

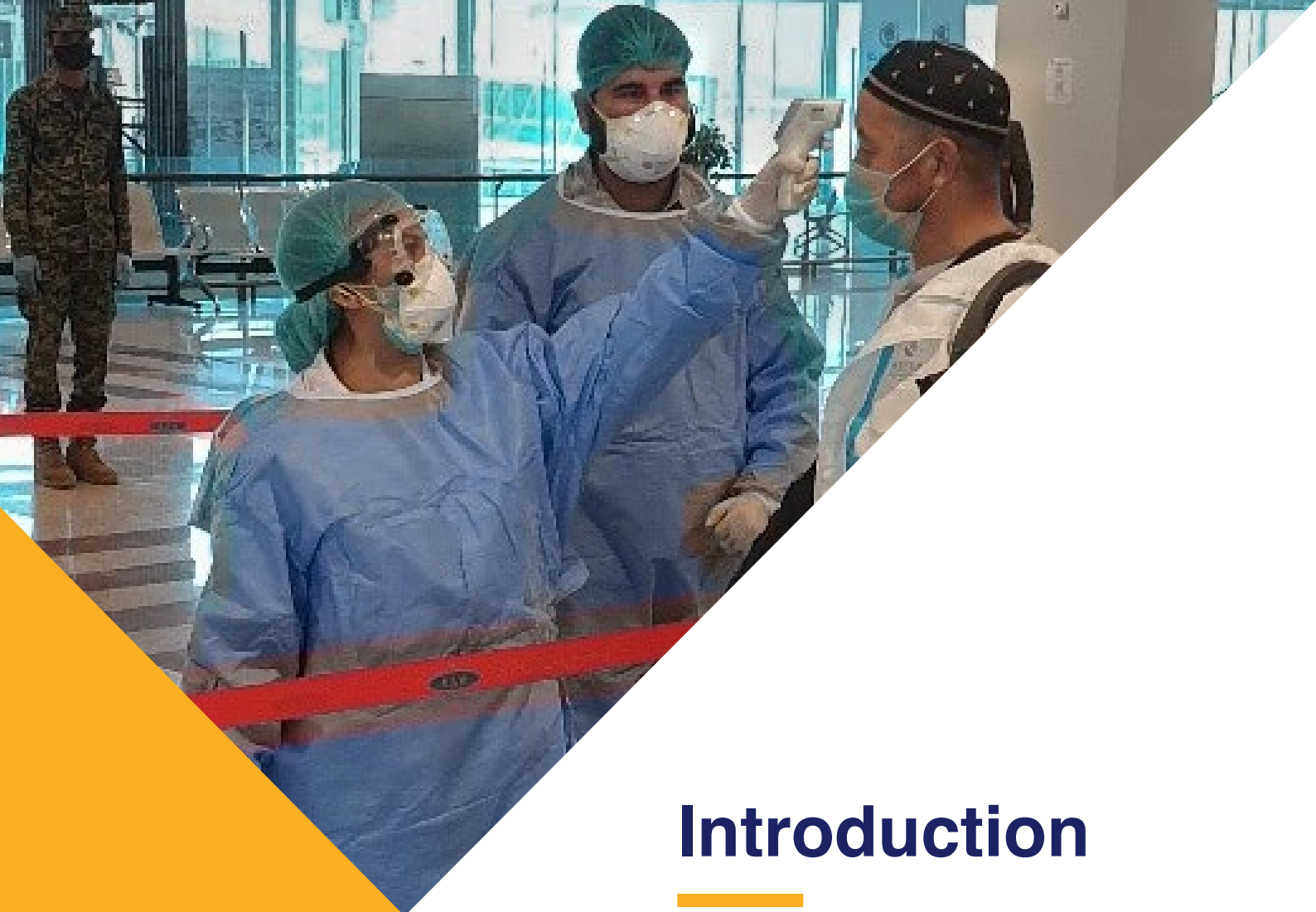


Sedi



**Using stakeholder dialogues for
strengthening evidence use to inform
government decision-making during
COVID-19**

SEDI Learning Brief 4



Introduction

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pakistan, like most other countries in the world, has been facing the daunting challenge of addressing a health, economic, and social crisis. The economic- and trade-related costs and shocks in the country have been alarming, and the need to respond at a policy level has been urgent. A survey published by the Small and Medium Enterprises Authority (SMEDA)ⁱ in April 2020 showed that 73% of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Pakistan had to pause operations when the pandemic struck. The revenue losses due to supply chain disruptions and reductions in export orders also contributed to job losses – around 50% of the 920 businesses polled reported layoffs due to the pandemic.

As both national and provincial governments scrambled to find answers and solutions during

the first wave of the pandemic, the demand for evidence to support decision-making on effective responses rose rapidly. The crisis underscored the importance of contextualising global and local evidence, alongside the tacit knowledge of key stakeholders.

The Strengthening Evidence Use for Development Impact (SEDI) programme team in Pakistan, led by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), engaged with agencies in the federal government to explore various options for accessing and discussing existing evidence¹ to inform policy responses to the pandemic. The agencies, which included Pakistan's Ministry of Commerce, and SMEDA at the Ministry of Industries and Production, were keen on moving swiftly to shield SMEs (and the trade sector more generally) from the

negative impacts of the economic downturn. They were eager to address the sector's immediate and pressing needs, while also considering measures that could support post-pandemic recovery in the medium term.

