

Keynote 1: Research Priorities for South Asia and Opportunities for Canada South Asia Collaboration | Text Transcript | CIRCLE Graduate South Asia Conference

This is a text transcript for the recorded keynote presentation “Research Priorities for South Asia and Opportunities for Canada South Asia Collaboration” by Dominique Charron. The keynote was part of CIRCLE’s Graduate South Asia Conference, held from September 29 to October 1, 2022.

Transcript:

Dilshan Fernando:

Gwen Chapman is the Provost and Vice-President (Academic), of the University of Guelph., a distinguished researcher and Innovative educator, she joined the University of Guelph in 2016, as dean of the College of Social and applied human Sciences. As Dean, she directed the development of a transformative strategic plan, that led to a significant growth in indigenization and internationalization, as well as research and pedagogical innovation.

Last but not least, Gwen, is a strong ally of Canada India Research Center (CIRCLE). And we have a [fantastic profile of her in our website](#) which I will put the web link in the chat shortly. This is for those who want to learn about Gwen's commitments to internationalization and the support for CIRCLE.

Gwen Chapman:

Thank you so much Dilshan and thank you Sharada, as well, and good morning, everybody. I am delighted to be here to help to open this conference and I want to echo certainly, the thanks that have been given to everybody. It takes a lot of work to organize an event like this and so thank you to all of the people who've been putting a lot of time and effort into, getting us here today. I particularly want to thank and acknowledge the keynote speakers Dominique Charron, who I see has joined us and will be speaking in just a few short minutes.

As well as Rohan Samarajiva, whom we're going to bring you to share their advice and their expertise over the course of the next few days. As I reviewed the, the program for this three-day conference I was really impressed, I was impressed by the number of students who are presenting, I was impressed by the range of universities from Canada and South Asia that are represented and I was also really impressed with sort of the range of topics; and you know for me this really speaks to the success of CIRCLE as Sharada, has said I've been a supporter and a champion for CIRCLE ever since it was an idea.

I think that came from Sharada and I was pleased as Dean and now as Provost to be able to support it, coming into fruition as the Canada India Research Center for Learning and engagement. And I think that today's conference really speaks to many of the goals that

Sharada I and that others had for CIRCLE, which is really to connect, I mean certainly with a focus on the link between Canada and India.

Recognizing kind of, the special relationships between Canada and India; the large Indian population, the Indian diaspora population in Canada, the connections that university students and researchers have had for years between, certainly the University of Guelph and India and, and sort of the deepness of those connections. As Provost I would say some of my priorities are ensuring that the university provides a learning environment that nurtures student creativity and innovation and also that promotes internationalization in multiple ways that includes bringing international students to Canada.

But it also involves having Canadian students travel internationally as well as to interact in other ways. And I think this conference is a great example of that without having to travel there are going to be connections forged between students from various parts of Canada, as well as not only from India but other South Asian areas as well.

And this is just really great to see, and I would say that it also helps to forge the connection between our faculty members, even though this is a graduate student research conference, we recognize that you're all working with esteemed researchers, and I think this helps to again strengthen those connections between Canada India and other parts of South Asia. It's also I think just a great opportunity for graduate students to get to know each other and to showcase the research and exciting topics and areas that you're exploring, your growing expertise in your chosen fields.

CIRCLE, as you can see from its name with engagement at the end, as the last word there, it really is aimed at fostering those connections, building a global community, where people can work together and learn from each other. So, I think with that, I am going to close my welcome, but again thank you to everybody who has made this event happen. Welcome and I wish you all the best for a wonderful conference.

Dilshan Fernando:

Thank you so much Gwen, for being here and sharing your thoughts with us. With that let me welcome Dominique Charron to our conference, to be a keynote speaker for today's event, and let me briefly introduce you, Dominique. Dominique Charron is vice president for programs and Partnerships at Canada's International Development Research Center, IDRC, where she leads programming strategy in five key areas of development around the world.

She has led programs on agricultural productivity and food security innovations in animal health, reducing vulnerability to climate change, ecosystem approaches to health, and prevention of emerging public health threats. Before joining IDRC, she led research programs on public health and climate change at the public health agency of Canada. A veterinarian and epidemiologist, she is a repetitive of the one Health, high level panel advising U.N intergovernmental agencies. Thank you so much for being here Dominique over to you.

