include/reflect changing context so that the knowledge generated is more relevant over time. Most of all, the space and respect for leadership from Southern Researchers/Expert and a strong focus on capacity strengthening of the project team is praiseworthy. No other donor compares on leadership (particularly women team members) and capacity strengthening (of early and mid-career professionals) efforts that IDRC does."*

### Dr. Amina Maharjan

Senior Livelihood and Migration Specialist,  
International Centre for Integrated Mountain  
Development, Nepal

# INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES



## TITLE

Inclusive Information Societies:  
Creating Growth and  
Employment Opportunities in  
Asia



## TIMELINE

2015 – 2018



## FUNDING

CAD 725,000



## PARTNERS

LIRNEAsia



## LOCATION

Sri Lanka,  
India, and  
Myanmar

## Challenge

Economic growth requires the integration of knowledge into production processes and connection to global supply chains. Without such insight action, farmers in Sri Lanka struggle to meet the quality standards set by international buyers. However, a significant portion of this information is often inaccessible to farmers and not in computer-readable formats. Alongside this there are gaps in our understanding of the impact of digitalization on the future of work, particularly in developing countries where evidence is limited.

## Solution

This project examined how information and technology connect service-sector employees and farmers to supply chains. It had two components:

**Service Sector Outsourcing** – Focused on micro-work and rural impact sourcing in India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, continuing previous IDRC-funded agricultural work to improve smallholder farmers' access to knowledge and value capture.

**Agricultural Impact Study** – Investigated how information and incentives affect produce quality and farmer income in Sri Lanka. It also explored the rise of gig economy jobs—such as coding, graphic design, and web development—over traditional employment.

## Impact and Results

The project first focused on making Ministry of Agriculture knowledge more accessible. It developed CropAdvisor, a mobile app in consultation with the Department of Agriculture (DOA), providing information on Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and allowing farmers to upload crop photos for feedback from the DOA and LIRNEAsia. The second objective was to research online freelance and micro-work in developing countries. Findings estimate 17,000-22,000 Sri Lankan freelancers earn USD 130-195 part-time, while Indian

freelancers earn USD 15-230 and Myanmar freelancers USD 14-2,185 per month. Through international engagement and expert panels, the project reframed online micro-work as a legitimate source of income. It also highlighted its role in empowering marginalized groups, such as Myanmar's transgender community working as translators and mothers balancing work with caregiving.

## Future Prospects

The CropAdvisor pilot showed that most farmers initially skeptical of the app later found it useful. However, challenges in scaling—such as outdated government data, limited visuals, and a lack of farmer-to-farmer communication—led to declining usage. LIRNEAsia continues to work with the government to address these issues. A finalist for the mBillionth Awards 2016, CropAdvisor faces long-term challenges due to resource constraints. For example, farmers may know which chemicals they need but struggle to afford them, limiting the app's impact. Meanwhile, the project's research on micro-work and online freelancing complements similar studies in Africa and Latin America, offering a large-scale, credible perspective on the gig economy in developing countries.

## Role of IDRC Funding

LIRNEAsia, an independent think tank, has operated continuously since its founding in 2004. The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has been its largest and most consistent funder since 2006, adapting its support to the region's evolving digital landscape. Initially, IDRC focused on quantifying digital access and marginalization, later expanding to digital technology in sectors like agriculture. From 2015, the focus shifted to the gig economy and, more recently, to artificial intelligence (AI). IDRC's flexible approach has fostered a collaborative, problem-solving environment, shaping a regional research agenda. Additionally, funding from the TTI initiative has fundamentally transformed LIRNEAsia and reshaped its goals.

# GOVERNANCE, SECURITY AND JUSTICE



## TITLE

IDRC Fellowships in Governance, Security and Justice in South Asia



## TIMELINE

2012 – 2017



## FUNDING

CAD 500,000



## PARTNERS

Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI)



## LOCATION

Pakistan

## Challenge

South Asia has experienced an increase in non-traditional security threats related to governance, conflict, economic security, environmental security, access to food and livelihoods, terrorism, human and drug trafficking, piracy, illegal immigration and information security. These threats are often cross-border or regional issues that require collective solutions. but the application of multidisciplinary lenses is a challenge in South Asia, where university programmes remain focused on traditional disciplines rather than on innovative approaches that are market-driven, policy-relevant and socially desirable.

