

The Resource Persons' Workshop was followed by a National Seminar for a wider audience at which some of these issues were discussed further.

### **3. National Seminar**

The National Seminar, also on the topic "Civil Society Organisations, Evidence and Policy Influence" was held at the Taj Samudra Hotel, Colombo on July 7, 2005. About 40 civil society organisations, policymakers, Government officials and donors participated in this ½ day event (see Annex 7.2 for list of participants).

The National Seminar began with Ms. Priyanthi Fernando, Executive Director of CEPA welcoming the participants and setting out the objectives of the seminar, as follows:

- Share the ideas and themes which came out of the workshop with a larger group of stakeholders
- Share international experience relating to CSOs, evidence and policy influence
- Provide a forum for discussion about issues relating to bridging the gap between evidence and policy influence in Sri Lanka.

#### **3.1. Keynote Addresses**

Two keynote addresses were delivered, by Mr. Lalith Weeratunga, Secretary to the Prime Minister and by Prof. Savitri Goonesekere, Emeritus Professor of Law and former Chancellor, University of Colombo.

Mr. Weeratunga, a veteran public servant with over 39 years of service in the public sector, spoke from the perspective of someone close to the policymaking process in Sri Lanka (see Annex 4 for full presentation). While policymaking is the core business of the Government, there is currently a gap between evidence and policymaking in Sri Lanka. Therefore, Mr. Weeratunga was of the view that the important question now is how to narrow, and if possible eliminate, this gap? He felt that it is necessary to understand how public policies are made because only then we can make the policymaking process more rational.

Mr. Weeratunga began his address by providing an overview of the policymaking process in Sri Lanka. Sometimes a distinction is made between policy and administration, with the former seen as the exclusive work of elected officials while the latter is seen as the domain of administrators. However, this distinction is problematic because the term administration is not straightforward and because politicians rely heavily on the public service and administration when formulating policy. Mr. Weeratunga pointed out the features of the public administration, such as permanency, unity, anonymity and neutrality, which are in stark contrast to the politicians, as reasons for focusing on the public administration service.

Policymaking happens in a cycle, involving policy initiation/agenda setting, appraisal, formulation, implementation, evaluation and continuation/reformulation/termination. This policy cycle provides a number of places in which CSOs can interact and intervene to improve policy but these opportunities are not generally used. In Sri Lanka, policies are usually triggered by a crisis, and one reason for the poor relationship between evidence and policymaking is that in this crisis environment, there is no time to look at empirical evidence. Furthermore, the highest policymaking bodies in Sri Lanka, such as the Cabinet and the Parliament, do not rely on research to make decisions.

In conclusion, Mr. Weeratunga identified several reasons for the gap between research and policymaking in Sri Lanka. These include the poor relationship between research organisations and the bureaucracy, the lack of applied research and research which is not

oriented towards policy influence, bureaucracy which lacks policymaking skills, politicians who are in a haste to make policies and finally, a policymaking system in which the highest policymaking bodies do not rely on research. He felt that research organisations must find a line into the policymaking process before crisis situations are reached, in order to bridge the gap between evidence and policy influence.

Prof. Savitri Goonesekere, who has many years of experience in working in research and civil society organisations, delivered the second keynote address. In contrast to Mr. Weeratunga, her perspective was that of an outsider to the policymaking process. Interestingly, Prof. Goonesekere argued that contrary to popular view, CSOs have been successful in many instances of linking evidence with policy influence in Sri Lanka. Two policies, which are important in the Sri Lankan context as well as being extremely successful in implementation -the family planning policy and micro credit policy-, have been influenced by evidence.

Tracing the development of CSOs in Sri Lanka, Prof Goonesekere said that there is a long tradition of civil society organisations in Sri Lanka, but CSOs tended to be mainly involved in service provision. Only recently, has there been a proliferation of research CSOs.

Prof. Goonesekere pointed out that we tend to distinguish between law and policy as different things, but law is the ultimate culmination of policy. For example, access to health in Sri Lanka is dealt with through policies rather than law/rights but increasingly it is being seen as an enforceable right. One of the most fundamental aspects of being Sri Lankan is our free education system, yet there is no law that says education should be free and compulsory, only policies.

So why is it difficult for research to influence policy? Prof. Goonesekere felt that researchers are guided by certain perspectives but the context is always shifting, which makes relying on evidence rather difficult. The quality of research is an issue here as sometimes getting the research out is more about utilising donor money or “instant” research. Another constraint is the attitude of the bureaucracy. Few are willing to listen and instead take their cue from politicians, resulting in the politicisation of the bureaucracy.

Speaking of success stories where CSOs have used evidence to influence policy, Prof. Goonesekere listed policies relating to mental health policies for migrant workers, agrarian reforms, reforms to the penal code. A significant failure cited was that of gender discrimination under the LDO land policies. Despite more than 20 years of research and push to change policy, when a decision was finally taken by the Cabinet on this issue, the entire body of research was ignored.

In order to bridge the gap between research and policy, several things are needed. Firstly, CSOs need to get involved in task forces and panels set up by the Government. This approach is particularly influential when the individuals who have done the research sit in these task forces and panels. This would also allow CSOs to find out what issues are being considered within the policy circles. Secondly, publications need to be disseminated at the political/policy level. There are avenues to access; for example, Ministers can be catalysts for change but only if they are given the information. The litigation path is another strategy, though the Government may see this approach as an obstacle to their agenda. Parliamentary Select Committees and the media present other opportunities. Prof. Goonesekere noted that one of the advantages of publicising research through media is that politicians and bureaucrats get more interested when there is publicity.

