The Research-for-Development (R4D) Landscape in Asia

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Executive Summary

The Asia Regional Office (ARO) of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) commissioned the Global Development Network (GDN) to undertake a study on the current research-for-development (R4D) landscape, for its region of competence, comprising 21 countries and territories. These include: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Kyrgyzstan, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. The purpose of the study is to analyze the landscape for R4D in Asia, with reference to the 2018-2023 period. The main objective is to identify changes in the context, as well as institutional gaps and opportunities for R4D in the region. To achieve this, the study asked the following three leading questions:

1. **What is the current institutional landscape for R4D in IDRC regions?**
2. **What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of actors or contributors towards R4D relevant for Strategy 2030 (i.e., universities; think tanks; government; major NGOs that conduct R4D)?**
3. **What salient recent trends or shifts have occurred in the composition and the role of actors in the R4D landscape over the last five years?**

Data were collected through a desk-based review and key informant interviews (KIIs). The desk-based review focused on gray and academic literature. Among secondary sources, the note draws heavily on the ongoing work of the Global Development Network (GDN)'s Doing Research global initiative and the Doing Research Assessment, which has been implemented (to different degrees) in countries such as: Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia and Myanmar. KIIs were conducted online with six senior experts from across the region, from a mix of organizations (universities, research institutes, think tanks and multilateral development organizations) active at the regional level in the R4D space.

Findings

The findings are presented in the following three parts in relation to the three questions above: Country typology, in terms of the intensity of the trends identified; Actor typology, in terms of their influence on the R4D landscape; and Key trends for the Asia R4D landscape (2018-2023).

Asia's R4D Landscape: Country Typologies

The R4D landscape can be understood as articulating three country groups: developed countries, emerging economies, and 'developing' or low-income countries in the region. This classification is based on converging economic performance, R&D investment, Human Development Index, number of researchers per million inhabitants and publication output as an imperfect proxy for research capacity. The proposed groupings are not strict categorizations and are intended to stimulate discussion as IDRC strategizes its programming in the region. The key insights from the grouping exercise are that definitions and traditions of R4D can vary

widely across countries, particularly between a focus on STI and a broader and more traditional focus on governance and socio-economic development issues, and that the visibility of international actors in the R4D landscape is greater where the institutionalization of the research sector is less developed.

In the **first group**, we place **Asia's developed countries**, which tend to have high research capacity, regional influence and, despite some blind spots, active participation in the global research space. These include China, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. With stronger institutional capacity and an abundance of resources, universities, research think tanks and government research institutions in these countries all play an important role, whether in building capacity or generating evidence. The quality of university-based research in these countries has moved from regional to global competition and is trusted and legitimized by governments. Regional research think tanks with a focus on research have had a significant impact not only on domestic issues, but also on foreign policy and international affairs. R4D actors have access to domestic funding for research development, governance and regional issues, including in relation to the rest of the region, especially mainland Southeast Asia. Governments tend to set up their own research institutions (within the ministry or department) to conduct research, and often fund R4D and the strengthening of research capacity for R4D in the neighboring region. In these countries, we see a significant depth of institutionalization of research and research policy, with multiple research councils and research funds, although the level of institutionalization and policy development varies between STEM/STI and social sciences. These countries advocate an approach to R4D that focuses on innovative technologies and their links to sustainable development and economic growth.

In a **second group**, we place several countries that are considered **emerging economies**. These include Thailand, Vietnam, The Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and, to some extent India, where higher levels of political and/or bureaucratic control over research (compared to countries in the first group) link the R4D landscape to national political cycles. Although often not globally competitive, the research sectors in these countries are regionally credible, and researchers and research institutions engaged in R4D have access to relevant networks and are aware of their capacities. These countries (Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia) are also home to the most influential regional think tanks. This group of countries is increasingly interested in research on technologies and innovation for development, although much of R4D still focuses on socio-economic development, natural resource management and political governance.

Governments in these countries have allocated budgets to sectoral ministries and, through various schemes, to policy-relevant research (research governance and funding is fairly institutionalized). Universities and government research agencies face a growing demand for evidence and a growing scope for influence, as illustrated by the case of Indonesia, where scientific evidence on proposed legislation and its potential impacts has become a requirement

in the standard legislative process. However, funding can be politicized, and spaces for critical inquiry can more easily shrink, especially for R4D which focuses on domestic issues. Ruling parties can be very selective in consulting with civil society, favoring global consultancies and politically aligned think tanks as partners in the production of evidence. Self-censorship and alignment with ruling party priorities among local R4D actors is common, especially when accessing domestic/public research funding. Importantly, research councils do not play a role in setting research policy or coordinating the sector, but can be effective in managing public funds for research.

A **third group** includes smaller countries, often referred to as **'developing' or low-income countries** in the region. These low-income countries, particularly Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Nepal and Bhutan, among others, face many challenges in R4D due to limited capacity and resources, which are highly concentrated in a few institutions at the national level. R4D in these countries is framed as research on economic and social development, agriculture, natural resource management and political governance, with technology and innovation remaining marginal. Many of these countries do not have, or have only recently established, national doctoral schools or national research councils and funding, and research capacity for R4D is largely dependent on international funding and a 'reverse brain drain': researchers returning to their country of nationality after advanced research training in Japan, India, Australia, France, the UK and North America, or international researchers choosing the country as their place of residence. In the GDN's experience, this limited research capacity is also often 'misallocated' in the system: many highly qualified researchers take up top administrative and management positions, heavy teaching loads, consultancy or employment in local offices of international agencies, either for better pay or because of a lack of research positions in local institutions. All this, however, keeps them away from a career in R4D, which is an important human resources issue.

In these low-income countries, while universities and government research institutions are becoming less important, NGOs and bilateral government research agencies are important in informing and shaping policy, but their involvement in the policy-making process is gradually declining. Think-tank structures are replacing NGOs in these countries (albeit at a slower pace than in developed countries in the region). In a country like Lao PDR (an authoritarian type in mainland Southeast Asia), government research institutions are the key actors in influencing policy making. In this context, where political control of research remains tight, international bilateral agencies gain a significant role and their contribution to local agenda setting or research system strengthening remains controversial.

Asia's R4D Landscape: Actor Typologies

The analysis identified six different types of actors: universities, independent think tanks, government research institutes and think tanks, NGOs, national research councils and international development agencies. These actors are positioned along a spectrum of functions

in the research system, ranging from research production to diffusion and (support for) evidence uptake. Each actor has a different level of importance in terms of its role in providing research for development or research to inform policy and decision-making. Different actors also play different roles and have different levels of influence, particularly at the national/regional level.

Universities, particularly in the developed and emerging economies of Asia, are an important site of R4D production, but they do not have the ear of policy-makers and remain on the margins of national and regional development debates, despite being uniquely positioned to work on long-term research agendas. However, they remain the backbone of research capacity building efforts, including in developing Asia, but often struggle with issues of research quality due to career advancement policies (often the same as in the general public sector) that do not incentivize research or recognize research quality at the doctoral and postdoctoral levels; the lack of national and regional benchmarks for journals; and the prevalence of informal patronage systems that regulate access to research funding and discourage young researchers from pursuing research careers within the university system. In addition, as Asian universities strive for international recognition, they face strong incentives to conform to established Northern notions of excellence, with a tendency towards hyperspecialization as a strategy to climb bibliometric rankings and academic impact measures, often at the expense of broader engagement with non-research actors.

Research think tanks are emerging as key actors in R4D across the region, sometimes to the detriment of universities and NGOs. While this reflects a growing demand for research and evidence on the part of governments, it also signals a careful management of evidence partnerships on the part of governments and policy actors. A clear distinction is emerging between think tanks that strive for independence and those that are politically aligned or even affiliated with government institutions, particularly in emerging Asia. A new space has also opened up for 'regional' think tanks: regional research organizations have credibility and legitimacy, including with national governments and on national issues. Regional think tanks appear to be increasingly important players in a regional market for evidence and can channel work and resources to national researchers and think tanks to respond to a growing demand for data and analysis. Regional think tanks are also comparatively more influential in shaping regional debates on issues such as climate change, regional economic integration, energy, and geopolitical and international affairs.

NGOs appear to be declining as R4D actors in Asia after decades of prominence unless they have become implementing agencies for development agencies (national or international). In the case of early childhood care and development programs in India, for example, and in Myanmar, a country where direct government funding remains politically sensitive or prohibited, national NGOs are playing a significant role in monitoring and evaluating development initiatives, with an emphasis on monitoring and direct implementation, contributing to a culture of evidence, albeit without critical inquiry.

National research councils, agencies and funds are reference institutions in developed and emerging countries, and often feature prominently in policy reforms of the research sector in developing countries in Asia. While mainly focused on STEM, Asia has a number of research councils focused on social sciences, with a clear interest in R4D in general, which could play a proactive role in counterbalancing the drive towards STI as the sole driver of R4D in developed Asian countries. Many of the established councils still function as administrative arms of ministries of higher education or science and technology: they do not have a coordinating and agenda-setting role at the level of the research system, nor do they have the tools to monitor the system they fund, and are therefore unable to shift incentives that can drive work at the research-policy interface (and R4D). Collaboration between councils is picking up across the region, for example with the revival of the Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils, with a focus on building council capacity-building tools and portfolios, as well as benchmarking journals.

