

Keynote 2: Research to Policy in the Global South | Text Transcript | CIRCLE Graduate South Asia Conference

This is a text transcript for the recorded keynote presentation “Research to Policy in the Global South” by Rohan Samarajiva. The keynote was part of CIRCLE’s Graduate South Asia Conference, held from September 29 to October 1, 2022.

Transcript:

Naresh Thevathasan:

Well, good morning, everyone for this CIRCLE session. We have a keynote speaker from Sri Lanka to talk on the topic Research to Policy in the Global South. It is with the great pleasure that we welcome Dr. Rohan Samarajiva, and I would like to give a brief background. He is the founding chair of LIRNEasia. It is a policy think tank in Sri Lanka where they try to bring about policy change through research and science for the betterment of Rural livelihoods and common lives in Sri Lanka.

He is a member of the United Nations Global Policy Advisory Group on the Governance of Data and Artificial Intelligence. He served as the chair of the Apex Information and Communication Technology Agency within the government of Sri Lanka from 2018 to 2019. He was the Director General of telecommunications Sri Lanka from 1998 to 1999 and an associate professor of communication and public policy at Ohio State University from 1987 to 2000. It is a great pleasure, Dr. Samarajiva, for your kind time to come to this workshop or conference to give a presentation.

And my name, as I said is, displayed with us [Naresh Thevathasan], and I was a former associate professor in the School of Environmental Sciences. My research mainly focuses on tree integration into agricultural ecosystems; to bring about environmental, economic, ecological, and social benefits. And so again, I also try hard to bring about policy change in the agriculture sector; where I try to influence provincial and federal government to enhance this type of land systems as climate resilient land use systems, so that common landowners can benefit out of tree integration.

So, without any further ado, it is our great pleasure Dr. Samarajiva, and that we would welcome you to give your keynote speech please.

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

Thank you very much and good morning to everyone. Perhaps there are other time zones involved, in that case good day. I hope you can see my slides – yep, okay. I was thinking when I was invited to talk to you all, what I would have been interested in as a graduate student when I was studying in Canada. About 40 years ago I was at Simon Fraser! So, I was thinking, you know what could have sort of made it more interesting for me to participate in as a graduate

student. Because there are the substantive subject areas that one is dealing with, and then there's sort of the larger issues.

And I see from the program that you're looking at sort of more the process aspects of being a graduate student and being at this stage of your life. So, let me begin, hopefully I will say a few things that are of interest. Okay. Firstly, [indiscernible] this is on a gravestone in a cemetery in London.

On-screen Content:

Current slide has the title "Research to policy." The text underneath the title is a quote, reading, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point is, however, is to change it."

Dilshan Fernando:

Rohan, could you put your slides on the presentation mode?

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

Oh, sorry, okay. Good, okay sorry about that. I don't say who thought of this, who wrote this, but I hope - there's always Google, you can easily find out who wrote this.

There is a distinction in the university between basic science and applied science. I have always found that I've been on the applied side, but even basic I find has got extraordinary applications in the world and does contribute to changing it. So, without getting into all those esoteric discussions, let's just leave it at this. That this whole business is about, that I'm talking about, and that many of you will be called upon to take your knowledge to the world, to effect changes, or to prevent bad changes from happening. And we'll take that as an assumption, right?

So, that is what the whole research-to-policy is. Research not as an end in itself, but research as something that contributes to how policies are made, and how people are governed and things of that nature. So, I assume most of you, all of you, are connected to universities in one form or another.

On-screen Content:

Title reads: Universities or university faculty as suppliers of evidence to policy?

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

Should universities, as such - as organizations, be engaged in this activity? I'd like to say no, because supplying evidence to policy is not a neutral activity. I've been on the gun sites of several - there was a time when, I think it was Ohio Bill, which was the company at that time. The larger entity was somebody-Tech. Nobody knows these names, these companies no longer exist.