## Solution

The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) based in Pakistan implemented this project, which focused on building capacity of young researchers who can produce quality research on regional issues particularly governance, security and justice. The project provided fully-funded scholarships to 15 candidates for postgraduate studies at both Master's (9 candidates) and Doctoral (6 candidates) level, from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

## Impact and Results

The project has built capacity in South Asia at the Master's and PhD levels to produce highly skilled professionals and researchers on non-traditional security issues in the region. Four fellows obtained PhDs, seven obtained MPhils and three obtained Masters.

The project's workshop training has enhanced students' skills in research design, academic writing and research dissemination through. The SDPI centre for capacity building hosted short term intensive training course in research and academic writing, data survey and analysis, research dissemination through advocacy and outreach.

The project provided forums for students to network with peers, key professionals and

institutions in the region and to receive support in publishing research findings. Fellows presented their findings at South Asia-wide conferences including South Asia Economic Summit and Annual Sustainable Development Conference in Islamabad and in similar forums in their own countries.

## Future Prospects

As a result of the skills acquired and the fellowship programme, the 14 graduates were able to secure relevant job placements/admissions to higher degrees where it is hoped they will continue to develop research in the specialist areas covered by the project.

Research under this programme has been conducted in a multidisciplinary environment and the project has enabled structured engagement with policy makers through the representation of fellows at conferences. The increased research and policy engagement by graduates could lead to more innovative thinking on issues that constrain regional cooperation in South Asia.

## Role of IDRC Funding

IDRC funding was flexible and supportive, providing the necessary impetus to mainstream activities to enable a responsive and impactful project.

*"This project was one of SDPI's flagship capacity-building projects. It is important to note that the project cannot be seen as just a project; it has been a long-term programme for us. The programme was instrumental in raising the SDPI's profile in the capacity-building area. Previously, SDPI had a niche in research and advocacy. This programme further enhanced the SDPI's reputation as an institution with the capacity to undertake capacity-building initiatives."*

### Dr. Irfan Chatha

Head of the Centre for Learning and Development (CLD) at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Pakistan

# GENDER AND VIOLENCE



## TITLE

Gender and Violence in Urban Pakistan



## TIMELINE

2013 – 2016



## FUNDING

CAD 545,886 as part of SAIC research grants)



## PARTNERS

Institute of Business Administration, Karachi



## LOCATION

Pakistan

## Challenge

The link between marginalized urban lives and violence is well established and has been the focus of several studies both globally and in Pakistan. Young adult men are the most visible and well-studied agents and victims of violence in urban areas. Conversely, young adult women are often invisible and under-studied. The challenge lies in investigating the gender role drivers that contribute to violence among marginalized urban youth, while also considering the infrastructural dimensions of these socially constructed identities. A related challenge is building the capacity of researchers to establish evidence on this complex and nuanced area while challenging stereotypical representations.

## Solution

The research project explored how different gender expectations drive various forms of violence. It focussed on four urban working-class neighborhoods of Karachi and Rawalpindi/Islamabad. In partnership with local communities a group of young researchers collected data on how frustrated gendered expectations may contribute to violence and how addressing these can be achieved by improving access to public services and opportunities, alongside influencing public education and media. This community collaboration was key to capacity building and the two Principal Investigators established a mentoring program that included individual and group training sessions, along with meetings during field observation periods.

## Impact and Results

The project's findings are based on a multi-matrix methodology, which included approximately 2,400 questionnaire surveys, nearly 60 ethnographic-style interviews, participant observations, participatory photographic surveys, media monitoring, a secondary literature review, and key informant interviews. The findings overwhelmingly point to access to services and household vulnerability profiles as major drivers of violence, particularly as they intersect with discourses surrounding masculinities, femininities, and sexualities. These findings were published in academic journals, policy

briefs, and in the media, with visual data shared through photographic exhibitions.

The most significant impact of the project was from the mentoring and capacity building of young researchers who were from diverse ethnic backgrounds and universities across Pakistan. Often from underprivileged communities, these researchers were given well-funded opportunities to develop their skills, and three of them went on to pursue PhDs.