International development agencies play different roles in developed and developing countries in Asia. In the latter, faced with institutionalized research systems, their space is often tied to establishing strategic partnerships with government agencies (ministries of higher education and research or of innovation) and supporting their development. This is the case, for example, with the Knowledge Sector Initiative in Indonesia. In addition, they also commission R4D to support their internal decision-making, thereby supporting the emergence of a consultancy sector populated by both local and international researchers who serve their needs without necessarily contributing to development debates. In developing countries where domestic research funding is scarce, bilateral and multilateral agencies continue to play a key role in commissioning R4D, including supporting bilateral negotiations with local government counterparts, with a significant impact on policy design and implementation.

Key Trends for the Asia R4D Landscape (2018-2023)

This rapid assessment of the R4D landscape has identified five trends that are currently shaping R4D in Asia, including persistent lack of evidence base for R4D as a sector; deepening institutionalization of research systems across the region; growing importance of policy think tanks for governments at national and regional levels; high degree of politicization of the research space; and R4D researchers wearing multiple hats in a regional R4D landscape.

Persistent lack of an evidence base for R4D as a sector: Despite decades of efforts to strengthen the R4D sector across the region, systematic evidence on the structure, strengths and weaknesses of research systems in Asia is largely lacking. Of the 54 indicators included in the Doing Research Assessment Framework developed by GDN to describe an R4D system, less than 10% are currently available in existing international or national statistics. Evidence is lacking for basic disaggregated data on the number of researchers in a country by gender and discipline, data on their qualifications, absolute and disaggregated data on research funding (domestic, public and private, and international), data on journals and publishing platforms, and so on.

The lack of evidence extends to the lack of documentation on the pathways that brought developed Asian countries into the global research space, but also on the career trajectories and incentive structures that researchers face across borders. The channels through which evidence circulates in policy circles are also not systematically studied. This long-term trend undermines the effectiveness and efficiency of efforts to advance the sector: in countries such as Indonesia, which has a long history of international cooperation in the development of R4D and a recently established Ministry of Innovation and Research, publication counts for career advancement do not differentiate between publication platforms due to the lack of a national benchmark for journals. Investments by IDRC, OSF and many others in the think tank sector in a country like Myanmar (before the recent coup) have not created bridges with the country's 160+ universities, and accordingly, with teaching, and (currently) cannot count on data on the research diaspora.

Deepening institutionalization of research systems across the region: The emergence of a stable set of rules, resource windows and actors dedicated exclusively to the development of research is an indication of the growing institutionalization of research systems. Many of the scientifically stronger countries (Singapore, South Korea, China, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia) have functioning research councils (and separate ones for social sciences, medicine and engineering) and sometimes several national research funds. R4D capacity has shifted from NGOs to universities (for training) and to think tanks and government research institutes (for evidence generation), with increasing specialization of actors.

The development of social science research councils is particularly relevant to this trend: Many Asian countries have a dedicated social science research council (Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, India, Bangladesh, China, etc.) alongside councils that fund hard sciences, health and innovation. In other countries, voluntary associations registered as NGOs play a coordinating role for the sector (e.g. the Philippines, Malaysia). Many of the smaller developing countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Timor Leste) do not yet have a body. These differences do not contradict the overall trend towards institutionalization, but rather describe its uneven pace, some blind spots and some opportunities. Policy discussions that GDN has been involved in in smaller countries (pre-coup Myanmar, Cambodia) on the creation of national doctoral schools, research councils and national research budgets suggest that smaller countries could leapfrog if these key institutions are used as a lever to advance R4D.

Growing importance of policy think tanks for governments at the national and regional levels: The demand for policy-relevant evidence, especially from governments, is driving the development of a specific type of institution: think tanks. This trend is key to understanding the R4D landscape in all its complexity: as governments invest in strengthening higher education systems, they turn to think tanks for policy-relevant evidence - or in some cases create their own. The appeal of the 'policy think tank' label for governments in the region is best illustrated by the rebranding of the Niti Aayog, formerly known as India's Planning Commission, as the 'policy think tank of the Government of India'. The creation and success of regional research

institutions such as ERIA and the ADB Institute, the think tank of ASEAN and ADB respectively, exemplify this trend.

While think tanks attract research talent, they struggle much more than universities for independence and survival. There is a growing trend for think tanks to develop research agendas that are aligned with the development agendas of the ruling government and international organizations in order to remain active (and access funding) in a given policy space. For example, economic integration, climate change, sustainable development, renewable energy and energy transition are popular themes in Southeast and East Asia. Technology and environmental change are also popular in South Asia. More critical R4D lenses on cross-cutting issues such as equity, inclusion and rights easily fall outside the purview of think tank research agendas. As think tanks occupy the evidence and advocacy space formerly occupied by NGOs, the human rights and inclusion agenda loses visibility. Ultimately, the specific conditions surrounding the rise of think tanks in Asia raise the question of who owns the R4D agendas.

High degree of politicization of the research space: Two complementary strategies are used across Asia to exert political control over the domestic R4D space: a. the establishment of government-linked research initiatives to support government agendas, and b. the management of resources (financial and political) available to other R4D actors. The first strategy points to a structural lack of trust in the legitimacy of independent research voices. The centralization of policy-making, political functions and power is a key feature of governments in mainland Southeast Asia. In authoritarian countries such as Cambodia, critical academic and policy researchers have been forced to self-censor to avoid government repression. More open policies tend to provide opportunities and space. Malaysia, Japan, South Korea and other East Asian countries offer more opportunities to establish independent research centers than Brunei, Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Myanmar.

The second strategy drives incentives to align with the ruling party and its agenda, in a non-confrontational manner. COVID-19 responses showcased a wide use of both strategies: critics of government, even when using quality evidence, were targeted by governments in Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia and India. Research on the relationship between COVID-19 response policies and social science research, for example, suggests that the ability to influence government response policies rely on pre-existing relationship think tanks had built with the government, and not the quality or timeliness of the evidence the structure produced. This strategy for influence leverages self-censorship as a tool, but does not overcome the power politics shaping the sector. Anecdotal evidence accessed by GDN shows a similar trend at play in countries with a much more solid democratic tradition and a thriving intellectual scene, such as India, with regard to a range of topics (minorities, equity and inequality, etc.). The existing literature on Asia points to self-censorship as a practice adopted by researchers in response to shrinking freedom of research and expression.

R4D researchers wear multiple hats in an increasingly connected regional R4D landscape: This is particularly the case for high-capacity R4D researchers and organizations that operate as part of an increasingly regional market for R4D, both in terms of human resources (i.e. capacity) and institutional legitimacy. In fact, the regionalization of the R4D space (both in terms of capacity and evidence) creates opportunities for local R4D: researchers and local research groups can strategically use regional platforms to have a voice and influence national policies (a strategy known as the 'boomerang effect'). Strategic and peer-to-peer networking among local/domestic research institutions (both think tanks and universities) is an important trend in a globalizing Asian region. Researchers from universities in developing Asian countries tend to seek affiliations with research think tanks that have access to the regional level, given the limited resources for research within their university affiliations. Local researchers can build credibility in the policy arena through these collaborations, hence the importance of access to and membership of regional networks.

Conclusions

In the conclusions of the report, we suggest that analyzing the research for development (R4D) landscape in Asia provides valuable insights for IDRC but does not automatically lead to a list of priorities. The unevenness and blind spots in Asia's research space give IDRC the flexibility to adopt various strategies.

To achieve goals like policy influence and evidence-based policymaking, IDRC should **collaborate closely with think tanks that have connections to the ruling government,** focusing on non-partisan topics. Collaboration with regional think tanks and universities can help address issues such as gender equality, green growth, health, and state building. Supporting independent research agenda setting, particularly in fields like health, climate, energy, innovation, and technology, can be achieved through long-term partnerships with select universities. Building research capacity should emphasize **regional networks that offer opportunities for professional growth and collaboration**. Strengthening domestic and regional research systems can be facilitated through partnerships with research councils. Supporting diversity and inclusion may require targeted funding and outreach efforts. Investing in **systematic data generation and utilizing domestic institutions** can drive change in funding and infrastructure for R4D.

We suggest that IDRC should **adopt a portfolio approach,** combining policy influence and high-visibility engagements for medium-term impact with support for domestic agenda setting and system strengthening for long-term impact. This approach involves strategic partnerships with established R4D actors in the local research system. Implementing this approach may require adjustments in IDRC's operations but could significantly enhance its visibility.