SEDI, funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), is dedicated to promoting evidence use in decision-making, in partnership with government. In reviewing different options² with our government partners, we agreed that deliberative dialogues with a diverse set of stakeholders would be the most suitable approach for quickly accessing the available evidence and drawing on varied perspectives in order to evolve response measures. The nature of the crisis meant that there was a need to be agile while dealing with high levels of

Box 1: Key lessons learned

- Stakeholder dialogues contributed to multiple instances of instrumental, embedded, and transparent use of evidence.
- The pandemic made stakeholder engagement a priority for evolving rapid responses.
- Trust-based relationships and sustained engagement between policymakers, topic experts, evidence brokers, and other stakeholders matter for facilitating evidence use.
- The dialogues highlighted the government's keen interest in engaging with the representatives of large firms, and trade and industry bodies.
- A multi-pronged approach to evidence translation and communication helps in amplifying key messages and building traction.
- An inclusive dialogue that brings in the voices of women entrepreneurs, and rural and small business owners, requires dedicated effort, a better understanding of power dynamics, and enabling communication channels.
- To communicate effectively with policymakers, it is important to use the language they use.
- Monitoring progress and adapting as we go is important in order to make necessary tweaks to dialogues and to ensure that no one is left behind.

uncertainty and changing problems.ⁱⁱ It was also important to draw on evidence to assess tricky trade-offs and impacts on different segments of the population.

SEDI convened 12 dialogues between July 2020 and December 2020 with the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Industries and Production, and the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives. These dialogues were designed as a conversation between the government and representatives from the private sector (large, medium-sized, and small enterprises, and business and trade bodies), academia, and bilateral and multilateral donor agencies. They were called 'public-private dialogues' (PPDs) as that is the term that stakeholders in Pakistan used to express how these conversations were set up – as an opportunity for the public and private sectors to engage with each other.

This offered SEDI an opportunity to draw on lessons learned about approaches to designing dialogues to address government priorities, and applying these to a crisis. In this learning brief, we take stock of the lessons we learned about the design of PPDs in Pakistan, the value of different types of evidence, the nature of participation, and the mechanisms that influenced impact.



Evidence brokering through dialogues

Deliberative dialogues have been used globally to factor in stakeholders' views on problem framing, to make sense of the evidence, to consider implications, and to arrive at recommendations. Policymakers, particularly in the area of health and international humanitarian aid, have drawn heavily on stakeholder opinions and have considered citizen values as they have examined research evidence, alongside other factors that influence their decisions.ⁱⁱⁱ

The consideration of expert opinions and experiential knowledge as evidence becomes

more apparent during a crisis. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, the convening of 'expert task forces' to drive policy decisions is the go-to strategy for many country governments across the world. Although dialogues draw on experts, they may also be designed to bring in diverse stakeholders to deliberate on varied lived experiences. While there is agreement that experience may be considered as knowledge and expertise, there is less consensus on 'what' and 'whose' experience can be considered as evidence that can inform decision-making.^{iv}

A crisis also makes it imperative to design context-specific strategies that address the barriers and leverage the facilitators of evidence.^v There is a need to be rapid, to foster stakeholder interactions, to leverage technological platforms, and to present relevant evidence to decision makers in a concise and accessible manner. In recent years, evidence briefs have been used in deliberative dialogues to make summarised evidence accessible to stakeholders.^{vi}

In designing the PPDs in Pakistan we drew on what we had learned from existing literature. Our objective was to design an intervention that was evidence-informed and fit for purpose, and that addressed the needs of our government partners.



Design of the public-private dialogues

In this section we elaborate on the various design features of the dialogues, and how these features influenced whether and how the dialogues brokered evidence for decision-making.

The PPDs in Pakistan were designed in collaboration with the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Industries and Production. In consultation with the ministries, a set of six themes was initially selected for six sessions, based on the priorities outlined by government representatives. As new waves of the pandemic hit, our government partners increased the number of dialogues to 12 to explore more

topics and emerging challenges (see Annex A for a list of the sessions).

The 12 sessions covered different kinds of topics. Some were sector-specific (e.g. focusing on the textile, horticulture, or manufacturing sectors), while others related to specific stakeholder groups (e.g. women-led enterprises or SMEs) or issues (e.g. digital trade and cyber security, or evidence use during COVID-19). Two of the dialogues were closed-door events that were restricted to members of the Planning Commission's sub-group on industry and enterprise.

A conscious effort was made to factor equity and inclusion considerations into the choice of panellists, the topics covered, the evidence presented, and the recommendations made. Representatives from the Ministry of Commerce provided inputs on the questions that needed to be explored in each dialogue, and suggestions on potential panellists and participants. In addition, a detailed mapping of stakeholders in the trade and commerce sector that was carried out as part of SEDI's political economy analysis of evidence in March 2020^{vii} informed decisions about the participants. Efforts were made to invite panellists and participants from different kinds of stakeholder groups – federal government units in different ministries, provincial government departments, regulatory bodies, large companies, SMEs, business associations, bilateral and multilateral agencies, donors, and media outlets.

The participants were mainly those who were part of our targeted mailing list of key stakeholders. At the request of our government partners, we also invited media outlets tracking finance, trade, and commerce to participate in 10 dialogues. However, to support candid conversations, the media were not invited to the closed-door dialogues convened by the

Planning Commission with the sub-group on industry and enterprise.

Ahead of each dialogue, the SEDI team sent out a briefing note to panellists, elaborating on the topic that would be discussed and posing a set of questions that they were expected to respond to. The questions were tailored to different panellists and they were encouraged to contribute questions of their own. In the case of a few dialogues, members of the private sector (specifically business owners who were part of trade associations) were proactive about suggesting questions they would want to pose to the public sector. The SEDI team actively engaged with the panellists to narrow the focus areas of the discussion ahead of the dialogues.

With COVID-19 safety protocols in place, 11 out of the 12 dialogues were carried out virtually. Most of the dialogues followed a similar format. They were kicked off by an 'agenda-setting presentation' made by a stakeholder or stakeholders who either had evidence to present on the selected theme or who had a lot of experience or expertise to share. This was followed by a discussion during which panellists responded to questions posed to them or asked each other questions. Attendees could engage using the chat function and ask questions. This function was also used to share research reports and other types of evidence being discussed. The duration of each dialogue was approximately 90 minutes.