Disappointingly there was little translation of data into policy change. The project engaged with local policymakers, and some showed interest in the themes and participated in activities, but there was no direct policy changes resulting from the project. There was extensive engagement with the media, creating spaces to foster a deeper understanding of urban violence.

## Future Prospects

Publications originating from the project continue to attract attention, with several studies being cited. During the project, a positive relationship was established with IDRC and the the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) in Karachi, which led to further collaboration. IBA participated in a subsequent call on cities and governance, resulting in a second IDRC-funded project titled "Governance, Land, and the Gendered Politics of Displacement in Pakistan" which exclusively involved local partners.

## Role of IDRC Funding

One of the merits of the IDRC is its straightforward application process and clear expectations and management demands. Internal reports on the progress of activities are not seen as a burden but as an opportunity to reflect on the actual work and the substantive dynamics explored by the project. IDRC has been highly supportive of the project's ideas, with funding being provided promptly and without complications. The presence of a dedicated South Asia office has also been invaluable, as the officers there have a deep understanding of the local context. IDRC funding recognizes the importance of mentoring and capacity building, which are embedded throughout the research program.

# PREVENTING CHILD MARRIAGE



## TITLE

Preventing Early Marriage in Urban Poor Settlements in Bangladesh



## TIMELINE

2015 – 2020



## FUNDING

CAD 500,000



## PARTNERS

BRAC University, Dhaka



## LOCATION

Bangladesh

## Challenge

Child marriage among girls is most prevalent in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, with Bangladesh having the highest rate of marriages involving girls under the age of 15. In Bangladesh, 64% of girls are married before the age of 18, with the median age for a first marriage being 16.4 years. Uneducated adolescent girls are at a higher risk of marrying five years earlier than those with secondary or higher education. Additionally, 81% of girls from households with the lowest income marry before age 18, compared to 56% from households with the highest income. This issue is even more pronounced in urban slums, areas marked by widespread violence, extreme poverty, and a lack of basic services. These conditions suggest a strong link between development, governance, accountability failures, and the persistence of early child marriage.

## Solution

This project conducted one of the few research studies on urban slum settlements, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to understand the causes and consequences of early marriage and to explore the social construction of gender. This included 145 qualitative interviews, and surveys with 1129 married and 1006 unmarried adolescent girls in two of the largest slum settlements in the country - Dhaka and Chittagong. Urban slums in Bangladesh receive minimal governmental attention, and the project aimed to build trusting relationships with local communities and recognize the insecurity and structural violence they face. The project highlighted that early marriage in urban slums does not occur in isolation and cannot be solved through a single action but by addressing structural drivers. The research engaged a range of local stakeholders, followed by outreach to the government, journalists, and lawyers to further raise awareness of this phenomenon.

## Impact and Results

The project produced academic publications, alongside publications for the general public, including an illustrated book featuring the stories of girls from the slums. The book launch was attended by local policymakers. The overall goal of the project was to

humanize people living in slums by amplifying their voices, struggles, and strategies, while avoiding the reproduction of biases and negative judgments. The project included media engagement, community involvement with local stakeholders, and collaboration with policymakers. IDRC was very supportive of these participatory efforts, allowing the project methodology, timelines, and the selection of research participants to adapt to the evolving conditions on the ground. Local stakeholders and the community were actively involved, asking questions that enriched the project. They validated findings, and utilized the evidence to improve programs and plans.

## Future Prospects

BRAC University successfully applied for IDRC funding for two additional projects which focused on innovative digital health solutions addressing the COVID-19 crisis among refugees and vulnerable populations, including Rohingya refugees. However, the government never granted the necessary permits to start the projects, and after two years, the funding was withdrawn. The ability of younger colleagues at the institution to participate in competitive international funding calls highlights the effectiveness of the research capacity building that IDRC has supported.

## Role of IDRC Funding

BRAC University received funding from several international donors but there was limited national funding. Among these, IDRC stands out for its exceptional support of social science research, even during high-risk periods. It prioritizes local-level research, design, and methods, empowering research leadership in the Global South. IDRC fosters equal partnerships, including partners in the budget, research design, and publication outputs. Additionally, IDRC funding has a significant capacity-building impact on the institutions it supports, by notifying them of new calls for proposals, maintaining regular communication, and demonstrating genuine commitment to creating sustainable partnerships and networks. IDRC does not act as a benevolent charity but instead offers support, leaving decision-making to its partners and allowing time to build trusting relationships.