Background

In September 2019, a McKinsey report announced the beginning of 'the Asian century' in the following terms: *"By 2040, the region could account for more than half of global GDP and about 40% of global consumption. Global cross-border flows are shifting towards Asia on seven of eight dimensions, and the region's growth is becoming more broad-based and sustainable as its constituent economies increasingly integrate with each other."*[1] The impact of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine impacted these projections since, but announcements such as McKinsey's describe a multifaceted, long-term trend. In the words of a scholar in Box 1 (Nayyar, 2019, p. 58):

Box 1: Extract from Nayyar (2019) Chapter

> The transformation of Asia reflected in its demographic transition, social progress, and economic development, has been phenomenal. During 1970–2016, growth in GDP and GDP per capita in Asia was much higher than elsewhere in the world economy. Its share of world GDP rose from less than one-tenth to three-tenths. Its income per capita converged towards the world average. Its share in world industrial production jumped from 4% to 40%. This provides a sharp contrast with the precipitous decline of Asia in the world economy during the colonial era. For Asian countries, political independence, which restored their economic autonomy and enabled them to pursue their national development objectives, made this possible. However, economic and social development was most unequal between the constituent sub-regions of Asia. East Asia was the leader and South Asia was the laggard, with Southeast Asia in the middle, while progress in West Asia did not match its high-income levels.

Source: Nayyar, D. (2019). 'The rise of Asia', Chapter 2, p. 58. In the book, Resurgent Asia: Diversity in Development. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198849513.003.0002

Asia is both vast and diverse. Asia's diversity is a function of vastly different country size and population sizes, but also of different achievements in terms of number of researchers per million inhabitants and development, including Human Development Index (see Tables 1 and 2). Political regimes and trajectories diverge, ranging from authoritarian regimes to the world's biggest and most economically dynamic democracies. Asia has a very young population, and demographic trends shape this change. As a region, Asia has the largest share of population globally, but also more than 50% of the planet's 'millennials'.[2] Asia's aspirations, values, taste and vote will likely have a far-reaching impact across the globe, and cannot be taken for

[1] https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/asia-pacific/the-future-of-asia-asian-flows-and-networks-are-defining-the-next-phase-of-globalization

[2] https://www.brookings.edu/articles/democracy-in-asia/

granted, as data from the Pew Research Centre exemplifies - see Figure 1. The region also boasted more than half of patents in digital and computer technologies in 2019, up from 40%two decades earlier,[3] and compared to the business-as-usual trajectory, economies could gain from more gender equality as much as 12%, or US$4.5 trillion, in terms of collective annual GDP in 2025.[4]

Asia is also facing the brunt of climate change impacts with disproportionate intensity, compared to other regions: in the Asia-Pacific region temperatures are rising twice as fast than the global average, with an observed increase in the frequency and severity of weather-related natural disasters.[5]

In sum, the interplay of economic trends, a changing climate and a changing society and political environment delivers a complex and at times fractured picture of Asia's development, one that is fraught with questions on who will gain and who will lose from the 'Asian century'.

Against this backdrop, the case for strengthening 'research for development' could not be stronger: policy actors (of all types - from governments to civil society, in Asia as much as across the globe), need high quality evidence to understand and interpret the drivers of change, position themselves vis-à-vis them, and influence it. The closer researchers are to where change is taking place, and the better-connected Asian researchers are with global peers, the more relevant, accessible and reliable the knowledge they produce be.

Since its establishment, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) promotes and funds research and innovation in and with developing regions to advance global change as part of Canada's foreign and development policy. IDRC invests in high-quality research in developing countries, shares knowledge in support of uptake and use, and leads international alliances to create a more inclusive and sustainable world.

The Asia Regional Office (ARO) commissioned the Global Development Network (GDN) to undertake a study on the current research-for-development (R4D) landscape, for its region of competence, comprising 21 countries and territories. These include: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Kyrgyzstan, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

[3] https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2023/01/09/asias-productivity-needs-a-boost-that-digitalization-can-provide

[4] https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/the-power-of-parity-advancing-womens-equality-in-asia-pacific

[5] https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2021/09/asia-climate-emergency-role-of-fiscal-policy-IMF-dabla

Table 1: Number of researchers, expenditure in R&D and human development index in Asia

Country	Researchers per million habitants (FTE)[6]	Population ('000) (Source: World Bank, 2021)	Expenditure in R&D (% of GDP[7])	Human Development Index (2021)[8]
Azerbaijan	1741.11 (2021)	10,137.75	0.20914 (2021)	0.745
Cambodia	30.36 (2015)	16,589	0.11823 (2015)	0.593
China	1 584.86 (2020)	1,412,360	2.41 (2020)	0.768
China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region	4553.40 (2021)	7,413.10	0.96969 (2021)	0.952
China, Macao Special Administrative Region	4283.06 (2021)	686.61	0.38366 (2021)	n/a
India	252.70 (2021)	1,407,563.84	0.65529 (2018)	0.633
Indonesia	395.66 (2020)	273,753.19	0.28077 (2020)	0.705
Japan	5454.68 (2019)	125,681.59	3.2746 (2021)	0.925
Kazakhstan	629.85 (2021)	19,000.99	0.13023 (2021)	0.811
Malaysia	740.76 (2020)	33,573.87	0.95088 (2020)	0.803
Mongolia	330.99 (2020)	3,347.78	0.13301 (2020)	0.739
Myanmar	18.55 (2020)	53,798.08	0.14506 (2021)	0.585
Pakistan	422.82 (2020)	231,402.12	0.16443 (2021)	0.544
Philippines	173.64 (2018)	113,880.33	0.32222 (2018)	0.699
Republic of Korea	8713.59 (2020)	51,744.88	4.79571 (2020)	0.925
Singapore	7286.86 (2019)	5,453.57	1.88517 (2019)	0.939
Sri Lanka	105.61 (2018)	22,156.00	0.11949 (2018)	0.782
Thailand	2069.91 (2020)	71,601.10	1.33025 (2020)	0.800
Uzbekistan	523.38 (2021)	34,915.10	0.13229 (2021)	0.727
Viet Nam	756.69 (2019)	97,468.03	0.41652 (2019)	0.703

Sources: Compilation from several sources

[6] UNESCO, http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=SCN_DS

[7] UNESCO, http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=SCN_DS

[8] https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI

Table 2: Number of researchers per million inhabitants in sub-regions of Asia

	Researchers per million inhabitants (FTE)					
Region	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**
Western Asia	912.45	938.58	979.45	1,028.09	1,084.73	1,131.76
Central and Southern Asia	237.56	262.06	286.76	301.62	307.12	308.12
Central Asia	496.14	476.12	460.31	452.48	419.03	440.08
Southern Asia	227.88	254.00	280.19	295.88	302.85	303.06
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia	1,388.02	1,432.74	1,471.50	1,547.07	1,683.04	1,762.93
Eastern Asia	1,678.07	1,724.20	1,768.12	1,857.19	2,017.08	2,131.03
South-Eastern Asia	673.05	718.87	749.47	796.80	879.89	883.53

Source: http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=SCN_DS&lang=en

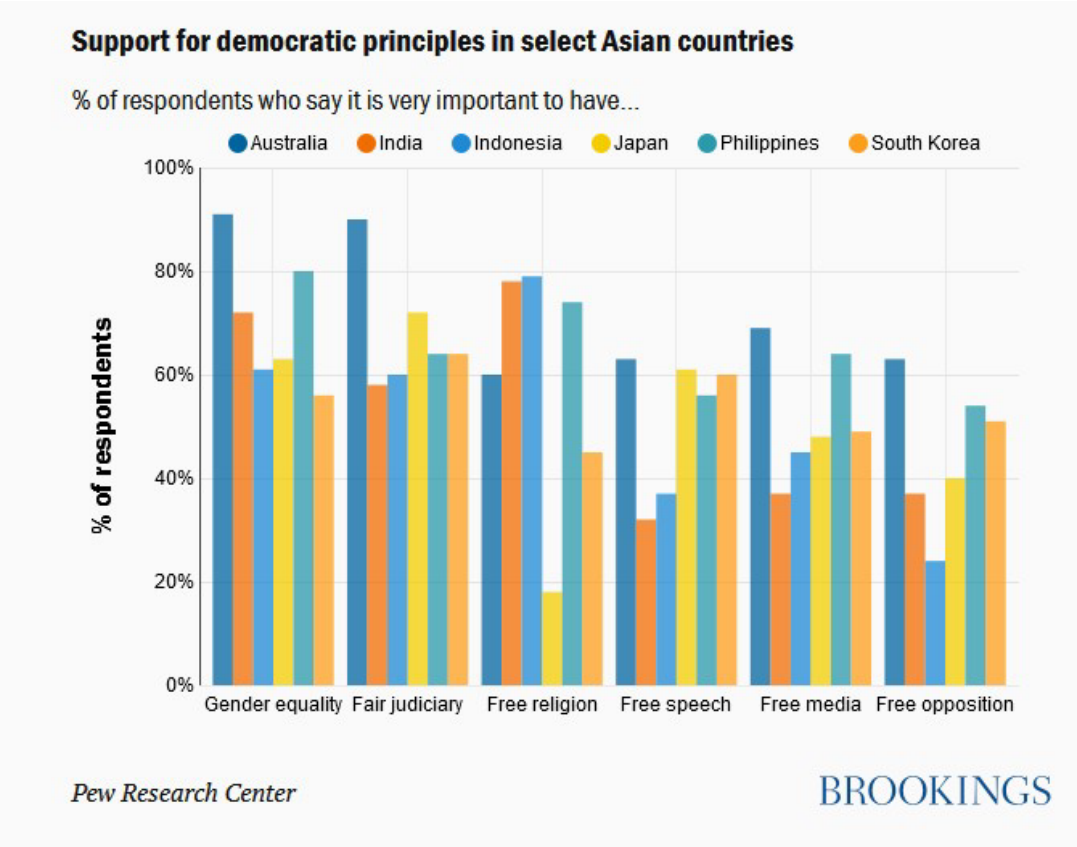

Figure 1: Support for Democratic Principles in Select Asian Countries

Source: Ford & Hass (2021). Democracy in Asia. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/democracy-in-asia/

In 2021, IDRC began implementing its new Strategy 2030. Every three years, beginning in 2023, IDRC plans to conduct a strategy check-in to reflect on progress to date and to inform its implementation strategy. This study aims to inform this exercise, along with studies for each of the other four IDRC regions (East and Southern Africa, West and Central Africa, Middle East and North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean). Understanding how IDRC's work can contribute to expanding R4D in the Asia region is key to its capacity to play an impactful and visible role in the global changes underway.

