

EDITORIAL

Why a proactive research culture is necessary for advancing social sciences in Sri Lanka?

This editorial points to the need for developing a positive research culture for advancing social science research in Sri Lanka. This is not to say that a positive attitude towards research is absent among social scientists and the scientific community in general in Sri Lanka. On the contrary, there is an emerging recognition that social science inputs are necessary for tackling the various challenging problems facing the country today. However, what is lacking is a firm faith in building a local social science knowledge base for exploring various approaches for understanding critical issues facing the country, constant debates about relevant issues and a critical engagement with the social, economic, and political environment in which we find ourselves. This is what I call a “proactive research culture” where we constantly turn to new research for generating new knowledge and finding answers to serious problems affecting the current and future generations.

First let me backtrack for a moment and try to articulate what is meant by research culture.

What is a Research Culture?

According to one definition (University of Aberdeen, 2023), “Research culture encompasses the behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes and norms of our research communities”. It influences researchers’ career paths and determines the way that research is conducted, communicated and used for social development. A research culture is a culture that looks towards new knowledge and new research for addressing problems identified by the research community, industry, social activists, the policy makers, and the public at large. Also, it incorporates a tradition of interrogating existing knowledge and exploring alternative ways of understanding issues from different perspectives. I see this as a key feature of liberal arts education and the social science mindset that should guide knowledge production and application of the knowledge so produced for addressing human problems.

Knowledge Production in the Global Periphery

Knowledge production in the contemporary world is by and large determined by inequalities in knowledge production originating from the colonial era. For instance, an article on research culture in the Caribbean universities stated the following:

“We contend that research culture in the Caribbean comes up against the strictures of post-colonial dependence, university education in the region being *largely a one-way traffic of ideas from metropolitan centers to island peripheries*.” (Lewis & Simmons, 2010: p. 337, emphasis added).

The structural inequality in scientific knowledge production in the contemporary world and the resulting dependency syndrome in knowledge production are increasingly recognized as key challenges all sciences are facing. This should, however, not be seen as a deterrent for developing a research culture in countries in the global south. On the contrary, a proactive research culture is one way in which researchers in the global south can collectively seek to redirect and reorient as an analytical framework grounded in the Global South. The postcolonial turn in social analysis is just one such effort to critically engage with social analysis from the viewpoint of Global South. Subaltern perspective emanating from India is a specific application of postcolonial theory with its own research culture tied up with Indian social reality. Its specific aim is to liberate social analysis from coloniality grounded in metropolitan interests.



A Brief Overview of the Evolution of Social Sciences in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is one of the earliest Asian countries to introduce social sciences after India and the Philippines (Pieris, 1976). Many social science departments in the Ceylon University College established in 1921 and the University of Ceylon established in 1942 were founded by guest professors coming from Britain, US and India. Ivor Jennings, the first professor of political science, Bryce Ryan, the first professor of Sociology and B. B. Dasgupta, the first professor of economics for instance came from, England, United States and India, respectively. Indigenization of social sciences progressed gradually with Sri Lankan social scientists progressively taking over from expatriates, and social science education that started in the English medium for a limited number of students from urban English-speaking backgrounds being opened up to Sinhala and Tamil media in order to expand social science education in the country. As of 2022, the entire university system consisting of 17 universities were involved in social science education for internal as well as external students in some universities. If we take enrollment in Sociology as an indicator, it recorded a 114 percent increase from 2396 in 1987/88 to 5121 in 2021 (Silva & Perera, 2022).

Apart from the university system, several research institutions are engaged in social science research in Sri Lanka. The relevant government agencies include the Agrarian Research and Training Institute, the Institute of Policy Studies, and the research arm of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka. In addition, Marga Institute, the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, the Centre for Poverty Analysis and Verité Research are among the leading non-government research agencies that have established a track record in social science research on high priority national issues.

This indicates that not only there are many higher education institutions engaged in social science teaching, but there is also a diversity of organizations engaged in social science research on a regular basis.

Gaps in Research Culture in Social Science Practice in Sri Lanka

A proactive social science research culture encompassing these different institutions is yet to be evolved. This is reflected in a number of deficiencies in knowledge production in relation to social issues affecting the country.

First, there is no open discussion about pressing social issues affecting the country from a diversity of viewpoints. For instance, the current economic crisis affecting the country is approached by different analysts using a strictly neoliberal angle, a political economy perspective and dependency theory. However, there is no debate among them or an adequate questioning of these perspectives to provide a balanced analysis that can guide policy makers.

Second, the research process is by and large handled by established individual researchers rather than groups of researchers with a common understanding of the issues at hand, also ensuring continuity of research when the lead researcher retires or takes on some other responsibilities. One empirical indicator of this is that many of the publications are single authored unlike in natural sciences where the pattern is different and many of the publications are authored by many contributors. There are, however, some signs that this pattern is changing. For instance, in the current issue of *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences*, the number of multi-authored articles is 6 as compared to 2 single authored articles.

Third, cross cutting research networks actively engaged on vital issues like gender, environment, social inequality, urbanization, demographic trends, migration and identity politics are largely non-existent or non-active for the most part.

Fourth, there is inadequate interaction between research and policy development in Sri Lanka. In an ideal setting, research should inform policy formulation and policy dialogue should generate new ideas for research. On the contrary, policy formulation and social science research have tended to ignore each other in ways that is harmful to each other and created a hiatus between the process of economic and social development and knowledge production in the country.

Fifth, as a long-established social science journal, *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences* experience many difficulties in identifying reviewers, getting manuscript reviews on time and a shortage of quality submissions from within Sri Lanka on a regular basis. This is despite the substantial expansion of social science higher education in the country as reported earlier in this editorial. While the real problems the academic community is encountering in the light of the current economic crisis may be partly responsible for this situation, this also indicates the fact that the absence of a satisfactory research culture where society as a whole is eagerly waiting for new knowledge and the application of limited social science knowledge available is largely absent in Sri Lanka at present. More importantly neither the researchers nor the policy makers consider it necessary to consult each other and develop a feedback mechanism whereby research can contribute to practice and vice-versa. This is an ultimate indicator of an absence of a proactive research culture in Social Sciences in Sri Lanka.

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