After each dialogue, a short summary report was prepared to capture the discussion and stakeholders' recommendations to the government. These reports were shared with all the dialogue participants, and with the relevant ministries and department representatives who were unable to attend but who were expected to have some role in implementing or addressing the recommendations made in the

dialogue. A formal letter, along with the detailed policy recommendations made in each of the dialogues, was also shared with the secretary of the Ministry of Commerce.

Senior SDPI staff wrote editorial pieces that drew on the dialogues to highlight key policy issues that needed particular attention. Social media channels, such as Twitter, were used to disseminate communication products related to the dialogues.

A number of tools were used to monitor progress, support reflections with our partners, and inform necessary tweaks. We maintained a 'learning log' that was updated with insights from each session – ranging from observations on operational matters, stakeholder groups, and relationship dynamics, to takeaways from the evidence. Importantly, the log was also used to track the engagement or non-engagement with the issues by different stakeholder groups. This helped inform the necessary follow-up activities that we needed to carry out after the dialogues or in subsequent dialogues. We conducted a feedback survey after each dialogue, but these received very little participation. The surveys were aimed at getting participant feedback on the usefulness of the dialogues for informing their work, and suggestions on improvements. As the surveys were not able to serve this purpose, the SEDI team reached out to selected government and private sector participants to set up debrief meetings to discuss what worked well and where we needed to make improvements.



How did the PPDs help the government in increasing evidence use for decision-making?

COVID-19 has created several unprecedented policy challenges for decision makers in Pakistan. After most of the dialogues, the SEDI team received multiple requests from government partners for more information and/or for the contacts of stakeholders who they

wanted to engage with further. These follow-up conversations helped in concretising the actions that the government needed to take immediately to boost trade and protect firms affected by the crisis. The deliberations with selected and trusted stakeholders contributed to the instrumental, embedded, and transparent use of evidence.

We capture below different instances of evidence use. In the first two instances, 'expert opinions' gathered through sustained dialogue were used directly to inform government actions, illustrating the instrumental use of evidence. The third and fourth instances show how the dialogues contributed to the embedded use of evidence. Our government partners saw the value of the dialogue process and the partnership with SDPI for accessing evidence. They set up institutional structures and a formal

partnership to continue the use of stakeholder feedback in government decision-making on a regular basis. Finally, the fifth instance of evidence use highlights how the dialogues contributed to the transparent use of evidence by building awareness of, and consolidating knowledge on, the various issues faced by the trade sector, particularly during the pandemic.

Feedback received from our co-hosting government partners (who participated in the sessions) after each dialogue suggests that the PPDs offered a useful platform for them to rapidly explore evidence on policy-relevant questions and engage with stakeholders to understand their challenges and work out solutions. As the feedback survey yielded very few responses, we received this feedback during the debrief meetings held after each of the dialogues.

1. Release of exporters' sales tax refunds

In one of the dialogues on taxation measures, a business association leader suggested that the government could support exporters battling liquidity challenges during the pandemic by releasing exporters' sales tax refunds for the year 2020. The issue was also profiled in media coverage on the dialogue and in an editorial piece published by SDPI in a mainstream national daily.^{viii}

After the dialogue, officials from the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) asked SDPI to help with setting up a follow-up meeting with the association leader who had participated in the dialogue. The chairperson of the FBR acknowledged on Twitter an opinion piece published by SDPI, and they were keen on understanding the issue better. Subsequently,

the FBR directed chief commissioners to act on all tax refund applications. At the time of writing, it is believed that refunds of over Pakistani rupees (PKR) 175 billion were released during calendar year 2020.^{ix,x}

2. Government withdraws customs and regulatory duties on selected imported goods

Pakistan's textile sector contributes nearly 67% to Pakistan's exports and 40% to industrial employment.^{xi} Data released by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics showed that, in April 2020, textile exports declined by nearly 65% year-on-year to US\$ 404 billion – the lowest level in almost 17 years. Order cancellations and shipments delays during the global lockdown were some of the reasons cited for the plummeting exports.^{xii}

The Ministry of Commerce was keen to receive suggestions from stakeholders on inputs that are imported for production processes and that are important for stimulating exports. In response, SDPI organised the session 'The textile sector's competitiveness amid COVID-19'. This discussed the need to reduce tariffs on

imports to help textile sector exports. The issues flagged by a representative from a multilateral development assistance agency spurred discussion in the dialogue. Following the dialogue, SDPI received a request for a follow-up meeting with a business association member engaged in the dialogue. These discussions with stakeholders helped inform the government's decision to withdraw customs, regulatory, and additional duties on more than 163 tariff lines in order to increase the share of human-made fibres for better per-unit prices on international markets.^{xiii} In debrief discussions with the Ministry of Commerce, the Planning Commission, and the National Tariff Commission, the role of SDPI and the dialogues was highlighted as a contributory factor in this policy change.

3. Setting up a stakeholder sub-group on industry and enterprise, Planning Commission

The engagement with SDPI on the dialogue series helped fuel the Planning Commission's interest in setting up a sub-group on industry and enterprise that would work as a strategic consultative working group to discuss policy issues in this area. After nine dialogues had been held, SDPI received a request from the commission to nominate firm owners who could be part of this sub-group. The Planning Commission was interested in securing representation from large firms, chambers of commerce, and trade associations. SDPI drew on its experience in the dialogues to nominate members for this group.