Scope of the assignment

The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the landscape for R4D, in Asia, with reference to the 2018-2023 period. The main objective is to identify changes in the context, as well as institutional gaps and opportunities for R4D in the region, in order to inform IDRC's strategy and approach going forward. To achieve this, the study asked the following three leading questions:

1. What is the current institutional landscape for R4D in IDRC regions?
2. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of actors or contributors towards R4D relevant for Strategy 2030 (i.e., universities; think tanks; government; major NGOs that conduct R4D)?
3. What salient recent trends or shifts have occurred in the composition and the role of actors in the R4D landscape over the last five years?

These questions are answered in succinct form in the executive summary. The full report discusses, in order, the methodology, the definition of R4D and of 'R4D landscape', it proposes country groups to guide the analysis, discusses the role of key actor categories across the country groups and presents key trends. Finally, it proposes a number of implications this analysis can have for IDRC.

Methodology

The report draws on three main sources: a desk-based review of academic and gray literature, key informant interviews (KIIs), and GDN's own operational knowledge of the R4D space in Asia.

The desk-based review focused on gray and academic literature. Among secondary sources, the note draws heavily on the ongoing work of the Global Development Network (GDN)'s Doing Research global initiative and the Doing Research Assessment, which has been implemented (to different degrees) in countries such as: Bangladesh (pilot completed in 2016), Cambodia (pilot completed in 2016), India (pilot completed in 2016), Indonesia (pilot completed in 2016, full assessment in 2020), and Myanmar (full assessment in 2020, with an update in 2022). The Doing Research global initiative is the first attempt to generate systematic comparative evidence on the state of research systems in low- and middle-income countries, with a specific focus on policy-relevant social science research.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with experts familiar with the regional R4D landscape. KIIs were conducted online with six senior experts from across the region, from a mix of organizations (universities, research institutes, think tanks and multilateral development organizations) active at the regional level in the R4D space. In particular, we drew on two KII with researchers from regional research think tanks (ERIA, ADBI) and four senior national researchers, from Laos (government-affiliated research center), Indonesia (academic researchers) and the Philippines (government-affiliated research think tank - see Annex 1 for Categories of KII Respondents, – see Annex 2 for KII protocol). The KIIs generated data that helped to broaden and deepen insights emerging from desk-based data, guided by the understanding of the R4D landscape of the authors.

The authors applied established protocols for data analysis, which included synthesis of themes and categories, and interpretation (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2014). Data triangulation throughout the synthesis process combined primary (interview) and secondary (documental) sources whenever possible, and within a process remained iterative and inductive in nature. Within the timeline and budget available for this exercise, interviews were limited to a small number of researchers in the region, and the review of the literature and relevant data was iterative. Further work will be essential to broaden and deepen the validity of the analysis presented below.

Defining Research for Development (R4D)

As a preliminary step, we briefly introduce what we mean by 'research-for-development' (R4D). The rationale for this introduction stems from the acknowledgement that, as a phrase and as a concept, R4D is more widely used among international development donors that fund (through ODA) research in Low- and Middle- Income Countries (LMICs), than by the researchers and research institutions themselves. In this sense, the R4D describes efforts to link research to development locally, and the international sector that funds this work, of which IDRC is a key player. Bringing these two sectors together are specific expectations regarding the role research can (or ought to) play in larger processes of socio-economic development, even if these expectations (including diverging positions) are not always articulated and debated. This implies that the R4D landscape is influenced by both the politics of ODA and international cooperation at the regional level as much as it is influenced by (multiple) local debates on the place of evidence in development policy and practice.

R4D in the words of researchers. In the academic literature, research-for-development (R4D) is described as research aiming to benefit developing countries, or rather the development of these countries. More specifically, David (2021, para 2) defines R4D as "research that seeks to find solutions to poverty and bring about social, economic and political development in the Global South". This suggests that R4D is an explicit attempt to reframe research with a developmental perspective - to go beyond knowledge production and to include attention to the use of **research to achieve development impacts** (or, alternatively, to place research results within development processes). This ambition **shapes expectations regarding research**

process, and in particular regarding production, dissemination and use functions as being equally at play in R4D efforts (GDN, 2020). In line with this understanding, Hall (2013, p. 1) defines R4D as *"an engagement process for understanding and addressing development challenges defined with stakeholders. Stakeholders are champions and partners in the research process as well as the change it aims to bring about."* In other words, the focus of R4D is strongly on 'applied' research, and in particular research that is generated, conducted and typically shared with other development actors, i.e. non-researchers, in support of policy and practice.

IDRC's take on R4D. The IDRC Act of 1985[9] defines IDRC's focus on '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' (1985). It is problem-focused and action-oriented, creatively identifying and engaging with relevant users of knowledge and innovation to ensure that research is relevant and positioned for use in policy and practice (IDRC, 2023). To this end, the Centre embraces a number of strategies, spanning investing in talent, supporting Southern-led capacity building, enhancing collaboration and coordination at the international level (see IDRC Act, par. 4.1 a-d). The attention to research use, as well as collaboration and coordination as priority areas is also clear in IDRC's Strategy 2030, which commits the Center to "be a leader in research for development, **investing in high-quality research and innovation, sharing knowledge and mobilizing alliances** for more sustainable, prosperous and inclusive societies" (IDRC Strategy, 2030, p. 4, emphasis added).

Asia has been a fertile ground for experimentation with the K4D agenda, and of multifaceted collaborations between international and local actors. Among many initiatives, stand the Knowledge Sector Initiative (KSI) between the Australian and Indonesia governments,[10] the UK's South Asia Knowledge Hub, the creations of think tanks linked to regional organizations (EERIA, ADB Institute) in support of both governments and regional organizations, and a long history of donor support for local research efforts (SIDA, Ford Foundation, UK FCDO, OSF, BMGF, and many others).

In sum, as IDRC implements its mandate and strategy, seeking both impact and visibility, it must grapple with the evolution of research systems and their drivers, and with the changing space and role international donors can play in it (cf. Apgar et al., 2023 and Currie-Alder, 2014).

Asia's R4D Landscape: Country Typologies

We stated earlier that Asia is both vast and diverse, but also increasingly integrated thanks to bilateral and regional economic cooperation agreements. Integration is not even, and the multiplicity of regional organizations and groupings (ASEAN, SAARC and ADB being the most

[9] https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/i-19/fulltext.html

[10] see Nugroho, Carden and Antlov, 2018, Local Knowledge Matters Power, Context and Policy Making in Indonesia. Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447348085

prominent) exemplifies the multiplicity of political or economic priorities, but also the diversity of needs and ambitions.

The same prism of analysis applies to the R4D landscape, and for the purpose of this analysis we propose to divide the region into three country typologies, based on converging economic performance, R&D investments, number of researchers per million inhabitants and a publication output as an imperfect proxy for research capacity.

In the **first group** we place Asia's developed countries, which tend to have high research capacity, can command regional influence and partake actively in the global research space, despite some blind spots. In developed countries with stronger institutional capacity and abundance of resources, universities, research think tanks and governmental research institutions all play a significant role, whether in building capacities or in generating evidence (Interviewee 5). The quality of university-based research countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan have moved from regional to global competition (Interviewee 3). The quality of research by universities in these countries is trusted and legitimate by governments. Regional research think tanks, with emphasis on research, have significantly influenced not only the country's domestic issues but also foreign affairs and international issues, as confirmed (Interviewee 3 and 6). R4D actors can access domestic funding to research development, governance and regional issues, including with regard to the rest of the region, especially mainland Southeast Asia. Governments tend to set up their own research institutions (inside the ministry or department) to conduct research, and often fund R4D and research capacity strengthening for R4D in the region.

In these countries, we see significant depth of institutionalization of research and research governance policy, with multiple research councils and research funds, even though the level of institutionalization and policy development varies between STEM/STI and social sciences. These countries champion an approach to R4D that focuses on innovative technology and its links to sustainable development and economic growth (see Holroyd, 2022).

In a **second group** we place several counties considered as emerging economies, and that share specific political dynamics (at times contradictory) that affect, specifically, the research-policy interface and academic freedom. These include Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and to an extent India, where higher levels of political and/or bureaucratic control of research (compared to countries in the first group) link the evolution of the R4D landscape more closely to national political cycles.