# 5 Advancing Research for Impact in South Asia: Next Steps

There is clear evidence that IDRC's grant-making work in South Asia has been transformative, particularly at the level of individual researchers and research institutions. IDRC funding has allowed its grantees to address critical societal challenges, foster innovative solutions to well-known development challenges, and shape the knowledge base on policy areas linked to the region's top development priorities. Many grantees describe IDRC's support in very positive terms, and, in reverse, a hypothetical scenario of reduced funding as structurally debilitating.

*"[If IDRC funding in the South Asia region were to decrease significantly...] regional and institutional asymmetries, among others, in the production and circulation of knowledge are likely to deepen and there will be less space and opportunities to develop local research agendas linked to collective benefit."*

**Laura Rovelli**

CLACSO, Co-lead with India's Centre for Policy Research, of an IDRC-funded study on 'Research quality and allocation of research funds in the Global South'

IDRC grantees stress the value of its flexible, adaptive approach to funding, often noting it sets IDRC apart from other funders (90% of respondents mentioned working with at least 3 other donors), particularly in a period marked by the unprecedented ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic on researchers' focus, mobility and timelines. The attention to capacity building in IDRC's development research funding emerges as a clear asset from interviews, along with open communication with its staff.

*"[More funding like IDRC 's] would enable investment in critical areas such as sustainable development, climate change mitigation, and technological innovation, fostering collaboration and empowering local institutions."*

**Zakiullah Munshi**

TFO Canada

*"One aspect that differs IDRC funding from others is the focus on research for development. I also appreciate the practical and flexible approach that IDRC undertakes that allows projects to include/reflect changing context so that the knowledge generated is more relevant over time. Most of all, the space and respect for leadership from Southern Researchers/Experts and a strong focus on capacity strengthening of the project team is praiseworthy."*

**Dr. Amina Maharjan**

ICIMOD, Nepal

Central to IDRC's track record is a consistent emphasis on fostering local leadership. Grantees stress the freedom IDRC's funding gives researchers to set research priorities within its board themes. By empowering researchers to pursue their own agendas, IDRC has cultivated expertise and leadership that extends beyond individual projects, and that facilitates regional collaboration and integration across Asian countries.

*"IDRC was very forward-thinking when it came to Myanmar—it agreed with us that the evidence for inclusive digital policymaking required evidence and that the evidence base was missing in Myanmar. For example, one of the earliest activities it funded us to do was Myanmar's first nationally representative survey of ICT use. This was the first evidence from the ground level."*

**Helani Galpaya**  
LIRNEasia, Sri Lanka

*"IDRC's funding is comparatively more generous than that of national donor agencies. While IDRC primarily invests in research and action research, national donor agencies tend to focus on implementation projects, often without adequate background research. Moreover, many national donor agencies impose strict limitations on HR and overhead budgets, creating challenges for organizations to fairly compensate project teams and operate effectively."*

**N.D.K. Dayawansa**  
Department of Agricultural Engineering,  
University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Notably, some of IDRC's funded work has been catalytic. Its core support to think tanks and other development research organisations has been critical to the development of a regional research infrastructure. IDRC's support (along with few other international donors) of the establishment of SANDEE is exemplary, enabling it to launch a grant-making program unique in the region for its focus on policy-relevant research. Few other funding windows focus on incentives and capacities for young and mid-career researchers interested in hinging their work on local policy challenges. The end of its core funding window, including the end of the multi-donor Think Tank Initiative, inevitably destabilised some of its key grantees.

*"While the IDRC modality of having programme officers is very useful, and so is their flexibility, the constraint on just 13% overhead costs is restrictive."*

**Dr, Deepta Chopra**  
Institute of Development Studies, UK.

The need for flexible, neutral and long-term funding remains critical to sustain well-informed development policy debates and foster innovation. IDRC's track record, through the perspective of IDRC's South Asian grantees, underscores the need for diversifying research funding to keep research agendas independent, and the unique contribution that international funding can make towards better policies and better lives.

*"One of the best funders. Respects the identity of the institution, has no agenda it tries to push and has knowledgeable teams."*

**Pratap Bhanu Mehta**  
President and Chief Executive at the Centre  
for Policy Research in New Delhi, India.



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