The objective of setting up such a sub-group was to have continued conversations about emerging issues with key stakeholders, and to receive their inputs on the measures that could be put in place to support recovery from the pandemic. Two of the dialogues were convened as closed-door discussions with just the sub-group members. In the first closed-door dialogue, industry representatives gave an overview of the strategies they had adopted to adapt to COVID-19. They also provided the government with policy recommendations on ways to manage the economy while not compromising the health of citizens. In the

second meeting, SDPI presented a summary of the recommendations to the advisory committee of the Planning Commission. This was followed up with a request to SDPI to make the same presentation to the National Command and Operation Centre – the country's apex body for COVID-related policymaking.

After the completion of the 12 dialogues, SDPI has received requests from the Planning Commission to continue to moderate the

conversations with this sub-group. By March 2021, two more sessions with the sub-group had been held. The setting up of this working group has helped institutionalise the dialogue process with stakeholders. The sub-group has the mandate to make recommendations on policies to aid economic recovery from the pandemic. What remains to be seen is if the sub-group can sustain itself beyond the period of crisis created by the pandemic.

4. Partnerships for knowledge sharing

Spurred by the PPDs, SMEDA and the Competition Commission of Pakistan sought to formalise their partnership with SDPI. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between SDPI and these government agencies to establish a partnership to carry out research and support the facilitation and co-hosting of conferences, policy dialogues, and training programmes. SDPI has been asked to draw on the PPDs to provide the agencies with

specific pieces of analysis on a monitoring and evaluation framework for SMEs, and to begin joint collaborative research projects on SME development, entrepreneurship, sustainable development, economic policy, finance, trade, and business development services. SDPI was also asked to conduct an orientation for government staff on how to conduct PPDs, and to document the proceedings for any necessary follow-up actions.^{xiv}

5. Contribution to a training module for civil servants

SDPI drew on what it had learned from the PPDs to inform a module titled 'Trade protocols amid COVID-19', which was part of a training programme for an incoming batch of civil servants working in the area of commerce and trade. This was delivered at the Pakistan

Institute of Trade and Development. Sessions based on the lessons learned from the PPDs were conducted in December 2020 and January 2021.^{xv}



What did we learn?

Multiple factors seemed to influence whether and how the PPDs supported evidence use. Here we reflect on these and take stock of what worked and what we could do better in order to improve the design and implementation of PPDs to promote evidence use. Feedback from our government partners suggests that the PPDs offered a useful platform for them to rapidly explore evidence on policy-relevant questions and to engage with stakeholders to understand their challenges and work out solutions.

A crisis can make stakeholder engagement an urgent priority for decision makers. Both public and private sector stakeholders were eager to engage with each other through the dialogue process. They were interested in investing time and resources in collaborative thinking to manage the pandemic and support the recovery of the trade sector. There was an eagerness to

identify solutions that could address both the short- and medium-term challenges presented by the pandemic. There was also particular interest in learning from the experiences of other countries on how they are managing the tricky trade-offs between health and economic growth.

A survey carried out by the SEDI team in March 2021 to examine the political economy of evidence use in the trade and commerce sector also underscores what we observed through the dialogues – that the government's demand for,

and commitment to use, evidence has increased since the pandemic struck, as there is a need to identify quick solutions to emerging problems.^{xvi,3}

Institutionalisation of the dialogue process through a stakeholder sub-group at the Planning Commission and formal partnerships showed the government's interest in continued deliberation with stakeholders to address emerging issues. However, it is unclear whether this motivation to engage will be sustained after the crisis is considered to be over.

Strong, trust-based relationships are key – and it takes sustained engagement to build them

It was possible to implement the dialogue series rapidly and efficiently – in terms of attracting the right participants, raising visibility in the media, and exerting overall influence – because our government partners trusted SDPI as a national think tank that could convene these discussions. SDPI's track record in policy research and engagement⁴ in the commerce and trade sector also helped in motivating private sector entities to come forward and engage with the government. SDPI was able to leverage its established networks with business and trade associations, academics, and donors to draw in relevant individuals for the dialogues.

The dialogues drew out the key issues that the private sector was facing during the pandemic and promoted discussions of the evidence. But as the instances of evidence use discussed earlier highlight, follow-up conversations with stakeholders were needed to establish a better understanding of the problem and to develop solutions. Credibility and trust were the key factors influencing who the government wanted to engage with following the dialogues. Most of the

business owners that the government was keen to engage with were well known in the sector and often belonged to business or trade associations with a track record of policy engagement.

The fact that SDPI received multiple government requests to identify appropriate stakeholders for follow-up conversations highlighted the trusted role the organisation played in brokering relationships and building networks effectively. SDPI's ability to convene and structure these conversations again highlighted the important role an evidence broker plays in turning stakeholder feedback into concrete and feasible actions that the government can take.

Continued engagement with the government mattered for building the necessary amount of trust to formalise the relationships (in the form of MoUs and other partnerships) which are required to start to embed evidence use in organisations' systems, processes, and cultures.^{xvii}

The formalising of relationships in some cases also extended to SDPI entering into partnerships with other non-government knowledge producers.⁵

It took a series of dialogues to build trust and to strengthen the demand-driven nature of the exercise

Studies have shown that having just a one-off dialogue event with policymakers may not have much of an impact. There may be limited engagement from policy actors and not enough time to develop an action plan or set up monitoring mechanisms for follow-up.^{xviii} Many of these challenges can be overcome when a series of dialogues is set up.

After the first few dialogues, there was a notable increase in the engagement of the government partners. As they started to feel more comfortable with the exercise, they played a more active role in agenda-setting and coming up with questions for the private sector representatives. They also took on the moderator's role for a few sessions and were actively engaged in the discussions.