While often not competitive globally, the research sectors in these countries are credible at the regional level, and researchers and research institutions active on R4D have access to relevant networks and are aware of their capacity (Interviewees 2 and 3). These are also the countries (Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia) that host the most influential regional think tanks.

Governments in these countries have allocated budgets to sectoral ministries and through different schemes to universities, and research think tanks to carry out research to inform and shape policies (research governance and funding is fairly institutionalized). Universities and governmental research agencies face a growing demand for evidence and a growing scope for influence, as demonstrated by the Indonesian case, where scientific evidence on proposed legislation and its potential impacts has become a requisite in the standard legislative process. Yet, funding can be politicized, and spaces for critical inquiry can shrink more easily, particularly when R4D focuses on domestic development. Ruling parties can be very selective in consulting civil society and prefer global consultancy firms and politically aligned think tanks as partners for the production of evidence. Self-censorship and alignment with ruling party priorities among local R4D actors is common, particularly when accessing domestic/public research funds. Importantly, research councils do not play a role in setting research policy or coordinating the sector, but can be effective in the management of public funding to research.

This group of countries is increasingly interested in researching technologies and innovation for development, though a large part of R4D still focuses on socio-economic development, the governance of natural resources and political governance.

A **third group** brings together smaller countries, often referred to as 'developing' or low-income countries in the region. All interviews confirmed that low-income countries, especially Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Timor Leste, Nepal and Bhutan among others, face many challenges in research for development due to the limited capacity and resources, which are very concentrated in few institutions at the domestic level. This is often in contrast with ambitious policy initiatives to reform the research system, such as those documented in Cambodia and Myanmar by GDN's Doing Research program, that aim at the establishment of science policies, research councils, national doctoral schools, research funds and various mechanisms to link university-based research and policy institutions.

The ambition of such initiatives suffers from poor implementation capacity (Doing Research in Cambodia – CICP, 2016), and it is typically inversely proportional to the credibility policy makers bestow upon public universities. Many of these countries do not have or have established only recently national doctoral schools or national research councils and funds, and research capacity for R4D depends largely on international funding and 'reverse brain-drain': Researchers relocating in their country of nationality after advanced research training in Japan, India, Australia, France, the UK and North America, or international researchers having elected the country as a residence. Based on GDN's experience, this limited research capacity is often also 'miss-allocated' in the system: many highly qualified researchers take up top administrative and leadership positions, heavy teaching loads, consulting or employment in local offices of international agencies, either for better pay or for lack of research positions in local institutions. All of these, however, keep them away from a career in R4D, posing a significant human resources question.

In low-income countries, while universities and government research institutions become less significant, NGOs and bilateral governmental research agencies are significant in informing and shaping policymaking, but their involvement in the policy making process is declining gradually. Think tank-like structures in these countries are replacing NGOs (though at a slower pace than in developed countries in the region). When asked which research actors play important roles in policy making, Interviewee 4 suggests that governmental research institutions are the crucial actors in influencing policy making in a country like Lao PDR (an authoritarian type in mainland Southeast Asia). In this context where political control of research remains tight, international bilateral agencies gain a significant role, and their contribution to local agenda setting or research system strengthening remains controversial. R4D in these countries is framed as research on economic and social development, agriculture, the governance of natural resources and political governance, with technology and innovation remaining marginal.

The proposed country groupings echo the ranking of Asian countries in international indicators that can serve as proxies for research capacity, such as those ranking countries based on research outputs published in international scientific journals. Table 3 ranks the country in the region based on the 'Nature Index', which tracks the affiliations of high-quality scientific articles (NB: this is a suboptimal proxy that focuses only on research output in top journals and excludes social sciences). From January 1, 2022 to December 31, 2022, China is ranked number 1, while the countries in East Asia, such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan rank in the top 10. Countries in Southeast Asia rank in the top 20. Developing countries, such as Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Cambodia, rank at the bottom of the table. We further note a correlation between this index and the number of researchers per million inhabitants and the levels of investment in R&D as a percentage of GDP and the Human Development Index, reported in Table 1.

The proposed groupings are not strict categorizations, and they are meant to stimulate discussion as IDRC strategies its programming in the region. The key insights from the grouping exercise are the fact that definitions and traditions of R4D may vary widely across countries, specifically between a focus on STI and one a broader and more traditional focus on questions of governance and socio-economic development, and that the visibility of international actors in the R4D landscape is stronger where institutionalization of the research sector is shallower. The next sections will further develop these insights through an analysis of actors and trends.

Asia's R4D Landscape: Actor Typologies

KIIs were useful to qualify the actors that populate the R4D regional landscape, based on their relative strength and influence in the R4D landscape. Based on interviews with the six senior researchers and evidence available from the literature and GDN's past work, we identify six different types of actors: universities, independent think tanks, government-affiliated research institutions and think tanks, NGOs, national research councils and international development

agencies. These actors are positioned along a spectrum of function in the research system, ranging from research production, to diffusion and (support to) evidence uptake.

Table 4 summarizes this rapid assessment, and delivers two scenarios, applying respectively to the first and second group in one case, and to the third country group in another. Each actor possesses a different level of significance, in terms of their roles in delivering research for development (or research to inform policy and decision making).

Different actors also play different roles, and are influential on different aspects, particularly along the national/regional scale. Table 5 summarizes the inputs collected during the rapid assessment, and further differentiates between domestic and regional think tanks.

Universities, particularly in Asia's developed and emerging countries, are an important site of R4D production, but don't have the ear of policy actors, and remain on the margins of national and regional development debates despite being uniquely positioned to work on long-term research agendas. They remain the backbone of research capacity building efforts though, including in developing countries of Asia, but often grapple with questions around research quality, as a result of career advancement policies (often the same as for the general public sector) that do not incentivize research or recognize research quality at doctoral or postdoctoral level; lack of national and regional benchmarks for journals; and the prevalence of informal patronage systems that regulate access to research funding, disincentivizing young researchers from pursuing research careers within the university system. Further, as Asia's universities strive to gain international recognition, they face strong incentives to align to established Northern notions of excellence, with a tendency towards hyperspecialization as a strategy to climb bibliometric rankings and academic impact measurements, often to the detriment of a broader engagement with non-research actors.

Research think tanks, as we'll discuss further below, are emerging as a key actor for R4D, partially to the detriment of universities and NGOs, across the region. While this reflects a growing demand for research and evidence on the side of governments, it also signals a careful management of evidence partnerships on the side of governments and political actors. A clear differentiation emerges between think tanks that strive for independence, and think tanks that are politically aligned or even affiliated with government institutions, particularly in emerging Asian countries. A new space for 'regional' think tanks also opened up: Regional research outfits command credibility and legitimacy, including with national governments and on national questions (Interviewee 3 and 6). As discussed further below, regional think tanks appear to be increasingly important players in a regional market for evidence, and can channel work and resources towards national researchers and think tanks to respond to an increasing demand for data and analysis. Regional think tanks are also comparatively more influential in shaping regional debates on issues such as climate change, regional economic integration, energy and geopolitical and international affairs.

Table 3: Research outputs in Asia from January 1, 2022 - December 31, 2022

Country / Territory	Count	Share
China	23520	19373.349099715
Japan	4565	2742.4851347882
South Korea	2395	1481.2129691207
India	1849	1228.9406208532
Australia	2695	1061.1336427991
Singapore	1202	503.07741849126
Taiwan	908	393.51984853062
New Zealand	379	111.38410469146
Thailand	283	67.458208536447
Vietnam	108	27.613937049075
Indonesia	87	15.797180154183
Malaysia	120	7.6946824894077
Bangladesh	39	6.3678061881621
Philippines	78	5.4676681678496
North Korea	6	4.5119047619048
Sri Lanka	65	2.0240933599719
Nepal	16	1.8988282841979
Cambodia	9	1.8868085618086
Papua New Guinea	6	1.317225476049
Mongolia	47	1.0753507950495
French Polynesia	4	1.0121753246753
Myanmar	8	0.930338180338 18
Laos	6	0.69483698562646
Bhutan	3	0.23618233618234
Micronesia	1	0.14285714285714
Brunei	3	0.09524882024882
Samoa	7	0.085218735776714
Palau	1	0.083333333333333
Tonga	1	0.055555555555556
Vanuatu	2	0.025657894736842
Fiji	1	0.025
Cook Islands	1	0.018518518518519

Source: https://www.nature.com/nature-index/country-outputs/generate/All/Asia%20Pacific

Table 4: Actor typologies based on their relative strength in the Asian R4D landscape

Actors of research 4 development	Developed countries [11]	Emerging economies [12]	Developing countries (Lower middle-income countries [13])
Universities	Significant	Significant	Less significant
Research think-tanks	Significant	Significant	Significant
Governmental-affiliated research institutions/think tank	Significant	Significant	Less significant
NGOs	Less significant	Less significant	Less significant
National research councils	Significant	Significant	Less significant
International development agencies (UN, bilateral, multilateral agencies)	Less significant	Less significant	Significant

Source: Authors' compilation from the interviews with researchers, 2023

NGOs appear to be declining in importance as a R4D actor in Asia, after decades of prominence, unless they have become an implementation agency for development agencies (domestic or international). The case of early childhood care and development programs in India, for example, and of Myanmar as a country where funding governments directly remains politically sensitive or banned, sees national NGOs play a significant role in monitoring and evaluation of development initiatives, with an emphasis on monitoring and direct implementation, contributing to a culture of evidence, though devoid of critical inquiry.