Dominique Charron:

Thank you. Can you hear me? So, thank you very much. Thank you Dilshan and Sharada and Gwen, and the CIRCLE group for inviting me to do this. I was really touched I'm an alumna of Guelph and so I really welcome the opportunity to, join you and tell you a little bit about what I've been doing, where I am now which is at IDRC, as described and to describe to you a little bit what IDRC does.

With this lens of why research and the funding of research is so important, to achieving International Development objectives of Canada, but also the development objectives in the region, and the importance of evidence for finding solutions for innovating, for transforming and adjusting to the big challenges that we face globally is at the core of, our objectives at IDRC.

And, and to be able to engage with a group of international bright minds at full of energy and thinking about how are we going to make the world better, and doing that in an international collaborative setting as you are here in CIRCLE well that's, just perfect for me and for IDRC. So, thank you very much for the invitation. I'm going to do that exciting slide-share, thing now, which I'm a bit clumsy at because I don't use zoom all the time. How do I do it? Where do I find it? Shares green, big green button, this one yes let's see. Yes, do you see that?

Dilshan Fernando:

We can see that.

Dominique Charron:

Excellent, excited it worked. Now then how do I advance the slides? Do I advance the slides yes, no, yes? Look at that it works. Okay you can tell it, unfortunately I'm one of those people that often has people help me with these things. If so, you've described who I am, where I came from and how important it didn't say.

But I will say how important Guelph was in I would say launching my interest in international affairs and that had to do with a conference, bigger one than this, that Guelph hosted in 1987 around and at the same time as the launch of the our common future report the Brundtland report on sustainable development and that led to a set of, I, was very excited to be able to attend this as the entire university community was; but it was transformative for me, and it really set my thinking beyond being interested in conservation and, and endangered wildlife which was my motivation for going to vet school and to understand the world and the drivers of problems in the world and to engage in a career that's brought me to where I am today.

Now, let's zoom in to the region that you're all most focused on, interested in, and, living in; many of you and here's a list of just a quick survey of our colleagues. We have an office in Delhi, but our colleagues working in South Asia today, on what the key challenges are, and of course Pakistan is underwater, and we know why. And, we are knowing why, and knowing it was coming, still wasn't enough to be able to prevent the devastation that has occurred.

Climate change, fragility of food systems and, and it's so easy, so easily can people wind up insecure, in terms of access to food and nutrition. And decarbonization is a huge challenge for the world, but also for the region we know also from Covid and weak health systems and not only in South Asia, but it is a huge challenge for the region. Given the size of the population, and continuing emerging health threats, both infectious, but also growing burden of chronic disease, geopolitical shifts we would be really, I think ignoring and it's a very important driver of, of issues challenges and development in the region.

If we didn't think about what was going on in the world and how the positioning as powers such as Russia and China and the US are playing out on the landscape of South Asia. And the opportunities but also challenges and threats that that represents for countries in the region and, for the region as well. Gender and other inequalities huge inequalities are a tremendous challenge in South Asia. And I think a real, what's the, word that I'm looking for a real obstacle, I think to really transformative change and progress in religion.

Like everywhere in the world, there's an erosion of trust in public institutions like spread of misinformation and that is complicating, the role of Science and informed decision making, and then I would say the region is also at the forefront of the fourth industrial revolution, which is this transformation that we are experiencing in our work and economies because of digital technologies, big data and the power of AI; and with that comes the need for educated workforce jobs, and so forth to be able to, respond.

So, this is the landscape that we're looking at as IDRC. In terms of thinking about, where to focus our resources on, research and supporting researchers in the region and the conversation is continuing with experts in the region and stakeholders on how to prioritize, how to come at these interconnected issues. Yeah so, I didn't say it but I will say it now, Canada's International Development Research Center and I'll go into what we do and how we came about in a minute.

Our, our vision and our strategy is focused on advancing evidence and research for a more sustainable and inclusive world. I'm speaking to you today from Ottawa, which is on the unseated traditional territory of the Algonquin people, to whom we owe here in Ottawa, and the region a huge debt and a commitment, to engage, understand, repair, and reconcile. The colonial, the impacts of colonialism and the experiences that they have faced over the, the centuries of, European settlement; and of course, tomorrow is our national day of Truth and Reconciliation, and I would be very remiss if I didn't pause a moment and mark that as how important indigenous perspectives are.