Although an initial set of topics were discussed for the 12 sessions, the first few dialogues helped government representatives identify more relevant topics for further discussion. For instance, at the government's request, an additional session was dedicated to discussing data protection and cyber security in the context of digital trade in Pakistan. The government representatives were also keen to have one session focused purely on hearing from donors and multilateral and bilateral agencies on the use of COVID-19-related evidence in policymaking. As we progressed through the dialogues, the exercise became more demand-driven. Retaining flexibility and keeping the process more iterative also strengthened this aspect.

While framing recommendations for action, consider the decision-making process involved

There was variation in the traction that the dialogues generated: some dialogues triggered more conversations than others. A couple of dialogues led to follow-up meetings, which in turn informed and expedited government actions – as seen in the example of the exporters' sales tax refunds and the withdrawal of customs and regulatory duties on the import of selected goods. With exports falling drastically in the months following the global lockdown and border closures, it was imperative for the government to rapidly implement measures to support exporters and to retain the country's export competitiveness.

Recommendations that could be implemented through quick executive orders were easier for our government partners to take up. However, recommendations that required approvals from political leadership or parliament could not be expedited in the short term. For instance, some recommendations may get picked up in the next round of amendments to the finance bill or during similar legislative exercises. It is therefore important to factor in the complexity of the decision-making process when making recommendations.

Dialogues can reveal the kinds of evidence that the government values

Our government partners were interested in evidence from stakeholders in the trade and commerce sector that could help inform the government's response measures to help firms to adapt to the pandemic. This was clearly shown in the themes and questions explored.

The evidence that was presented as part of the agenda-setting in each dialogue included findings from surveys, research and evaluations that were carried out by academia, bilateral or multilateral agencies, and business associations. Although our government partners were interested in learning from this evidence,

they were most interested in having follow-up conversations, mainly with large firm owners and representatives from chambers of commerce and business associations. Several of these conversations focused on the challenges faced by firm owners, the impact of government regulations on exporters, and the possible remedial actions that could be taken. The dialogues thus helped to reveal whose opinions were valued as evidence for decision-making. By representing and interacting with several firms, members of the chambers of commerce had earned what may be seen as 'expertise of experience'.^{xix}

Dialogues can reveal where there are evidence gaps

In order to identify stakeholders who could make agenda-setting presentations in each of the dialogues, we had to take stock of the current evidence base. For the session 'Credit and finance issues faced by SME exporters amid COVID-19', the SEDI team tried to reach out to several banks to make a presentation on export financing during the pandemic. However, no banker could come up with a presentation due to the lack of recent research or data in the area. Similarly, for the session 'Challenges of women-

led exporting enterprises amid COVID-19', we were not able to find speakers who were able to share recent research in this area.

In some of the dialogues, representatives from the private sector could not clearly articulate the specific challenges they faced, or come up with recommendations for what the public sector could do to support them or to respond to these challenges.

Dialogues can improve understanding of the barriers to evidence use, which includes the language we use to communicate with decision makers

The dialogues promoted frank conversations that identified barriers to evidence use. At a session entitled 'How evidence on COVID 19

is being used to support the trade sector', senior officials from the Ministry of Commerce suggested that there was very little capacity to

use evidence within government agencies. Even where evidence is available, the public sector finds it challenging to access and use it.

The agenda for this session was developed mainly with contributions from multilateral and bilateral agencies, as well as academia; the public sector did not provide many inputs. A key challenge here was the language used for conceptualising the session. Terms such as 'evidence' can feel like jargon to government officials. The language on 'evidence use' may be part of the development sector's parlance,

but for government officials working in the area of trade and commerce these are terms that are not used in their daily conversation or their work. They find it easier to engage when talking about data, information, statistics, and research. To promote the evidence use agenda and communicate effectively with policymakers, it is important to speak the same language. Replacing what may be considered jargon with terms and phrases that policymakers are more familiar with can help in making our work more relevant and relatable.

A multi-pronged approach to evidence translation and communication helps in amplifying key messages

The SEDI team worked on making the discussions in the dialogues widely accessible. By conducting the sessions as webinars, participants across the country and globally could join the discussion. Most dialogues (except the closed-door sessions) were recorded and posted on the SDPI website. A total of 47 media articles and six opinion pieces were published on the dialogues. All the communication products related to the dialogues – the summary reports, recordings, and media articles – were disseminated on Twitter. The chambers of commerce and business councils drew on the information from our products for their internal newsletters, which contributed to wider dissemination.

After each dialogue, we received requests from public and private sector representatives to access the recordings or the communication products. The SEDI team also took a proactive approach in sharing the communication

products with key government and private sector officials who are in a position to take policy decisions.

The government's interest in including journalists in the dialogues speaks to the nature of its relationship with traditional media. However, this may not work in contexts in which a government is wary of including the media in policy dialogues. Based on the feedback we received, it was clear that our government partners were interested in the media coverage for several reasons: the articles showed that the government was engaging with stakeholders through the dialogue process; they helped in highlighting the most relevant issues from the citizens' perspective; and they provided an accessible summary of the key takeaways from the conversations that could be used in discussions with colleagues. Government staff also picked up on the Twitter conversations, particularly around the media articles.

Responses to a SEDI survey (March 2021)^{xx} of government officials also showed that general media reporting, research-based media articles, webinars, and social media channels are considered to be key sources of evidence. This corroborates what we observed in the dialogues.

In the particular instance of the exporters'

sales tax refunds, media channels helped in amplifying the issue and bringing it to the government's attention. It is also notable that the government's decision to release the refunds was covered by the press.^{xxi} Similarly, the issue of reducing tariffs on inputs also received significant traction in the media.^{xxii}

An inclusive dialogue requires dedicated effort and a better understanding of relationship and power dynamics

Data on participation in the dialogues (see Annex B) show that most of the participants were firm owners and members of business bodies, followed by academics and representatives from donors and bilateral and multilateral agencies. There were notably fewer women than men participating in the dialogues. For an inclusive dialogue, a lot more work needs to go into evidence brokering – linking stakeholders, translating evidence, and evolving actionable recommendations. Powerful lobbies can silence those who do not feel empowered to speak up.

