



## Influencing policy in a pro-poor manner: KR. Viswanathan, India

### 1. Involvement in promoting a pro-poor agenda in policy dialogue

In India, which is of continental dimension and diversity, one has to distinguish between national and provincial (state) level policies. And one has to recognise that in a few sectors, at times no clear-cut policies are available or explicitly stated. However, there are a plethora of guidelines, national missions, centrally sponsored schemes, state funded programmes etc. which provide the strategies, direction, guiding principles and operational elements.

The mere existence of a policy does not guarantee its effective implementation. The policy might look very good on paper, but many not mean much in practice. A lot therefore, depends upon the extent to which the strategic orientations and guiding principles are put into practice. At times, practices on the ground may be pro-poor, and sensitive to the needs and demands of the disadvantaged; yet without an officially approved policy frame.

How does one follow up on pro-poor policies at different levels? Say 25 years ago, senior level staff within the Government of India level were instrumental in formulating policies based on their own perceptions and judgements. Things have changed for the better now. Thanks to the growth of internet and other modern communication tools together with overall awareness, there is an element of participation in policy making, not only at different levels within the Government system, but also the engagement of the civil society and communities at large in shaping policy agenda.

Being a foreign organisation, that too a small bilateral agency in terms of resources deployed, SDC has to be very cautious and strategic while approaching policy related issues, both at the level of the Government of India and at the State level. If our feedback and response is not put in a positive and diplomatic frame, there is a possibility of encountering resistance (if not hostility) to our suggestions, even though we may have very cogent and convincing arguments for putting things in a certain way. This is one of the reasons why we always talk in terms of 'contributing to policy development' rather than 'trying to influence policies'.

Rather than setting apart 'exclusive time' for engaging key actors in policy dialogue, it is often vital to remain

open, flexible and available to discuss policy related matters at all opportunities with key persons who contribute to policy development, be they Government or civil society actors. One of the best ways in which we could contribute to policy development is through articulation of field-based experiences and lessons together with the context. At times, we have been successful in influencing policies when we do not use the word 'policy' in our interactions!

A good example of successful contribution to policy development at the national level (with little financial input) relates to our involvement in the preparation of the Five Year Plan proposals of the national Government. Through effective **networking**, SDC has been successful in finding itself represented (either directly, or through its programme support offices or partners) in various important committees and task forces constituted by the Planning Commission in the preparation of the Five Year Plans. This has been very important in enabling us to contribute pro-poor approaches and orientations to Government plans that involve huge financial outlays. Very often SDC representatives are requested to provide briefs, supporting documents, approach papers, situational analysis papers, perspective documents etc. These offer excellent opportunities to include our point of view.

### 2. Whose policy we seek to influence

It is a major challenge to avoid being obsessed by results - in particular, because SDC is trying to influence people **both at central and at state level**. Both levels have their own agenda, with central level having responsibilities for matters allocated to it under the Constitution of India, such as Railways, Defence, Communications Foreign Affairs etc.

On the subjects of SDC's interest, such as effective management of natural resources, watershed development, local governance, rural energy and housing etc. it is mostly the State Governments that enact legislations. A few subjects fall within the purview of what is popularly known as the 'Concurrent List', where both the Centre as well as the States can enact legislation; however, in the event of a conflict between the two, the Central legislation will prevail.

Irrespective of the central/ State nature of the policies and the sectors, most implementation necessarily takes

place at the State level. This is the reason why we feel that it is extremely important not to neglect contributing to policy development at State level.

### 3. Choice of policy or policy issues

A major challenge for us in our dialogue (formal or informal) with key actors on policy development relates to visualisation and articulation of the mechanisms involved in implementation. On the surface of it, most Government policies in the development sector (be it education, health, natural resources management, social justice) are pro-poor, articulating the concerns, issues, needs and demands of the poorer strata of the population. However, the devil is often in the details! If the policy does not have built-in mechanisms for raising awareness amongst the poor about the opportunities offered to them by Government, it does not serve much purpose.

### 4. Knowing that an approach will be poor

To know that an approach will be pro-poor, it is important to go from "bottom up" – looking for the potential to be pro-poor on the ground, starting from there.

### 5. The approach in bringing in a pro-poor agenda

During the process of influencing policy development, we try to look for pro-poor elements in what the Government and para-Governmental organisations are doing and saying. As an example, when the present Congress-led Government came to power over two years ago (with the help of several friendly political parties - including those of the left - to form a coalition government), they came up with a **Common Minimum Programme**, which contained several promises and assurances of providing a fair deal to the poor, deprived and the discriminated. Whenever we discuss the policy development issues with key actors (be it through the instrument of bilateral discussions or through seminars, symposiums, workshops, conferences etc.), our endeavour is always to **link our field experiences** (especially where activities are people-centred, people-led and people-managed) with the provisions of the Common Minimum Programme. In a way, we try to demonstrate that our field work provide good examples of how one could put into operation the Common Minimum Programme.

On the other hand, whenever we come across the not so poor orientations in certain policy prescriptions, we bring these inconsistencies to the notice of the key actors, impressing upon them that the stated pro-poor orientations of the policy do not necessarily result in pro-poor practices and processes in the field.

We also try to invite key people to the field at key moments so that they can **observe the reality in villages**, interact with the community and get their perspectives on various schemes and projects. A very recent example of this relates to the invitation extended

by some of SDC's key partners to Mr Parthasarathi, who has been heading a National Level Committee to review national guidelines for watershed development. In the important report submitted to the Government recently, Mr Parthasarathi has extensively quoted the good field work and good practices (which according to him are worthy of replication at different levels) that are being supported through SDC.

It is also very important that in policy related dialogue, we work both directly and through our partners. For example, through its advocacy activities, our partner the International Water Management Institute has been able to influence national level policies relating to the conservation and optimal use of water, ground water exploitation and recharge, water-energy nexus etc.