And in Canada, we are grappling with this now but also in in other regions of the world and South Asia is absolutely rich with or indigenous people's, original peoples who are in all cases at the margins of society, and the opportunity to draw in their knowledge, engage them more in the kinds of solving the kinds of challenges I spoke about a few minutes ago.

Now, there you see on this slide we were created years ago and we're part of Canada's International assistance, so we're not part of the research funding ecosystem, we're part of the

international affairs ecosystem, but we really straddle both and our mandate is not to fund Canadian researchers because there's an entire infrastructure around the research councils and National Research Council for that. But we, are there to fund the innovators and experts in the regions, where we work and bring their perspectives and ideas to bear on the problems, local problems, but also to help bring that knowledge to the global stage and the Canadian stage.

So, this is where fostering Canadian collaboration such as what CIRCLE is doing is so exciting and important. I think for, addressing what are really global issues, but also helping bring all of these perspectives and innovation, to help us tackle similar issues in Canada. There's where we are so you see there, we have an office in New Delhi and, in four other cities to address the regions where we work and of course we're based in Ottawa.

Now our strategy for the next years in 2021 late 2020, I would say, we launched in early 2021 we launched our new strategy that was a bit delayed because, did we have to rethink what we were up to, in 2020, because of the pandemic. But here's our strategy and 10 years is a very long horizon, but it's a new approach for IDRC, to think over such a long term, and it recognizes the complexity of the challenges, that we're facing but it also recognizes the time it takes for research to be translated into evidence and to be then positioned for use used and deployed at scale to make the difference.

And to be able to capture that distance we've, set out a longer horizon. We've talked about this, certainly the issue that I listed at the beginning are challenges for the whole world and not just for Asia, and we now know that it's going to be impossible to reach most of the targets of the UN Agenda for 2030, the sustainable development goals because of the setback that we have experienced because of the pandemic and the economic disruption that went with it, but not only that things, like climate change and inequality, which are such important drivers of our ability to address others with sort of specific goals within the 17 SDG framework are simply too strong and too important I would say and too determinate to be ignored.

So, we can address food security without addressing climate change and inequality, we can't address gender inequality without thinking about climate change, we can't in all of these different dimensions that affect us and our ability to tackle specific development problems, need to be taken in a much more systemic framework. And that makes it very challenging for decision makers to advance, they'll make decisions, based on the evidence, that they have or the information that they have but it may not be in a systemic context, which may lead to the wrong decisions, the wrong policies further excluding or marginalizing people who are left out, or further increasing vulnerability to climate impact.

So, a systemic lens is needed, the way we work at IDRC, is to really engage with partners, research partners around the world, and bringing about, that high quality research, bringing about innovation, bringing about the evidence, the data, that are needed to help shape change. And there's an important dimension of knowledge sharing and knowledge translation, communication, research engagement but also mobilizing the partners that you need in the

field to bring about that change - whether it's social change or whether it's commercialization and scaling up of an innovation or solution or a set of innovations and solutions.

Researchers can't do that on their own and I'm sure Gwen is, listening and saying, it's a challenge here in Canada too. Here, on our Slide the five areas of programming that, that IDRC has included in its strategy, and they're interconnected, you can see there are some of the, SDG's that the specific entry points are tackling.

We're looking to improve global health, particularly strengthening health systems, to deal with those emerging health threats and to address women's health, sexual reproductive health and rights, maternal health and address that big gap, that's still there climate resilience in food systems improve democratic and inclusive governance, so that people can participate and have a say in the decisions that affect their lives, education, strengthening education, making sure that not only do girls and boys attend school but that the quality of the education they get is adequate, to help them contribute to solving the challenges of the world and participating in the economy of the future.

And then lastly, but certainly not least, figuring out how to support with evidence that important economic transition to a low-carbon future, but to do that inclusively, without leaving anyone behind, enormous challenge where research is needed to bring about the pathways to do it and to do it in low resource settings, among the least developed countries as well as, as, emerging economies.

