

Post-event Review: A dialogue on transparency, open access, and ethics in development research

By Aparna Radhakrishnan

S M Sehgal Foundation (Sehgal Foundation) in collaboration with International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) organized a dialogue on Transparency, Open Access, and Ethics in Development Research on December 4 at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi. The event goal was to bring together the research community to discuss and unravel the major factors that inhibit transparency, access, and ethics when conducting and disseminating development research.



The event organisers argued that as research is increasingly required to propose evidence-based solutions to pressing developmental problems, research organizations must focus on conducting and promoting ethical research and accelerating scientific openness. The event was open for all with a centrally located venue to attract a diverse participation of professionals. About 110 participants attended, including government representatives, researchers, and students. The event was divided into three thematic sessions.

Session I. Transparency and Open access in Research

The major objective of this session was to examine the idea of transparency and openness in research with views from a diverse panel sharing experiences from their own fields. Panelists debated on the concept of "openness" and the need for standards in research. They discussed their contextual views on how data could be made open and how open data differs across various disciplines. The panel was comprised of academicians and practitioners who debated and discussed the challenges faced in meeting data and research standards and making it publicly available. Major points discussed also included situations where data is openly available is often not found in a form that is accessible and useful.



This is a particular challenge in low- and middle-income countries where data could be used for carrying out the research that would generate useful evidence for decision-making. An agreed-upon method for moving forward was to undertake efforts to unite various institutions, NGOs, private organizations, and research agencies to achieve common understandings of data standards.

Session II. The State of Open Data in India

The focus of this session was to understand various debates around the state of open data in India with views from a diverse panel sharing experiences from their own fields. The discussion pointed out that open-source data is an inherently political issue. While the Indian government

has attempted to promote open access through initiatives such as india.gov.in, data is still guarded and inaccessible. The session highlighted government's efforts to make data publically available. While there is a consensus on promoting open access of government data, there is a need to ensure the quality of data being shared. Also discussed was the increasingly important role of data in journalism in response to the credibility crisis and the growing demand of evidence-backed stories from an educated reader base. Panelists shared that while the government has approved the National Data Sharing and Accessibility Policy, the quality of data renders it unusable.



The panelists discussed how accountability among the top echelons of the government can ensure better standards of data collection and analysis. It was also argued that rigorous data collection should be ensured by coming up with a solution-oriented rather than a punitive approach. This discussion was followed by an interesting Q&A session, with the audience raising issues such as a lack of standardized data on the government's data-sharing platform, innovative methods of data collection, as well as data quality assurance practices.

Session III. Ethics in Research Life Cycle

The session aimed to understand ethical considerations in conducting development research and the reuse of open data. The session was based

on the premise of the collective responsibility of the research community to promote ethics in conducting research. Panelists included practicing researchers and university professors. The first panelist shared his concern over an increasing risk of surveillance of citizens in light of fast-paced technological innovations like self-learning algorithms. The second panelist brought up the need for including the subjects of research in its process and advocated accountability to the participants and responsible conduct of research as essential facets of ethics in her field of practice. The third panelist discussed the issue of validity and reliability in data available from government agencies and insisted on ethical practices in conducting research in Indian universities that suffer from serious issues such as plagiarism. The last panelist shared the concerns noted and briefly described multiple issues related to the conduct of academic research during its life cycle.



The event was an eye-opener and useful platform for researchers, professors, professionals, journalists, and bureaucrats to discuss different facets of transparency, ethical values, and access issues within the disciplines. The follow-up feedback survey is planned to unravel the pressing issues involving multiple stakeholders.

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