



How good is consultancy dominated research?

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THE burden of thinking or policy-making has now been shifted to the global 'green room'. Implementation has been vested in the 'artificial intelligence' produced by a rootless educational system which only appreciates the virtues of market opportunities. In the process our brilliant younger minds only care for quick fixes and self-interests. They are at the receiving end of policies prepared at the global end. They hardly question those policies. Instead, they only go for implementation as per design. As a result the ownership of those policies has always been missing at least in the local/national society and polity. Many, therefore, call this process externally driven with very little local content.

Given the above ominous development, the biggest concern is how to bring the brain back to the body? There is no easy answer to this difficult question. Yet, we may try at least. My own hunch is that the answer lies in quality education anchored in the socio-political-cultural context of Bangladesh and yet linked with the domain of modern knowledge. Unless we generate enough indigenous knowledge capital which is also globally competitive, it may be very difficult for us to face this

onslaught of global policy intervention. This local knowledge generation has also to be further refined at a higher level called research. Research is one area which has been thoroughly neglected in Bangladesh. The universities in Bangladesh are producing too many artificially intelligent young persons who are not interested in questioning the world around them. They do not abstract theoretical ideas from the reality and apply the theory in explaining the reality. In most advanced countries, the universities are the places where research instincts are installed into the young minds. Of course, the research budget of those universities is also huge. The research institutes/thinktanks, both public and private recruit these budding researchers and help them grow with critical vision. These are the indigenous knowledge bearers who finally shape the creative options of a nation. But unfortunately, we have always neglected this process of building our research capacity and left the entire domain to the external resource providers. This is true for both social and natural sciences. The universities now hardly can produce young researchers with critical faculty. The research institutes, both public and private, have therefore been not getting the supply of brilliant minds. Also most of our best minds have left

the country and never attempted to come back to their homeland. So there is certainly a serious supply constraint here. Since there is also lack of long term funding support to these institutes, there is hardly any commitment for critical research in these places.

The consultancies are now the prime 'knowledge' products. Both teachers and fulltime researchers are now a days running after consultancies. The consultancy market has also expanded significantly. This has become a big business and many global players are also in the field. Earlier, we used to see foundations (e.g. Ford Foundation) mostly investing in academic research. These days they are hardly seen in developing countries like ours. Instead, research activities are tailor-made and attached to some development projects where international participation is also strategically designed.

These activities include project design, baseline survey, mid-term assessment, project completion report, ex-post impact assessment etc. These are mundane research activities without raising fundamental questions regarding why the reality is so. How to change this reality?

A desired departure from the conventional this mode of knowledge creation has to be located in the process itself. If

we want a participatory policy-making where transparency and accountability are at the process with diversified responses indigenous perspectives, we will then have to rely on independent centres of research and 'thinktanks'. These will not however, grow automatically. There is need for public encouragement for the growth of such centres of research and analysis.

I will confine my discussion here only to the field of social sciences. That does not mean I am understating the importance of such centres in the field of natural sciences. Indeed the latter centres must also get adequate support if we want to cope with the current technological challenges emanating from global flow of knowledge. For example, countries like Bangladesh are already in a vulnerable position due to massive flow of highbred seeds for producing genetically modified food. These seeds are being pushed into our soil without any backyard experimentation or acclimatisation. The environmental impact of this could indeed be devastating. But apparently there is hardly any research interest among our policy-makers in this aspect of globalisation of such seeds. The market interests are indeed overwhelming in this arena. The scientists have not been adequately trained, and provided

with needed funding and laboratory support for such research. The end result could be environmentally disastrous for these countries. We may end up with a long term irreversible destruction of our own soil just for short term gains. Such a disaster is already taking place in Southern Bangladesh where there has been unbridled shrimp cultivation in saline water using chemical inputs in high doses. There are already signs of saline desertification in those areas. We do not want to repeat similar outcomes in our agricultural fields as well. That does not mean we will shy away from modern agriculture. Of course, we will go for it, but only after enough scientific research and taking safeguards. Then where is the support for such research?

Let's now come back to the issues of improving our capacity in social science research.