I'm going to talk a little bit about some examples of how IDRC works in the region, and I've chosen examples that involve Canadian collaboration, to help sort of stimulate our conversation. I've got I think three examples from across our programming, but also, I was thinking about those challenges, that I listed at the beginning; it's really been shocking, and at the same time not surprising, to witness the devastation in Pakistan with the flooding.

IDRC has been funding research on climate change for well almost 15 years now on adaptation and when I talk about adaptation, what I mean is providing the evidence on how people can understand, anticipate, deal with the impacts of the change in climate on their lives and livelihoods and become more resilient to them, to be able to deal either stay or leave but manage those impacts.

We've done this in partnership with the governments of Canada, UK, and the Netherlands, over those 15 years, about 200 million dollars worth of research funded around the world. Our latest space of collaboration was launched with the UK was launched in Glasgow last year, at the climate conference, it's called climate adaptation and resilience, not, a very tricky name to remember; but it builds on the results of the work that's in this slide; and are you seeing my notes or are you seeing the slide.

Dilshan Fernando:

I'm seeing this slide.

Dominique Charron:

Okay, good, so this program the collaborative adaptation research initiative in Africa and Asia, was a seven year, 70-million-dollar, initiative, and that funded large consortia, a multi-country consortium, to tackle adaptation through a trans boundary lens; and highly impacted densely populated climate change hot spots. And one of these, was the, Himalayan Hindu Kush and its associated watersheds.

This program so in the whole program produced 800 scientific papers, produced influenced and or directly contributed to policy changes in 11 of the 17 countries in Asia and Africa, and really demonstrated the value of having strong alleged translation strategies and partnerships and support from, to show up the donor but also locally to be able to help researchers position their work, engage the decision makers, and engage in that post making process.

The Hi-Aware Consortium was led by ICIMOD based in Kathmandu but as an intergovernmental organization, to support development in the mountain regions, and that other partners that you see there including TERI and PARK, from, the region, a really dynamic complex, at times Consortium research, some of the work was very influential; and as I say you know, this is where you're sitting here as a funder of research, name, we knew, we showed , and the IPCC took up the research, not me but the research funder.

The research team was very influential with the work on glacier melt, and the implications for the region. They did not predict that in 2022 there would be a flood of this scale, but they predicted that with the scenarios of global warming this was a very real likelihood, it shows the power of research, but also the limitation right; unless we have adequate investment in the solutions, then we are essentially simply able to point to what will come like an oracle, and not able to do anything to prevent it. So, that importance of engaging decision makers, but also communities in understanding, the evidence, accepting the evidence, and doing something about it before the disasters come; it's so crucial.

Let me go to another slide, another example, I'm sure you'll, want to ask me questions, about this. In 2020, as we were all wherever you were, and I'm sure the university is same thing, trying to deal with and understand what was happening to us with this pandemic, how big a threat it was, and what to do about it and IDRC really has values at our core, responsiveness to local demands and priorities, and as we were getting ready to finalize our strategy and launch a new program framework.

In 2020, we realized that we had to put that on board, and to focus our resources, in supporting experts in developing regions to produce solutions to help, the world deal with the pandemic. We realized that though, that we didn't know necessarily what needed to be done.

So, our team many of whom were actually at the same time in the throws of relocating closer to home because we were going fully virtual, reached out to our network, with policy think tanks around the world asking them, what they were hearing, as key gaps and evidence from

their clients and stakeholders; and there was a resounding need for data evidence and rapid policy options to address the growing economic and social crisis that was upon them as the world locked down, right.

We in the high-income countries went into lockdown, economies ground to a halt and the repercussions of that as you know in the region were tremendous. Suddenly thousands, hundreds of thousands of informal workers found themselves without work and unable to feed themselves and needing to go home where they weren't necessarily going to be any more easily able to feed themselves or be fed.

And this out migration from the cities that occurred in India and in the region was remarkable. Part of what we heard then and what ideas did at that time is we allocated a significant amount of funding about 25 million dollars at that time to support this type of rapid policy research. Essentially a very flexible type of funding, to the think tanks to respond to the questions.

One study, that I'm bringing to your attention here, because it touches on such a large population in the South Asian region, is the study conducted by WEGO, and which is the think and do tank, international think and do tank focused on women and informal workers and it works with a wide network of anti-poverty NGOs and women's rights NGOs and labor organizations.