National research councils, agencies and funds, are reference institutions in developed and emerging countries, and often included as a priority in policy reforms of the research sector in developing countries in Asia. While mainly focused on STEM, Asia has a number of research councils focused on social sciences, with a clear interest in R4D writ-large, which could play a proactive role in counterbalancing the drive towards STI as a sole driver of R4D in Asia's developed countries. Many of the established councils, still operate as administrative arms of ministries of higher education or science and technology. They do not have a coordination and agenda setting role at the level of the research system, and do not have the tools to monitor the

[11] China, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan

[12] According to World Bank (https://data.worldbank.org/income-level/low-and-middle-income?view=chart): these are Brunei Darussalam, China, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, S. Korea, Japan, Ma Cao (China), Hong Kong and Taiwan.

[13] These are: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Timor Leste and Myanmar

system they fund. Accordingly, they are not in a position to shift incentives that can advance work at the research-policy interface (and R4D). This is despite their central position and their access to the entire research system. Cooperation between councils is picking up across the region, for example with the revival of the Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils, with a focus on building up councils' capacity building tools and portfolios, as well as benchmarking journals.

Table 5: Actors' intensity of influence on research for development in Asia

Actors of research for development	Domestic issues	Regional issues
Universities	Weak	Weak
Research think tank (regional)	Strong	Strong
Research think tank (domestic)	Strong if politically aligned with ruling party	Weak
Governmental-affiliated research institutions/think tank	Strong	Weak
NGOs	Declining, less effective	Weak
National research councils	Weak	Weak
International development agencies (UN, bilateral, multilateral agencies)	Strong	Weak

Source: Authors, 2023

International development agencies play different roles in developed and developing countries in Asia. In the latter, faced with research systems that are well-resourced and articulate even if malfunctioning, their space is often conditional to establishing strategic partnerships with government agencies (ministries of higher education and research, or of innovation) and in support of their development. This is the case of the Knowledge Sector Initiative in Indonesia, for example. Additionally, they also commission R4D to support their internal decision making (interviewees 3 and 6), supporting the emergence of a consulting sector populated by local and international researchers alike, that caters to their needs without necessarily contributing to development debates.

In developing countries, where domestic research funding is scarce, **bilateral and multilateral agencies** still play a key role in commissioning R4D, including to support bilateral negotiations with local government counterparts, with significant impact on policy design and implementation.

The role of the private sector, not included in the discussion so far, deserves a separate discussion. The dearth of data on the role of the private sector in R4D is compensated by some evidence on the growing investment of private corporations and foundations in R4D. Some of the ways in which the private sector is entering the R4D space is by setting up its own think tank-like structures at the country level, through the proliferation of private universities, and through the growing role consultancy firms play in the evidence space. A 2016 study carried out under the auspices of the Doing Research program at GDN, commenting on India, stated that:

> *"The consultancy firms are playing a much larger role in the policy making and strategizing and implementation of [government] schemes. This is because the approach to policy making has undergone a change. Innovative ideas are more important than conclusions derived from the rigorous SSR. The character of the state and its approach to policy making has shown evidence since the 1990s to subscribe to the market principles and envisage a greater role of the private sector and governance reform of the public sector."*
> (Chattopadhyay et al., 2016, p. 88: Doing Research in India)

A similar trend is visible in developing countries in the region, including Myanmar, whose governments engage systematically with large global consultancies that have established thriving national offices.

Beyond attempts to tap into evidence as a new business opportunity, the interest of the private sector in R4D opens up the door for collaboration on issues of common interest with government and civil society actors, such as green technology and jobs, gender equality and pro-poor policies.

Asia's R4D Landscape: Key Trends (2018-23)

This rapid assessment of the R4D landscape has identified five trends that are currently shaping R4D in Asia, including persistent lack of evidence base for R4D as a sector; deepening institutionalization of research systems across the region; growing importance of policy think tanks for governments at national and regional levels; high degree of politicization of the research space; and R4D researchers wearing multiple hats in a regional R4D landscape.

TREND: Persistent lack of an evidence base on R4D as a sector

Despite decades of efforts to strengthen the R4D sector across the region, **systematic evidence on the structure, strengths and weaknesses of research systems in Asia is largely lacking**. As a consequence, many efforts, both domestic and international, to strengthen the role of evidence in policy making are not themselves evidence based.

Out of 54 indicators included in the Doing Research Assessment Framework developed by GDN to describe a R4D system, less than 10% can currently be found in existing international or

national statistics. **Evidence is missing on basic disaggregated data on the number of researchers in a country by sex and discipline, data on their qualifications, absolute and disaggregated data on research funding (domestic, both public and private, and international), data on journals and publishing platforms, and so on**. The lack of evidence extends to the missing documentation on the pathways that brought Asia's developed countries into the global research space, but also the career trajectories and incentive structures faced by researchers across borders. **The channels through which evidence circulates in policy circles are not systematically studied either.**

This long-term trend undermines the effectiveness and efficiency of efforts to advance the sector: in countries such as Indonesia, with a long history of international cooperation around the development of R4D, and where a Ministry of Innovation and Research was recently established, publication count for career advancement does not differentiate between publication platforms, for lack of a national benchmark for journals. Investment by IDRC, OSF and many others in the think tank sector in a country like Myanmar (before the latest coup) did not create bridges with 160+ universities in the country, and (currently) cannot count on data on the research diaspora.

Lack of systematic evidence on funding flows and formats, R4D career and dissemination and uptake practices are **a missed opportunity**: documenting regionally-relevant trajectories could support efforts in the broader regions, including developing Asia-relevant benchmark for R4D systems and their evolution. An evidence base could also allow an evaluation of donor efforts in terms of the overall strengthening of research systems they support, and through better targeting of support.

TREND: Deepening institutionalization of research systems across the region

All interviews agreed on the growing institutionalization of research systems, that is, **the emergence of a stable set of rules, resource windows and actors exclusively dedicated to developing research**. Many of the scientifically stronger countries (Singapore, South Korea, China, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia) have working research councils (and separate ones for social and medical and engineering sciences) and at times multiple national research funds. R4D capacity moved from NGOs to universities (for training), and to think tanks and government research institutions (for evidence generation), with a **growing specialization of actors**.

Institutionalization is partly the result of state-building efforts, and in part the result of a growing demand for policy relevant evidence from governments. This trend is far from being even and fully transparent (see below) but it supports the expansion of an infrastructure and a 'market.' In Indonesia's case, the sourcing of scientific evidence is now part of the standard process for passing new laws. This spurred domestic debates on research and research capacity, with new resources and a new Ministry being established. Universities (Interviewee 3) in

Indonesia are under pressure to demonstrate the impact of research beyond academia. In the Philippines (interview 1) the growing attention by media outlets and advocacy networks to the voice of researchers are influencing the value of soft skills in research training. Overall, governments in Asia are paying more attention to actively managing the use of evidence (Interviewees 1, 2, 5 and 6), including in less democratic settings. This trend is not even: as it impacts the STEM and STI fields more than social sciences, the divide between the two is likely to increase.

The development of social science research councils is particularly relevant to this trend: many Asian countries have a research council dedicated to the social sciences (Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, India, Bangladesh, China) alongside councils that fund hard sciences, health and innovation. In other countries, voluntary associations registered as NGOs play a coordination role for the sector (for example, The Philippines).[14] Many of the smaller developing countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Timor Leste), do not have anybody yet (Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP), 2016; Glutting et al., 2020). These differences do not contradict the overall trends towards institutionalization, but rather describe its uneven pace, some **blind spots and some opportunities**. Policy discussions GDN was involved in smaller countries (pre-coup Myanmar, Cambodia) on the creation of national doctoral schools, research councils and national research budgets, suggest that **smaller countries could leapfrog if these institutions are used as a lever to advance R4D**.

TREND: Growing importance of policy think tanks for governments, at the national and particularly at the regional level

The demand for policy relevant evidence, particularly by the government, is boosting the development of a specific type of institution: think tanks. This trend is key to understanding the R4D landscape in all its complexity: while governments invest in strengthening higher education systems, they turn to think tanks for policy-relevant evidence - or in some cases create their own. The appeal the 'policy think tank' label has on governments in the region is best exemplified by the rebranding of the Niti Aayog, formerly known as India's Planning Commission, into the 'policy think tank of the government of India'. (Note that the number of universities in India is in the thousands). One of our interviewees mentioned that regional or domestic conferences and workshops can be a platform that allows academic researchers and institutions to present and discuss policy issues, but that there is limited participation from the policy makers, and overall **little interactions between university-based research and the policy sphere**.

[14] https://aassrec.org/ The Association of Asian Social Science research Councils, hosted by the Australian Academy of Social Sciences, is aiming to expand the scope of collaboration between councils, and between member and non-member countries, through capacity building and networking activities on access to literature, the benchmarking of regional journals, and mentoring.