The session 'Challenges of women-led exporting enterprises amid COVID-19' brought to the forefront the challenges in identifying women who could join the dialogue as panellists. The women business owners who we approached were either apprehensive about sharing their challenges with the government or they thought there was no point in raising their issues with the government. They were also concerned about whether their participation would affect their relationship with both the government and the chambers of commerce. The SEDI team had to persuade and reassure these business owners

about the dialogue being a constructive space before they agreed. In the end, we had a very engaging discussion; however, it took more time and effort to prepare panellists for this session than for the other sessions.

Our experience highlights the many challenges that women face in the trade and commerce sector. Women are under-represented at higher levels in the chambers of commerce and business associations. In some cities, there are dedicated women's chambers of commerce and industries; however, government departments usually only reach out to the mainstream chambers of commerce based in the cities, or to the apex body of these chambers, i.e. the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industries.

The SEDI team made efforts to draw in a diverse set of stakeholders to engage in the dialogues. For example, we invited representatives from small and rural enterprises, as well as start-ups, to join as panellists as well as participants in the dialogues. However, weak internet connections and a lack of access to technological infrastructure were the

reasons why some participants, particularly representatives from rural enterprises, were unable to join the dialogues. The dialogues were carried out in English as that is the language that was preferred by most of the panellists we invited. Although participants were not prevented from talking in Urdu (in fact, a few panellists did speak in Urdu), this may have been another reason keeping some participants away. The SEDI team tried to overcome these barriers by having separate conversations with representatives of groups that were being excluded from the dialogue. We tried to bring their perspectives into the discussions and also included them in our communication pieces. However, we do not believe this helped in any major way to amplify their voices.

As discussed earlier, based on the pattern of follow-up requests we received from the government, it was clear that they were mainly interested in engaging with large business owners and senior representatives from business and trade associations and drawing

on their tacit knowledge. When we queried our government partners about this preference, they said that these were the people who best understood the government's bureaucratic processes, the institutional landscape, and the regulations involved in various thematic areas. Hence, according to the government, the recommendations that came from them were usually actionable and feasible. They thought that small enterprise owners often just shared a list of challenges, without any suggestions of possible solutions.

Our experiences show that when convening inclusive dialogues, it is important to understand pre-existing relationship and power dynamics between stakeholders. We need to make a concerted effort to create safe and accessible spaces in which to have dedicated conversations with those stakeholder groups that are often left out of 'mainstream' conversations. This is important, in order to ensure all voices are heard and that no one is left behind.

Monitoring progress and adapting as we go is important in order to be able to make necessary tweaks to dialogues

The learning log we maintained helped us to identify operational issues and areas where we needed to gather more evidence, have more discussions, bring in more diverse stakeholders, or carry out follow-ups. It supported monitoring, reflection, and learning, and helped us to take decisions on adaptations as we progressed.

For example, after the first two dialogues, we decided not to have more than six speakers in a panel, to ensure we had sufficient time for

discussions, analysis of the recommendations that were made, and follow-up questions. As discussed earlier, in dialogues where we did not have sufficient diversity in participation, we had separate meetings with stakeholders to understand their perspectives.

The low rate of response to the feedback survey (11 responses in total after 12 dialogues), also meant that we had to be more proactive about seeking direct feedback from stakeholders in

debrief meetings after each dialogue. These meetings were helpful in promoting engagement and ownership of the dialogues. They also helped us to collaboratively reflect, learn, and adapt as we went. Based on these interactions, we changed or added new topics for the dialogues, and showed our flexibility in being responsive to our government partner's need. This kind of adaptive approach is integral to a responsive programme such as SEDI.



Conclusion

The PPDs were an opportunity for SEDI to design a timely intervention in Pakistan. Deliberative dialogues with stakeholders were an appropriate strategy for meeting the government's urgent need to engage with stakeholders and evolve rapid response measures in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The value of deliberation to understand the nature of problems and to come up with actionable measures was clear. Our experience shows that building relationships of trust and strengthening collaborative partnerships with government stakeholders is key in sustaining an interest in evidence. Investing in evidence translation and integrating communication activities with dialogues is important in order to amplify messages and build traction. Most importantly, significant effort needs to go into making stakeholder dialogues truly inclusive. Making different voices count is a priority that we need to address.