### 6. Collaboration with other donors on policy issues

SDC has always endeavoured to collaborate with other donors on policy issues. But donor coordination on policy related issues depends upon several factors, including the interest and inclination of the other donors. SDC has also been encouraging some of its key partners at the national level to bring the donors to a common platform to discuss policy related issues.

Owing to its demonstrated credibility, commitment and long presence in a particular field of activity, SDC is sometimes invited by the Government (especially at the State level, which is often crucial) to **convene and coordinate donor platforms**. Very recently, the State Government of Chhattisgarh sent an official request to SDC's CALPI (Capitalisation of Livestock Programme Experiences India) programme, requesting the latter to organise a donor platform in the State to deliberate on livestock-livelihood related issues.

Another important instance relates to the request by the Government of Kerala to the SDC programme CapDeck to convene and coordinate a **multiple stakeholder platform** at the State level, wherein the donors, government institutions and civil society organisations could discuss decentralisation related issues, especially the collaborative action among the panchayati raj institutions and the civil society.

The big and 'powerful' multilateral institutions such as the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, the European Union etc. have not overtly demonstrated an interest in donor coordination in India - although UNDP has, of late, been making some efforts to bring the donors to a common platform.

### 7. Tangible outcomes in promoting a pro-poor approach

My colleague, the Country Director, Francois Binder has given already a number of examples. I would like to highlight the example of the involvement of SDC in the field of **decentralisation**. This involvement was based on specific requests to SDC by the Kerala, Karnataka, Sikkim and Rajasthan governments. Through direct partnership with the state governments and its

institutions, local NGOs as well as local self governments, SDC has been able to ensure that Panchayat Raj Institutions are not promoted just as the third tier of the government, but rather as autonomous institutions of local self-governance, which are responsive and accountable to the needs and requirements of the communities, especially the poor.

Our involvement in **livestock** policy development at the national level is also interesting as we could contribute significantly to the development of both national and state level livestock policies that are people-oriented and responsive to the needs and requirements of the poor. This was possible because of the long association together with established credibility of SDC in India's livestock and dairying sector. We have examples in Sikkim, Rajasthan, Orissa, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and (as I mentioned earlier) we are presently involved through CALPI in the newly formed State of Chhattisgarh.

In the land use sector, SDC was instrumental (through its PIDOW programme and eventually through the Indo Swiss Participatory Watershed Programme in Karnataka) in playing a role in the development of the **national watershed guidelines**. These indeed contain participatory and pro-poor elements.

## 8. Main challenges and main lessons

How and when to bring up lessons learned under the programmes and projects supported by SDC is an important question. Often we are in search for the most appropriate and opportune moment and occasion and try to get the key people involved in the process. Being a relatively small donor, with limited resources for policy development, it is important to maximise outcome whilst minimising outlay.

At times, we have a tendency to limit our interactions to the senior most persons in the government. However, I think it is important that we take into confidence staff at different levels (who probably may stay with the Department for longer periods). Thus the need for investment on middle level staff becomes important.

When the Swiss parliament through the Fasal Commission wanted to look into SDC's impact on development cooperation all over the world, one of the examples of successful cooperation highlighted was that of Kerala. Although the Indo Swiss Programme Kerala (started in 1963) came to an end as far back as 1990, we were still able to gather current information on the milk production and milk productivity status in Kerala that gave a good account of the long-term impact of development cooperation of SDC in the State. We understand that the brief note that we prepared on this was very much appreciated.

In a large democracy like India, creating precedents (and quoting precedents if it suits) often becomes very important. Over two years ago, the Government of India came out with a policy that it would prefer the Government to work with 'big' donors', while the 'small donors' could channel their support to the civil society

organisations. Although this is the stated Government policy, we continue to work with the Government in programmes in Sikkim, and in biotechnology, energy etc. on the basis of memoranda of agreements. In one case, the Government of India itself approached us requesting for an extension (of SDC's support to the Sikkim Government programme) for a period of four years.

An important lesson we learned over the years is to help create a situation in which a demand is expressed, and then quickly respond to that demand. When partners express a demand openly, the work is almost half done. Two examples are as follows.

Our partner WOTR enabled local communities to work in reserved forests because they obtained special permission from the Government, waiving the stipulation that none except the Forest Department can treat reserve forests. This was a very exceptional situation in India. Instead of making a show of the situation to force up-scaling, it was kept a low key affair to gain experience and so prove that communities could handle such situations in a much better manner.

Another example is that of Indo Swiss Project Watershed Development Karnataka. After the Government of India withdrew from the programme, SDC informed the central government that the support to the three NGOs under the project would continue beyond the last phase of the project. This openness and transparency on our part eventually received recognition and support from the Government of Karnataka as we adopted a more of inclusive and reconciliatory approach rather than a confrontational approach. In this specific situation we were sensitive to the vested interests and power dimensions and therefore we were able to act in an objective way, protecting the interests of the community as well as that of SDC.

A second very important lesson is that we should disseminate our experiences, achievements, lessons learned (be they positive or not so positive) after careful and systematic documentation, with all key players. This is with the objective to promote knowledge management and sharing.

Lastly I would like to mention that we should not be 'obsessed' with 'influencing policies'. Contributing to policy development should be considered as a part of our overall strategy in disseminating the positive results and outcomes, methodologies, good practices etc. from our work in the field.

Interview with: Annet Witteveen, finalised with Jane Carter  
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Organisation), and was awarded the prestigious 'Vishist Seva Medal' (VSM) in 1986. He then worked in three different federal Ministries – his last position being Joint Commissioner, Ministry of Agriculture. He has worked for SDC India for over eight years and is currently Team Leader, water sector.