They found – I need to speed up a little bit – so I will; And they found that close to two billion workers, they found that as we know most informal workers cease to have income overnight and we know that the sector accounts for a huge part of the global economy up to 90 percent of workers in some low and middle-income countries are informal. And we saw a huge impact on their income that still hasn't recovered on. Either 64% those informal workers have only recovered about 64% of their income in the study and home-based workers, particularly in South Asia have not returned to work.

This, this has huge implications for, household income, livelihoods, food security, health care and so on. And so, the implications of the study were to bring that evidence on this, on a sector, where there isn't evidence and helps shape the frameworks and the policy options, for responding helping to strengthen their rights, access to social protection and access to wage protection.

So, last project which is a Guelph project, and I'll just touch on it briefly, is that it's a little bit, well it's research still ongoing now. But this was a really exciting project that looked at how a pretty, I would say technological solution developed at Guelph could be used to address food insecurity. And this is a product called Hexanal; that's been used to it's Jay Subramanian at the Arrell food center and agriculture, Ontario Agriculture College, who's the lead on this project – but developed essentially a spray, a product, that you could apply to fruit whether on the tree or in once picked and delayed it's ripening.

And delay that in a way, that doesn't affect, it isn't a chemical, that is a natural product; doesn't affect the flavor or anything else, and if it's sprayed when fruit or still on the tree it delays. It means, you can pick it long, later, which means you can bring it to market after most everybody else's fruit has been on the market and provides, extends the selling season, and provides that an opportunity for users of this product to access the shoulder season and better price.

Yeah, and though is really good for peaches, apples and nectarines that are grown here in Canada. Hexanal, by the way is a chemical produced by plants, when they're injured, it's, something like the smell of cut grass, sliced cucumber; that's hexanol that's contributing to that smell.

So, this application was done in collaboration as you see with researchers in Sri Lanka and, in India and where it was tested at quite large scale. There are some barriers that were made to its deployment, as a development solution, put it that way because of the cost of producing it, and scaling it. It's not that expensive to produce, and it can be produced at scale, it's easy to apply, no special equipment required, but all those processes and approvals and so forth; first, to register a new product and then the distribution, the manufacturing, distribution capacities remain a child.

And I'm sure many of you who are interested can reach out to Jay Subramanian and get more information on the status of that. I know the work is ongoing to find new markets for this. So, what are the future horizons, and what can we talk about the region is full of growing economic powerhouses or existing economic progresses, the capacity, diversity, level of Education, International networks, capacity for innovation, is a tremendous asset, and not only for the region but for the world, and because of that economic muscle and population size, the countries in the region have geopolitical influence.

ASEAN on the one hand, India on the other. But that opportunity for regional cooperation and Global integration and being a part of the global conversation and solution is an important opportunity for the region.

What do you think? I'd love to hear your thoughts, on where research, can make the biggest difference, what the biggest challenges are what the knowledge gaps are in your experience so that I can take that back to my colleagues at IDRC and help shape our thinking about where our resources to be most useful? I'm also happy to talk about anything else but that was my question. Thanks very much.

Dilshan Fernando:

Thank you Dominique. Thank you for that excellent presentation, rich in data and information. I think we have a lot to talk about, think about. There are some questions in the chat, and I have some questions as well. So, I'll, I'll, start with a question on the chat and, this is a reminder to all the participants here, if you have any questions, you can either put it on the chat or select the, you know, raise your hand button here on Zoom.

But it's preferable, if you can type in the question, so that we can move between questions pretty quickly. I'm going to read one question Dominique, if that's okay with you. So this is a question from Shmuel Yerushalmi. The question is, what do you say about challenge and opportunities of Covid-19 and post Covid? How according to you everybody of us, governments, municipalities, academy, society, can contribute to effective tackling with challenges, that was created as a result of Covid-19 pandemic? It's a question about how do we, in the global.

Dominique Charron:

Well, I think a question is really well posed. So, thank you for that. You know, we, our strategy was oriented around the two global challenges of climate and inequality, there are other global challenges, but we chose those two as ones where we felt our research could contribute the most, the research funding could contribute the most.

However, you can add now the third which is, what the pandemic, the experience, the global experience of the pandemic and the local experience of the pandemic have done. We're still living it, no we're still living the pandemic, and the health impacts of it, but more and more, it's the disruptions to, value chains, that the disruptions in labor markets. The impacts on how people live, work, and what they want to do, so all of them.