As indicated earlier, most of the social research centres, including BIDS, the premier public research institute, do not have access to secure flow of resources from a well-designed foundation. Nor have they had the opportunity of benefiting from huge one-time core funding. BIDS, of course, once got a sizable core fund from the government, but it has been almost depleted in real terms over the years. Moreover, the amount given to BIDS has been generat-

ing a small income which could meet only a part of its running cost. So it has been meeting its remaining running expenditure either from the revenue budget of the government and/or from the surplus generated from the consultancy undertaken by BIDS researchers. In either case, there has been no stability in the flow of resource for BIDS. As a result, a premier national institute like BIDS had to depend perpetually on donor funded consultancy oriented research activities with perspectives and priorities of the funding agencies gathering the better of our own. In the process, even a national institute like BIDS could not claim fully the ownership of the policy process. The researchers at BIDS could not always be differentiated from other private researchers or consultants. The story is the same for other non-government 'thinktanks' as well. They too are heavily depended on consultancy-based researches with short-term priorities of the donor agencies and more or less tied to their specific development projects. As already indicated the above 'research' activities fall within the gamut of project formulation, cost-benefit analysis, feasibility studies, project related benchmark survey and mid-term or end of the project ex-post evaluation. These are conducted under strict dead-

lines imposed by the requirements of the projects.

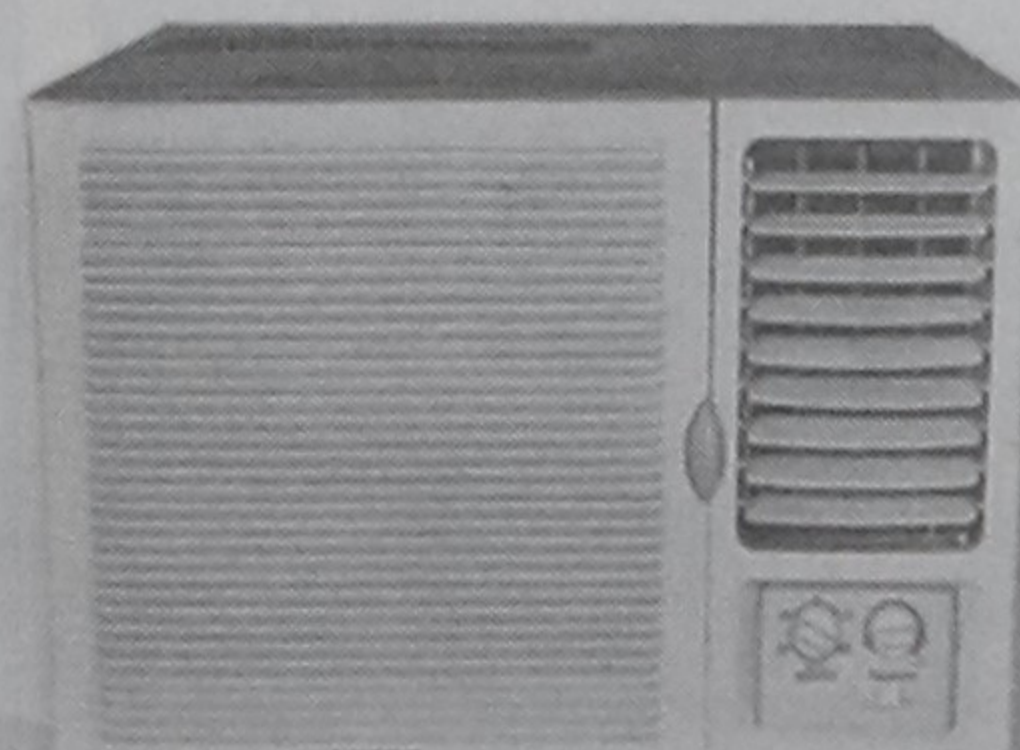
As a result, very few of these research activities can involve serious investigation and hence can hardly be published in referred journals. The process of peer reviewing is also not possible due to its rigid time frame. Some researchers, of course, still go back and work more to make the outputs publishable. But in most cases those project reports remain invisible in the shelves of the researchers without contributing much to the creative knowledge domain. Neither the donors nor the government agencies that commissioned these researches have the expertise or time to make a serious review of these studies. Most of our brilliant researchers have been caught up in this cobweb of contracted research activities with very little time and energy left for themselves to take a pause and introspect. Certainly, the quality of their research is compromised and ultimately the nation is deprived of their creative brilliance. The university teachers, without any research funding from within, are also being caught up in this cobweb of consultancies. Ultimately, not only are the students deprived of the deeper knowledge of some of their brilliant teachers, but the indigenous policy-

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