

Brokering evidence during the pandemic in Pakistan: what did SEDI learn?



Project blog

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Evidence brokers, whether they are individuals, organisations or networks, have played a crucial role managing the [‘infodemic’](#) during the pandemic. Apart from helping decision-makers with accessing and interpreting reliable evidence for action, they have bridged divides and built relationships of trust between the producers and users of evidence. A recent [report from the Global Commission on Evidence](#) calls on evidence intermediaries to step forward to fill the gaps left by government in facilitating evidence-informed decision-making. This only goes to show the tremendous responsibility involved in being the go-between.

[Strengthening Evidence Use for Development Impact \(SEDI\)](#) was an FCDO-funded programme (2019-21) that was dedicated to working with government partners in Pakistan, Uganda and Ghana for promoting evidence-informed decision-making. To support governments, the programme often took on the role of an evidence broker.

In this blog, we capture some of the lessons we learned about brokering evidence to support Pakistan's Ministry of Commerce, the Small and Medium Enterprises Authority at the Ministry of Industries and Production, Planning Commission, and the Pakistan Institute of Trade and Development.

Stakeholder engagement was considered the most valuable and rapid approach for gaining the 'expertise of experience' during a crisis. To address the crisis in the trade sector, our government partners were interested in engaging with relevant stakeholders. In response, the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), SEDI's lead in Pakistan, organised [a series of 12 stakeholder dialogues](#) which were mainly held as virtual webinars, and designed as a conversation between the government and representatives from business and trade bodies, firm owners, research organisations, and donor agencies.

The dialogues provided an opportunity to present different kinds of evidence, including findings from surveys, research and evaluations. Although our government partners were interested in learning from global and local evidence, they were most interested in having follow-up conversations, mainly with representatives from large chambers of commerce and business associations. As the chambers represented many firms and were aware of the varied challenges being experienced, they had earned the ['expertise of experience'](#).

Our experience with the stakeholder dialogues showed the immense value of a moderated conversation to make different voices heard and varied perspectives visible. This included integrating the views of firms led by women, persons with disabilities, or other marginalised segments into discussions.

A series of such stakeholder conversations helped inform a couple of key government decisions - to release exporters' tax refunds for supporting liquidity issues, and to rationalise customs duties on selected imported inputs for production processes essential for stimulating exports. The dialogues also sparked the Planning Commission's interest in setting up a stakeholder sub-group on industry and enterprise that now meets regularly with the secretariat managed by Planning Commission. The process of deliberation and discussion thus helped in strengthening the [instrumental and embedded use](#) of stakeholder inputs in decision-making.

A multi-pronged approach to evidence translation and communication helped in amplifying key issues and keeping the conversation going. Our government partners were keen on inviting journalists to attend the stakeholder dialogues. This meant that the discussion with stakeholders was not just confined to the webinars.

The traditional media played a supportive role in the dialogue process. The media articles amplified key issues and provided short and clear takeaways from the discussions. A small, internal survey we conducted in March 2021 among government officials working in the trade sector showed that general media reporting, research-based media articles, webinars, and credible voices on social media are considered key sources of evidence as they filter the noise that is all around during a crisis.

The SEDI team also worked on outreach by producing summary reports on the discussions, writing editorial articles and actively disseminating communication materials on social media. The team was also active on Twitter and mainstream television channels, which aided in communicating with sub-national administrations battling with lockdown-induced supply chain disruptions. In a couple of instances, we had government officials picking up the discussion on Twitter and asking for follow-up public-private dialogue sessions.

An inclusive conversation with a diverse set of stakeholders requires dedicated effort and commitment to equity. We found it difficult to find women business owners who would be keen to join discussions with the civil service. Most women were apprehensive about sharing their challenges, and were concerned it would affect their relationship with policymakers and senior members of the chambers of commerce. The SEDI team had to reassure them that the dialogue was a constructive space where they could speak freely. In at least two of the meetings, we had to do away with the webinar-like format and limit online participation only to women who wanted to share their challenges under Chatham House Rules.

Weak internet and language barriers also made it difficult for representatives from rural and small enterprise to participate in the conversations. These experiences made us realise that there is more preparatory work that needs to be done for creating a safe space of conversation.

Both global and local experts were needed for not just learning from best practices but also to assess capacity requirements for implementing new measures. The Pakistan Institute of Trade and Development was interested in learning from both local and global experts to update their curriculum for civil servants and to incorporate new Covid-19 related modules. This included topics such as ‘trade amid Covid-19 protocols’ and ‘safe trade of food and livestock’. The institute was also keen on understanding the capacity requirements for getting national institutions to adapt to stringent requirements of foreign buyers. The role of the SEDI team was to bring in the experts with current and practical knowledge in this area. Getting the experts to talk directly to the civil service was the quickest way to share knowledge.

In the work we did with our varied government partners, we had to often consider the complexity of the decision-making process and resource requirements while framing recommendations. It was easier for the civil service to take up recommendations that could be implemented through quick executive orders rather than through parliamentary recourse.

Technology can both help and hamper equitable participation. Although virtual platforms changed the [demography of participation](#) during the pandemic in a favourable way, there were also other problems to address. Our government partners in the trade sector wanted to develop a technological solution that allowed firms to post information on the challenges they were facing through a mobile-based application and a dashboard. Eventually this idea had to be shelved as the government realised its own limitations in the rapid procurement of such services, the inability of such dashboards to cater to citizens who had weak internet connections or lacked the skills to handle such apps.

The SEDI team proposed the idea of townhalls at the chambers of commerce in second- and third-tier cities led by field teams of Trade Development Authority of Pakistan. This idea has now been implemented across the Punjab province.

SDPI’s credibility was important for the role it played as a trusted evidence broker. A [recent article in Nature](#) emphasises the need for each country to have its own mechanisms for supplying evidence that is appropriate to its systems of governance and wider needs. For this to happen, you need evidence brokers in the country who have trusted, long-term relationships with decision-makers.

We were able to achieve what we did in Pakistan because of SDPI's credibility and long track record in policy research and engagement. Our government partners trusted SDPI to leverage its established networks with business and trade associations. SDPI's involvement has also helped in sustaining the partnership with government beyond the life of the SEDI programme. Trust is a key ingredient for brokering evidence successfully; and we know that can't be built overnight.