Annex A

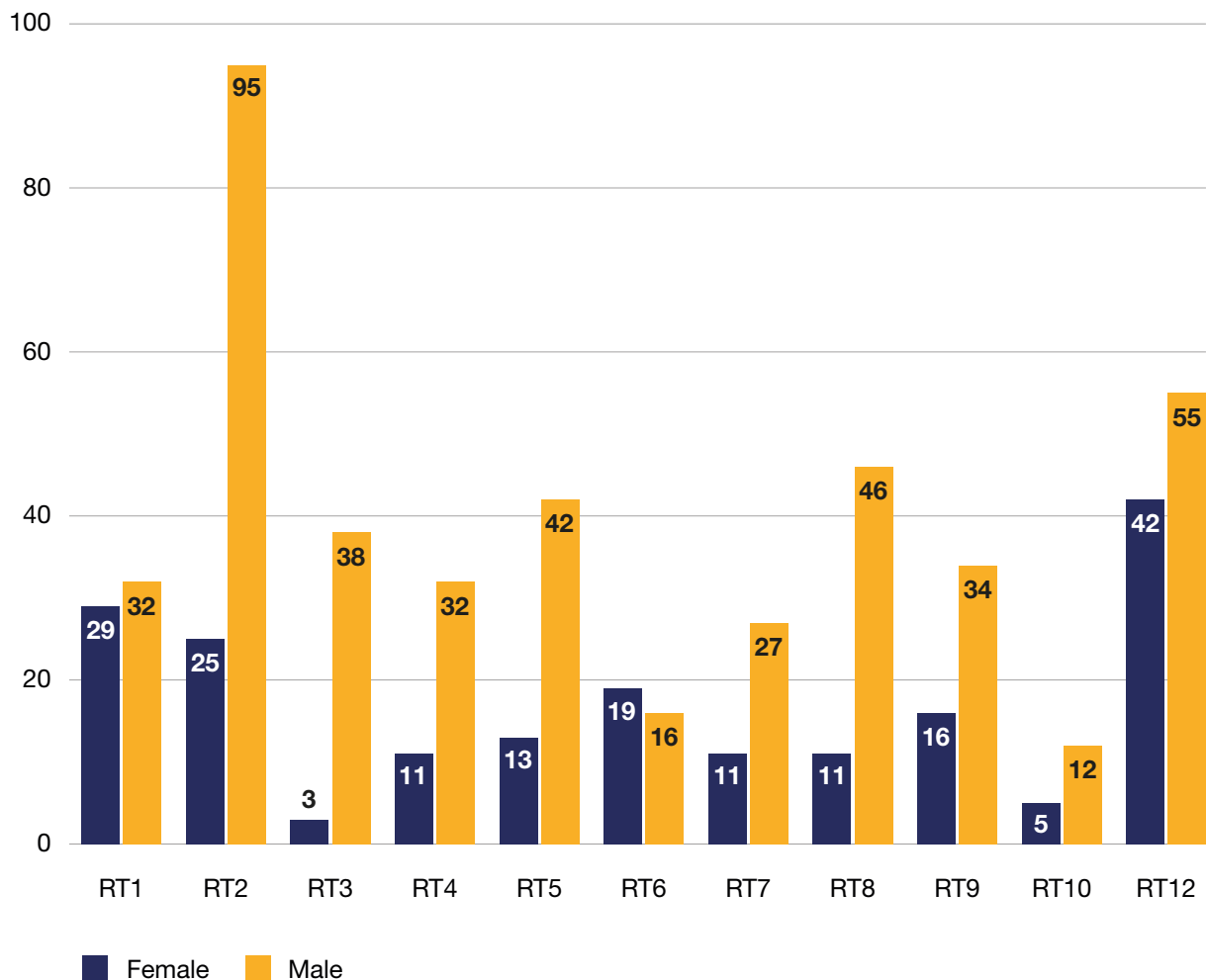
List of 12 stakeholder dialogues

Session I: 8 July 2020
Consultative dialogue: The textile and garment sector outlook amid COVID-19
Session II: 22 July 2020
PPD: Improving the value addition and export potential of the horticulture sector
Session III: 11 August 2020
Consultative dialogue: Taxation measures to support the textile sector's competitiveness amid
Session IV: 25 August 2020
Consultative dialogue: Credit and finance issues faced by SME exporters amid COVID-19
Session V: 10 September 2020
Consultative dialogue: Expediting trade facilitation reforms for the manufacturing sector amid
Session VI: 24 September 2020
Consultative dialogue: Pakistan in digital trade – challenges and opportunities
Session VII: 7 October 2020
Discussion meeting: Challenges of women-led exporting enterprises amid COVID-19
Session VIII: 21 October 2020
Discussion meeting: Digital trade barriers: the role of data protection and cyber security
Session IX: 4 November 2020
Discussion meeting: How is evidence on COVID 19 being used to support the trade sector?
Session X: 18 November 2020
Planning Commission: Advisory Committee's sub-group on industry and enterprise
Session XI: 26 November 2020
Meeting of the Planning Commission's Advisory Committee
Session XII: 15 December 2020
COVID-19-related evidence in policymaking: the perspective of development partners