While pointing out that the problem in Sri Lanka is that policies are too much dictated by politics, Prof. Goonesekere concluded her remarks by reiterating that there are, in fact, spaces for CSOs to link research with policy influence as clearly shown by past experiences in Sri Lanka.

### 3.2. Discussion

Following the keynote addresses, Mr. John Young and Mr. Naved Chowdhury from ODI presented an overview of ODI, the CSP Programme and the CEL Framework. Thereafter, Nilakshi De Silva, CEPA, provided a summary of the case studies as well as the issues and ideas that arose from the Resource Persons' Workshop.

Some of the main points that arose from the discussion that followed these presentations are summarised below:

- One problem is that the discussion about linking research with policy influence is carried on among those who already believe that policies should be based on evidence. These people are not the obstacles and there is no advantage in preaching to the converted, as it were. What is needed is a strategy to involve policymakers, bureaucrats and the media in this dialogue.
- The issue of language was also discussed at length. There is a need to go beyond an elite discussion conducted exclusively in English and to reach decentralised administration structures. Research CSOs need to consider incorporating translation and dissemination costs at the project proposal, contract negotiation stage.
- In this regard, the importance of creating a responsible media was noted, through for example, training good journalists, supporting journalism courses etc.
- While directing research evidence at the bureaucracy and other stakeholders is an option, it is not possible to completely ignore politicians, when attempting to influence policy. One option is to “create a din” through the media, especially in rural areas by creating awareness of issues among the public.
- Policies in Sri Lanka are often made due to the pressure from the international community. How can we use this pressure to our advantage without being co-opted by it? International and regional agendas are shifting – so there is a need to be selective.
- A substantial amount of research evidence is generated by the State sector, for example by institutions such as the Central Bank, the Department of Census and Statistics, the DEA, to name a few. When policymakers often ignore the evidence generated by the state sector, how can we get them to listen to CSOs?

### 4. Some Thoughts on the Way Forward

A large majority of those who were present during the Sri Lanka consultations felt that the ODI/CEPA workshop and seminar began an interesting dialogue, which needs to be taken forward. Participants expressed many thoughts about the way forward, and they are summarised below as three main suggestions:

- ***Need to put the importance of linking research/evidence with policy on the agenda***  
The popular view in Sri Lanka is that politicians make public policy in an ad-hoc manner, without reference to any evidence or research. While on the one hand this gives rise to a sense of pessimism among research CSOs, on the other hand it perpetuates the idea and lessens the likelihood that this status quo will change. That public policies should be linked to evidence is not as yet a widely accepted idea in Sri Lanka and it needs to be put on the public discourse agenda, as a first step to changing the status quo in Sri Lanka. A

programme to put evidence-based policy making on the map needs to be developed, which addresses this issue at the national level as well as at the level of donors.

- ***Need to convince other stakeholders of the importance of this link***

Research CSOs are already convinced of the need to link evidence with policy and talking among ourselves only results in limited progress. Those who are not convinced are the ones who can make a change, such as policymakers, bureaucrats and the media. There is a need to involve these stakeholders in this dialogue about bridging the gap between evidence and policy.

- ***Need to provide a forum to continue this discussion***

While the national consultations gave rise to an interesting discussion on linking evidence with policy, the discussions also highlighted many other issues that were not dealt with in depth. For example, what kind of research should influence policy, is there a right kind of evidence, is evidence in fact value-free and neutral, is there a right way to influence policy such as being inclusive, how does one “make a din” in order to be noticed by policymakers etc. In addition, the consultations made it very clear that there are many more case studies, which show how evidence can be successfully linked to policy influence in the Sri Lankan context, which may provide more lessons for research CSOs. There is a need to continue the dialogue that began with the Sri Lanka national consultations and a forum needs to be created for this purpose. This may give rise to a network of organisations which debates and discusses these issues on a regular basis.

## **5. Evaluation**

The following section provides a summary of the feedback received from participants at the Resource Persons’ Workshop and the National Seminar.

Overall, the participants at both the Resource Persons’ Workshop and the National Seminar appreciated that the consultations were firmly rooted in the Sri Lankan context. The four case studies as well as the key note addresses provided much useful material about the policy context and policy influencing processes in Sri Lanka, which can be of practical use to the participating CSOs. It would have been appreciated if the policy influencing tools were also similarly contextualised for the country context.

In addition to the informal feedback received from participants, formal, written feedback was also sought. Five workshop participants provided written feedback, which was on the whole very positive. A majority of responses (87%) were either “good” or “excellent”, no responses indicated “poor” or “very poor”. All respondents felt that the objectives of the workshop had been defined and achieved and that the concepts had been explained clearly. One respondent raised the lack of time spent dealing with the complexities of research and evidence but in general, respondents felt that time allocation had been either good or fair. One respondent identified the working through Sri Lankan case material, the tools provided by ODI as well as the overall discussion to be very valuable. Regarding follow-up options, the possibility of facilitating the formation of a working group discussing policy issues and identifying joint areas of work was brought up. In addition, the involvement of the corporate sector for policy lobbying was suggested.

Five evaluation forms were received from participants at the seminar. The feedback received was generally positive with a majority of responses being either “good” or “excellent”. In particular, all those who provided feedback saw the seminar topic as well as the conference arrangements as good or excellent. Respondents who had not thought of these issues before and saw the seminar as an eye-opener, and those who had always considered the

relationship between research and evidence an intriguing topic, found the seminar useful for their work. Three out of the five respondents felt that the seminar discussion was excellent while four out of the five respondents felt that all seminar speakers were good or excellent. The one dissenting participant was unhappy that the ODI presentations were not adequately linked to the Sri Lankan context, or more specifically, the keynote addresses, which preceded the presentation. Finally, one participant felt that the venue was not appropriate.