And, as I mentioned you know in the informal sector, there are still people who have not been, who have not found a way to get back in, who want to get back into the economy. So, this I would say there is an agenda actually, the U.N. Deputy Secretary General, Amina Mohamed, asked Canada to help steer an international very rapid effort in 2020 and to produce a roadmap, a research roadmap, I can post the link in the chat.

But if you look up research roadmap for post pandemic recovery, you'll find it in there are a number of entry points certainly there's a number of questions, around health systems and so forth and you know, we know, in the region that while countries like India had absolutely devastating waves and real challenges of health system capacity to respond. India was also one of the first successful manufacturers, mass manufacturers, of affordable Covid vaccines and just worldwide exports of that and in fact, our first manufactured.

So, we can see that the role and the perception that the world may have of countries like India needs to change, because of the potential contribution, actual contribution. So, as we think about research questions, and as we think about engaging in this, we know that Covid-19 has transformed the world. We know that with that there's been a backtracking and a loss of ground towards sustainable development goals.

When we look at any research question of any entry point, that you may have, you need to look at it through that lens and understand how the question of the people affected by the problem and the ways forward, in terms of solutions to close on this, that is no I would say south Asia, southeast Asia remain; it is a tremendous environmental change accommodation...

Sharada Srinivasan:

Dominique, I don't know if it is just for me, that your voice is breaking so perhaps you could turn off your video and continue speaking.

Dominique Charron:

I can, I can do that. Yeah, okay, great, yeah, thank you. All right is that better?

Sharada Srinivasan:

Yes, yes, okay.

Dominique Charron:

Good, oh dear, what's going on, oh I know what's going on. My battery is running low. So, just rapidly, you know, thinking about environmental change and the encroachment of development and people on natural areas is a major driver of ecosystem change that contributes to new disease emergence. And Covid you know was more a function of what people were eating and how animals were being marketed.

But the virus comes from bats and the bats are disrupted, and that whole dynamic in the region is tremendously important. You have major threats like Nipah virus that could be the next Covid, so, thinking about for those of you who are interested in environmental management and the intersection of environment and animal, and human health is an emerging, re-emerging field because of Covid. I'll stop there and plug in my computer.

Dilshan Fernando:

Okay, I think we just have a couple of minutes before we move on to the other section. But I'd like to ask Dominique, could you tell us how IDRC supports PhD research specifically? Is there any funding and other opportunities with the IDRC?

Dominique Charron:

Yes, so Canada supports through Universities Canada, the International Development research Awards which are awards of funding, to support international field research. So, for students studying in Canadian universities, this is an annual program of dedicated funding to support international field work. It's not huge, they're not fellowships necessarily, that support your whole research. But it will cover things that the Canadian research councils won't.

That's when so the Universities Canada, International Development Research Awards. The second opportunity although there isn't I think that around active round right now is that Canada contributes significantly to the Queen Elizabeth II scholarships and those are full fellowships to support students around the world to study in Canada. And it is a full fellowship and then in the research that we fund the stipends are an eligible expense.

So, we are very, I would say, open to including training research and graduate studies as part of research expenses and the research that we fund. And then from time to time, we will have specific scholarship programs, around a particular issue. We also have a research internship

award which are called the research awards, and those are for a year-long work and research placement in an IDRC office. And those are also competition, we run annually; it's not a fellowship per se but it's an opportunity for students, we're aiming more for master's transitioning to PhD but an opportunity to come and see, what it's like on the research funding side and to conduct some of the kind of research. Thank you.

Dilshan Fernando:

Okay, thank you so much. I think with that we might have to wind up this keynote session. We are on time, there's another session, next, so thank you so much Dominique for your presentation, you know, research ideas. I hope, you know, PhD Scholars learned a lot about the priority research areas in our region. Thank you so much again for your time. So, that was Dominique Charron, the Vice President for programs and partnerships at Canada's International Development Research Center. Thank you so much Dominique.

Dominique Charron:

Yeah, thank you. I look forward to, to hearing, how the conversation goes for the rest of the day. Thanks very much for the invitation.

Dilshan Fernando:

Thank you.

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