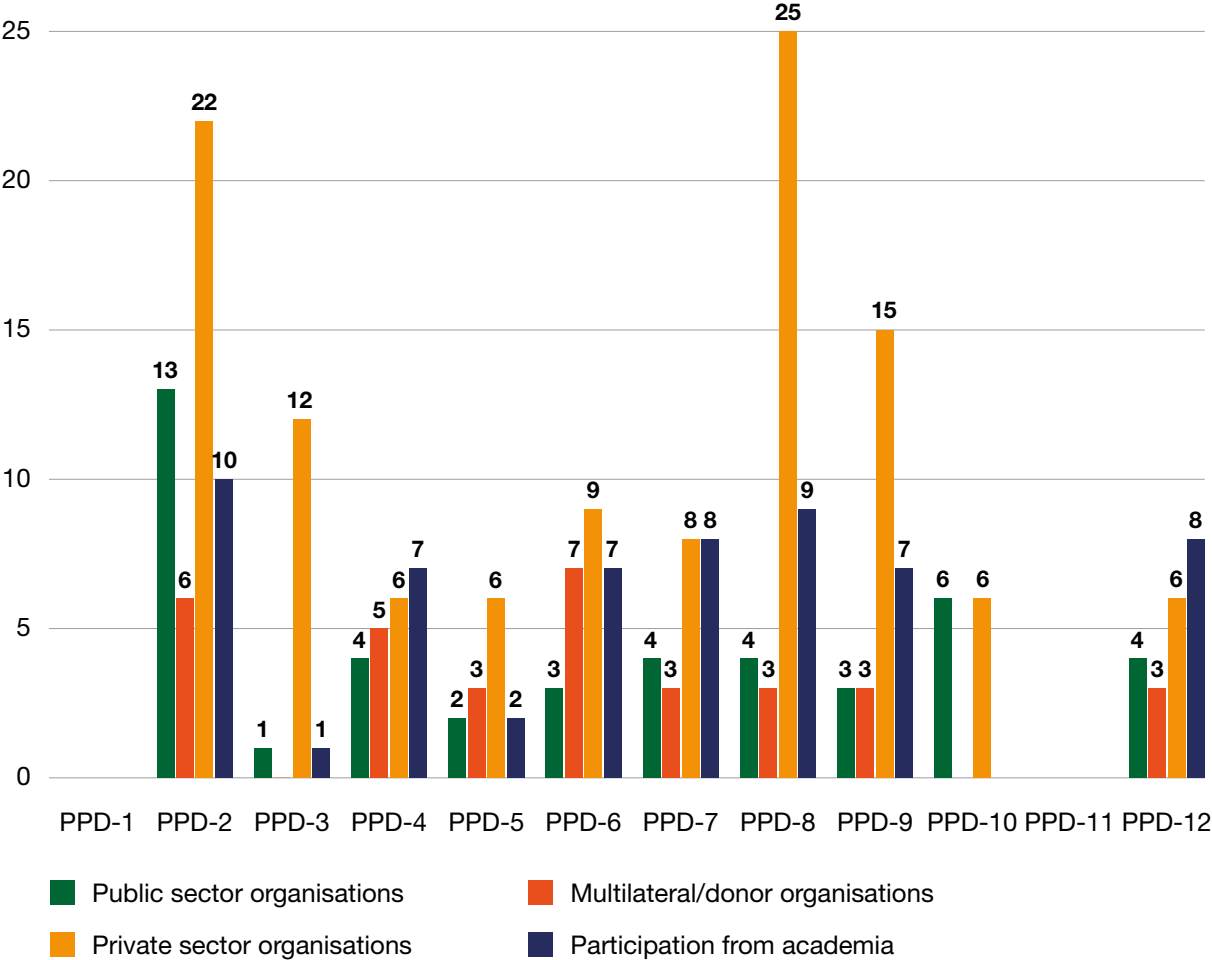
Annex B

Data on participation in stakeholder dialogues⁶

Number of participants by gender



Number of participants by organisation



About SEDI

Strengthening Evidence Use for Development Impact (SEDI) is a five-year programme (2019-24) that is working on increasing the use of evidence by policy makers in Uganda, Ghana, and Pakistan. In partnership with country governments, this programme aims to develop capacity and promote innovation in increasing evidence-informed decision making. SEDI is funded by UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

The SEDI consortium is led by Oxford Policy Management and comprises national, international, and regional partners. The national lead organisations – the African Center for Economic Transformation in Ghana, the Economic Policy Research Centre in Uganda and the Sustainable Development Policy Institute in Pakistan – provide programme leadership and coordination in each country. These national organisations are authoritative voices in policy processes and will ensure effective engagement and a sustainable legacy for SEDI.

The international partners – International Network for Advancing Science and Policy, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation, the Overseas Development Institute, and Oxford Policy Management – as well as the regional partners – the African Institute for Development Policy and the Africa Centre for Evidence – contribute their knowledge and years of experience in working with governments across the world to promote evidence-informed development. They provide technical thought partnership, facilitate cross-country learning, and collaborate on programme delivery.

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Endnotes

¹SEDI defines evidence as including: government statistical, survey, and administrative data; evidence from research; evidence from citizens, stakeholders, and role players; and monitoring data and evaluation evidence.

²The other options considered by the government for accessing evidence included developing a portal for stakeholder participation, rapid literature reviews, and engagement with global forums (under the auspices of the United Nations) to learn from the experiences of other countries and regions. A portal would have been expensive and some of the other options would not have brought in the perspectives of a diverse set of stakeholders, and would not have facilitated discussion with them.

³The survey carried out in March 2021 examined the evidence ecosystem and evidence use in Pakistan, and whether and how it has changed during the pandemic. The survey received a total of nine responses from government officials and two from academics.

⁴SDPI's standing as a knowledge intermediary was recognised in the global think tank ranking exercise conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

⁵SDPI went on to sign an MoU with the Peshawar Chamber of Small Traders and Small Industries to jointly conduct research on developing business-friendly policies and supporting knowledge-sharing activities.

⁶Quantitative indicators for monitoring were set up after the first session had already been conducted; thus, the numbers for the first session could not be recorded. However, other indicators (such as participants by gender) were in place from the start and can be viewed in the next graph. Similarly, the 11th session was managed by the Planning Commission and audience tracking was not possible.

Image Credits

Muhammad Tariq sells vegetables at the Empress Market, a colonial era market that is one of the busiest and most popular for shopping in Karachi. IMF Photo/ Saiyna Bashir

College student wearing N-95 mask for corona protection portrait. Kasif Javed/ Shutterstock

Supporting and Protecting Human Rights Defenders, Pakistan panellists. US Mission Geneva

FELTP: The Frontline of Defense Against COVID-19 in Pakistan. CDC Global

High-level Event on Digital Transformation for All: Empowering Entrepreneurs and Small Business. High level speakers spanning from Khurram Dastgir Khan (Minister of Commerce of Pakistan) to Sorasak Pan (Minister of Commerce of Cambodia). UNCTAD

Gathering around. Hussaan Zaidi, Sustainable Development Policy Institute

Pakistan Young Entrepreneurs conference 2012, break out groups. US Embassy Pakistan

Female hand writes in blue pen in a notebook. Nadeyeva Tatiana

Islamabad Reunion of the Pakistan-US Alumni Network 2013. US Embassy Pakistan

The content of this paper is the sole responsibility of the authors and does not represent the opinions of SEDI or the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Any errors and omissions are also the sole responsibility of the authors. Please direct any comments or queries to sedi@opml.co.uk.

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