In countries such as Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, and in some emerging economies (including Indonesia and Vietnam), government-affiliated think tanks have emerged as a response to calls for a shift towards evidence-based policy (Interviewees 2, 4). Governmental research institutions working in the R4D space are seeing an increase of funding in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore too. Interviewee 4 indicates that some of these organizations play a brokering role in governments' international engagements, to boost credibility.

While think tanks do attract research talents, they struggle much more than universities for independence **and survival**, according to Interviewee 3. There is a growing trend that sees think tanks develop research agendas aligned with the ruling government and international organizations' development agendas, to remain active (and access funds) in a given policy space. For instance, economic integrations, climate change, sustainable development, renewable energy and energy transition are popular topics in Southeast and East Asia. Technology and environmental change is also popular in South Asia. **More critical R4D lenses, on cross-cutting topics such as equality, inclusion and rights, easily fall outside of the purview of think tanks' research agenda. As think tank occupy the evidence and advocacy space that used to be of NGOs,**[15] **the human rights and inclusion agenda loses visibility**.

An important sub-trend is the emergence of regional think tanks. The creation and success of regional research outfits such as ERIA and the ADB Institute, respectively the think tank of ASEAN and of ADB, exemplify this trend. Interviewee 3 claims that his think tank has the leverage to advise ministerial meetings at G20 summit's plenary discussion, and that this drives demand from country governments. Interviewees 3 and 6 claim that domestic researchers often collaborate with regional think tanks, with much of the work being done by researchers affiliated with national organizations, but that influence and credibility flows disproportionately from the regional level down to the domestic arena.

Think tanks are also an important collaborator for **international funders**. Interviewee 3 claims that donors often approach their institution to conduct research, outside of competitive calls for research grants that could include other actors, to generate evidence useful to internal decision making, seldom published.

Ultimately, the specific conditions that surround the rise of think tanks in Asia raise questions around who owns the R4D agendas.

TREND: High politicization of the research space

A 2010 study highlights two complementary strategies in use across Asia to exert political control over domestic R4D space: a. setting up government-affiliated research initiatives in support of government agendas, and b. managing resources (financial and political) available to

[15] Obino, Francesco (2013) Not Indian enough? How domestic development actors respond to decentralised INGOs. South Asia @ LSE (18 Mar 2013) http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/75354/

other R4D actors. (Nachiappan, Mendizabal, & Datta, 2010).[16] The varying intensity with which governments use these strategies sets countries apart, (Stone, 2005).[17] but the message these authors convey is that politicization of the research space is widespread in the region.

The first strategy points to a structural **lack of trust in the legitimacy of independent research voices**. Centralization of policymaking, political functions and concentration of power is a vital feature of governments in mainland Southeast Asia (Young 2021).[18] In authoritarian countries like Cambodia, critical academic and policy researchers have been forced to self-censorship to avoid suppression from the government. The murder of researcher and policy analyst, Dr. Khem Ley, in 2016.[19], was exemplary and still echoes in the sector. More open polities tend to provide opportunities and space. Interviewee 6 suggests that Malaysia, Japan, South Korea, and other East Asia provide more opportunities to establish independent research centers than those of Brunei, Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Myanmar.

The second strategy drives **incentives to align with the ruling party and its agenda, in a non-confrontational manner**. For instance, Interviewee 2 said that, generally, there is freedom for research in Indonesia, but if the research can provoke critical policy change or even incite a public reaction (demonstration), that will face resistance from the government. COVID-19 responses showcased a wide use of both strategies: critics of government, even when using quality evidence, were targeted by governments in Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia and India.

When asked about academic freedom, Interviewee 3 suggested that researchers should focus on the technical aspects of the issues rather than the politics of the issues, including on issues such as corruption. Young's (2021) research on the relationship between COVID-19 response policies and social science research, for example, suggests that the ability to influence government response policies rely on pre-existing relationship think tanks had built with the government, and not the quality or timeliness of the evidence the structure produced.[20] This strategy for influence leverages self-censorship as a tool, but does not overcome the power politics shaping the sector. Anecdotal evidence accessed by GDN shows a similar trend at play in countries with a much more solid democratic tradition and a thriving intellectual scene, such as India, with regard to a range of topics (minorities, equity and inequality, etc.). The existing literature on Asia points to **self-censorship as a practice adopted by researchers in response to shrinking freedom of research and expression** (Morgenbesser & Weiss, 2018).[21].

[16] Nachiappan, K., Mendizabal, E., & Datta, A. (2010). Think Tanks in East and Southeast Asia. Bringing Politics Back into the Picture. Overseas Development Institute.
[17] Stone, D. (2005). Think tanks and policy advice in countries in transition.
[18] Young, S. (2021). Strategies of authoritarian survival and dissensus in Southeast Asia: Weak Men versus Strongmen. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
[19] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57580697
[20] https://www.gdn.int/doingresearch/southeastasiaCOVID-19
[21] Morgenbesser, L., & Weiss, M. L. (2018). Survive and thrive: Field research in authoritarian Southeast Asia. Asian Studies Review, 42(3), 385-403. AND Petcharamesree, S. (2023). Academic Freedom in Southeast

In sum, while there are many high-capacity research actors, their **freedom to define their own research agendas remains limited across the region, and so does their influence, when faced with political establishment**.

At a different level, regional geopolitics also continues to play a role in shaping the space for R4D, especially with regard to the regional influence of China. Studies show how China and Russia have asserted their autocratic influence by exercising "sharp power" over other countries' political parties, media, the Internet and academia in post-conflict or small states such as Cambodia and Myanmar (Walker, 2018).[22] The influence of China's Confucius Institutes on academic freedom and research agendas is also contentious (Peterson, 2017; Xavier et. al., 2023). Interviewee 5 suggests that the growing presence of China through funding and policy influence plays a role in shaping the R4D landscape, to the detriment of critical policy analysis.[23] Interviewee 6 provides a different perspective, pointing to efforts by the Chinese government to fund and support mobility in the region, but without a clear political agenda. While there is no conclusive evidence, the influence of China's regional cooperation on the R4D landscape is under-researched, and should not be ignored.

The promise and pitfalls of R4D in Asia are exemplified by the role research played in COVID-19 pandemic responses across the continent. We attempted to summarize these impacts through three key observations as shown Box 2.

TREND: R4D researchers wear multiple hats in a regional R4D landscape

In a regional context where academic institutions have the capacity to train and employ researchers, but politically aligned think tanks have the ear of governments, it is unsurprising that **researchers wear multiple hats and juggle a range of affiliations to navigate the domestic politics of evidence**. This is particularly true in the case of high-capacity R4D researchers and organizations, which operate as part of an increasingly regional market for R4D, both in terms of human resources (i.e. capacity) and in terms of institutional legitimacy. In fact, the **regionalization of the R4D space (both in terms of capacity and of evidence)** creates opportunities for R4D locally: researchers and local research groups can use regional platforms strategically, to have a voice and influence domestic policy (a strategy known as "boomerang effect").

All interviewees agreed that strategic and peer-to-peer networking among local/domestic research institutions (both think tanks and universities) is an important trend in a globalizing

Asia. In LOCAL RESPONSES TO GLOBAL CHALLENGES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: A Transregional Studies Reader (pp. 67-88).

[22] Walker, C. (2018). What Is" Sharp Power"?. Journal of Democracy, 29(3), 9-23.

[23] https://www.welt-sichten.org/artikel/40770/eine-gesponserte-autokratie?fbclid=IwAR2cBVhzRlEydsOyoKhqxxCpPk78TbrASI-68ogdLjKRFNAdcRmBeygKv9M

Asia region. Interviewee 6 indicates that there are many researchers in Asia's developing countries (Afghanistan, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Timor Leste, etc.) but it is harder for them to access resources or enter collaborations, unless they manage their time strategically between academia and think tanks. Researchers from universities in developing Asian countries, given the limited funding for doing research under their university affiliations, tend to seek affiliations with research think tanks with access to the regional level. This trend was emphasized by all interviewees. Local researchers can build credibility in the policy arena through these collaborations, hence the importance of accessing and inhabiting regional networks.

It is through international collaborations that local researchers and institutions build their voice, and increasingly not domestically. Interviewees agreed on observing a growing demand for facilitated access to policy making at the national and international/regional levels.

Box 2: Key Observations on the Role Research Played in COVID-19 Pandemic Responses

- The pandemic shed new light on the role local scientific knowledge has to play in policy. The pandemic put the questions of resilience, effective government intervention and crisis management on the center stage. Coincidentally, social distancing and travel restrictions temporarily halted so-called 'helicopter research', leaving more space for local researchers.
- The political (and in some cases military) management of the pandemic response exposed the focus of the limitations of government interest in scientific evidence, particularly social science research. Interviewee 5 suggests that socio-anthropological knowledge on targeting of public health programs that was developed in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in earlier decades by ministries of health, local universities and UN-AIDS agencies, went largely ignored. Privileging vaccine technology over context-specific public health interventions shunned questions around the proportionality of government action, the effectiveness of public action, trade-offs between rights and risks, equity and exclusion.
- Finally, despite some promise, the pandemic adversely affected research careers, both in academic or non-academic institutions. According to Interviewee 5, a number of research jobs have become unsecured as funding schemes for universities and research institutions were cut in the aftermath of COVID-19 impact on the economy.

Conclusion: Opportunities and Implications

A rapid analysis of the R4D landscape, its key actors and trends, does not translate automatically into a list of priorities for IDRC. It provides instead 'food for thought' in the form of a backdrop against which IDRC strategies for impact and for increased visibility in Asia deserve to be vetted.

Clearly, the combination of Asia's research space's deepening institutionalization and its unevenness and blind spots (political control, the question of research quality, the question of coordination at the level of single research systems) leaves much discretion to IDRC regarding the strategies it can adopt.

To pursue a goal such as **policy influence and more use of evidence in policy processes**, IDRC will likely have to work closely with think tanks, and particularly those think tanks that work closely with the ruling government and ruling parties, and focus on non-partisan topics. This will require a significant investment on the side of IDRC staff at all levels in managing high-profile partnerships in line with IDRC's core values, and acknowledging the power dynamics at play through them (which will be different from the traditional international donor-local grantee dynamics). As was discussed above, gender equality, green growth, health, but also state building are examples of non-contentious topics, and might additionally offer **a bridge towards collaboration with the private sector**. Working on policy influence at the regional level will require working closely with the established regional think tanks, such as ERIA and ADBI.

Supporting independent research agenda setting can contribute to bringing to light Asian perspectives on development, ranging from domestic to regional and global issues, in fields such as health, climate, energy, innovation and technology. This objective will be best achieved by working with select universities over longer-term periods, as opposed to project funding. If core funding is hard to implement and sustain, it is also not a need for public universities (not as much as it is for think tanks): demand-driven support focused on strengthening capacities of university-based research to gain visibility and credibility based on independent and long-term research agendas could play a transformational role – particularly in developed Asian countries where institutions can likely access human resources and domestic funding to implement such agendas. Funding focused on building research agendas, as opposed to project-level funding on themes identified by IDRC, could also shape new incentives for universities to work with a range of stakeholders, supporting network building around key R4D questions.

Building research capacity in Asia, a region where public universities are capable of training new generations of researchers, should focus on strengthening regional networks that offer opportunities for post-training professional growth, through learning-by-doing and learning-through-collaboration. Such networks could target researchers and think tankers as much as development practitioners and young policy actors. Formalizing the role regional think tanks play in creating opportunities for a new generation of domestic researchers could be a promising avenue for partnership and for visibility.

IDRC also has an opportunity to support domestic and regional **research system strengthening** initiatives, by partnering with actors such as research councils, in delivering its programs. Particularly in Asia's developing countries, working through councils could enhance national implementation capacity of research policies. Leveraging regional cooperation between

councils, across STI and social sciences, could deliver important advances for R4D across the region.[24]

Supporting diversity and inclusion, including with reference to **ethnic and other minorities**, both in terms of human resources (researchers from minority groups) and in terms of research agendas, will likely require more direct efforts by IDRC, through dedicated funding windows and targeted outreach to existing networks. Such activities could reach scale through partnership with like-minded international research funders and interested national research organizations.

As we have tried to argue in this review, some of these goals and strategies have more **potential to be 'catalytic' and open up the space for R4D**. Investing in systematic data and evidence generation about the R4D sector, and doing so through domestic institutions and teams, could drive change in domestic funding and infrastructure for R4D, inform IDRC and other donor strategies, and enable them to make the most of an R4D landscape that is increasingly complex. Ultimately, research support deserves to be evidence-based as much as any other policy area.

Based on these possibilities, we suggest that IDRC should consider a 'portfolio' approach, combining policy influence and high-visibility engagements for **medium-term** impact, with support for domestic agenda setting and domestic system strengthening for **long-term** impact and visibility.

Such an approach implies building programs around strategic partnerships, rather than the other way around, and working through established R4D actors with a role in the local research system (national or regional), rather than through the established community of IDRC grantees in Asia. This could require some adjustments in IDRC's modus operandi, but it could significantly increase IDRC's visibility.

[24] The 2023 AASSREC conference is a noteworthy attempt to support these efforts, with a specific focus on social sciences, at the regional level. https://aassrec.org/2023conference/

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Annexure

Annex 1: Categories of KII Respondents

S/N	Name	Position/Organization	Date
1	Dr. Teresa Tadem	Professor/Philippines Institute for Development Studies	April 20, 2023
2	Dr. Fadillah Putra	Deputy Head of Public Administration and Interdisciplinary studies, Brawijaya University, Malang, Indonesia	April 27, 2023
3	Dr. Han Phoumin	Senior Energy Economist/ Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia	April 28, 2023
4	Dr. Somdeth Bodhisane	Deputy Director of Division/ Institute for Industry and Commerce, Lao PDR	April 29, 2023
5	Dr. Inaya Rakhmani	Director, Asia Research Centre / Universitas Indonesia	May 1, 2023
6	Dr. Sonobe Tetsushi	Dean, ADB Institute, Japan	May 6, 2023

Annex 2: Key Informant Research Interview Protocol

The KIIs lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and were structured around the three (3) main guiding questions. The KII protocol was developed to facilitate the interview process as well as note taking and summarizing the discussion.

Script for Key Informant Interviews

Introduction

- Thank you for accepting to provide your insight.
- The interview should last around 60 minutes, and it will focus on a number of questions we are trying to answer for a rapid study commissioned by Canada's International Development Research Centre. The study is titled 'analyzing the regional research-for-development landscape'.
- You are one of six people we have identified as key informants, and we would like to use this conversation to discuss with you the factors, actors and trends shaping the space for research for development in Asia. The region is defined based on IDRC's list of focus countries, and includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Kyrgyzstan, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.
- We will be recording the conversation, and we might extract direct quotes to enrich the final report. We ask you to please flag any piece of information you would like us to treat as confidential, in case you would like to exclude it from possible direct quotes, or if you would like us to anonymize it.

- We thank you in advance for your time and support. We are hoping that this report will help IDRC in strategizing its work in the region, to support local researchers, contribute to strengthening institutions and local research systems.

Background to the Study

- The study is concerned with understanding the way the research landscape is structured across the region, who inhabits it, and how it is evolving, in terms of both advances and challenges, with a focus on the period 2018-23.
- IDRC defines 'research for development' as high-quality research and innovation carried out in developing countries, its diffusion and its use.
- In the literature, the phrase 'research for development' usually describes efforts to use research tools and methods to illuminate and address development policy challenges. We are therefore referring to 'applied' research, and specifically (at least partly) research that originates in interactions with, is conducted with, and typically is shared with other development stakeholders, i.e. non-researchers, in support of policy and practice.
- The space this kind of research has depends on a number of factors: from individual capacity, to institutional mandates and resources, including funding, academic freedom and the level and relationships that exist between researchers and development stakeholders.

Interview Questions

Question 1:

- What is your impression about the development of research, and R4D in particular, in your country/region over the last five years (2018-2022)?

Question 2:

- How would you describe the opportunities and the challenges facing this research space, in recent years? Which ones would you consider the top three 'shifts' or 'trends'? Think about both positive and negative trends. Please remember we are interested in production, diffusion and use, not only in production of research.
- Could you give us one or two concrete examples of how these trends shape the work of researchers, by focusing on a country, an institution or a project you know well?

Question 3:

- Who are the key actors in the scenario you describe above?
  If needed, prompt for these: universities; think tanks; government; major NGOs that conduct R4D]
- Which ones of these are directly or indirectly opening up for research, and which ones are contributing to closing it down?

Question 4:

- Now, can you choose a few actors that you think make the most difference (negative or positive) for research, and tell us more about their strengths and weaknesses, from your point of view?

Conclusion

- Many thanks for your time and answers. Would you be available for a follow-up interview, if needed? Finally, do you have any questions or suggestions for us?

Annex 3: A summary of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats in Asia R4D Landscape

Strengths	Weaknesses
▪ Regional think tanks are growing their influence in the region ▪ Growing research networking between regional and local research institutions (including peer-network) ▪ Growing a number of research schemes funded by the government in the region ▪ A number of research institutions or ministries are being created by the government.	▪ Research capacity and resources of local research institutions are limited ▪ Government/ policy makers and decision makers do not always accept research products from think tanks, research institutions, NGOs and universities ▪ Little influence of research for development in development policy and decision-making (developing countries) ▪ Regional or reputable research think tanks/ research institutions monopolize local research institutions ▪ Bureaucratic process in research for development ▪ Connecting the dots between research and policy remains an issue ▪ Research think tanks, centers and institutions tend to focus on high-level (centralized), providing no connection to the sub-national level policies/ decision making.
Opportunities	**Threats**
▪ China-funded research for development ▪ Growing funding schemes for research for development in emerging economies ▪ Research products are being considered by the government as input for policy development and decision making. ▪ Joint collaborative research for development between research think tanks, governmental research institutions, universities, NGOs and inter-bilateral agencies to increase impact.	▪ Research space in developing authoritarian countries. ▪ Donor driven-research for development (including funding from China) research freedom of the research actors ▪ Corruption practice especially in government funded schemes are observed in developing Southeast Asian countries ▪ Research careers become insecure employment due to economic change and the recent pandemic.

Source: Author, 2023