But there was somebody from that organization who actually threatened to deport me when I was teaching at Ohio State, and my question was across the Ohio River. Because that was the end of their remit, the end of their jurisdiction. So, I got a nice dinner with the university President in this relation, but other than that nothing much happened to me, because academic freedom is - there may be some problems with it, but it's actually alive and well.

So, the whole issue was that while I was saying controversial things as a university academic, and I was annoying the incumbent telephone company in Ohio, Ohio State University wasn't. And Ohio State University could continue to do whatever he was doing, and so on. Now there are some areas where, you know, higher education funding and so on; where universities employ lobbies and try to influence higher education policy, higher education funding policy, and so on.

I am cautious about that. I think people should not be self-serving, but. So, the point of the story is that while universities should remain neutral, they should create an environment where there will be individual for-policy members like me, who have policy-relevant research findings, and who have the desire to take that to the public policy process, to give them the freedom, to create the conditions for them to do that. That would be the contribution of the universities.

On-screen Content:

New slide. Title reads, "Universities (especially in the Global South) are ill-equipped". First point on the slide reads: Not best places to generate policy-relevant research and to provide homes to motivated, effective research-to-policy communicators because of: Demands of teaching, emphasis on abstract knowledge, different communication competencies. Second point on the slide reads: Specialized information-broker units are being set up within developed-country universities in recognition of the problem.

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

Now, we'll move to universities in the Global South. Again, I think you know, in some form this audience has an interest in that. There'll be people like me, who studied in Canada, and within a week of doing my defense was back in Sri Lanka. And then of course, back and forth, but back in Sri Lanka again. There will be others who might continue in Canada or wherever they are studying but do some things in the Global South with Global South universities.

This is something that you'll have to deal with, these universities, at some point. I'm sure Sharada and Thevathasan deal with Global South universities. So, you know what the situation there is. A strong, strong high demand of time for teaching, in class teaching. 14 to 16 hours is the number that I got. And I don't think I ever did 14 to 16 hours when I was teaching at Ohio State.

There is, these days, universities are very keen about ISI journals, and so on. So, applied research isn't easily publishable in ISI journals. So, that also tends to be a bit of a problem for those who actually do research and want to get published. And then, you know, the communication capabilities, competencies of people in the university and the skills that are

needed for policy communication are not the same. So as a result, even in developed country universities, the problem has been recognized, the last problem in particular, the communication competencies problem.

On-screen Content:

LSE Government website. Page is titled "LSE Public Policy Group."

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

So, you have entities like this, LSE public policy group, that essentially serves as a kind of a broker within the university for taking university research out to the public policy process. Now you must remember, that in the UK - I don't know what the situation is in Canada - in the UK, the university ranking comparison thing, which scheme that they have which sort of translates into funding at some point from the grants commission; actually, gave way to how much one contributed to the public policy process.

So, in order to, because of that overall incentive that the university had, they have created things like this. Now, this is not the case in the universities that I interact with in Sri Lanka, they basically are on their own.

On-screen content:

New slide. Title reads, "Think tanks are better positioned because".

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

Now of course, there's another animal that takes research to the public policy process. That is think tanks of the kind that I set up in 2004 in Sri Lanka. Their reason for existence is policy influence. I mean, if we can't show policy influence, I don't think we will get money on a continuing basis, so we got to show that we are having an impact.

They have the advantage of focus and specialization. We are not doing everything under the sun, and we tend to attract people who are motivated, who have the attitude. But of course, we also have another problem, which is that – I mean sometimes, I'm annoyed by how easily, you know, people who want to set up committees in government, etc. You say, "Oh, we just get somebody from XYZ universities, preferably the one that I went to," says the bureaucrat.

On-screen content:

Same slide. Last point reads, "BUT: They lack the 'organic' legitimacy university faculty enjoy & struggle with perception that their research is non-objective & ideological."

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

There's no thought given to the good work being done in various think tanks because there is this question of legitimacy. You know, are they legit, are they taking money from foreign sources. I think, you know, that some of you may have heard that there's this huge crackdown on foreign funding being received by Indian think tanks and research organizations.

So, there are those issues. And universities actually don't produce people trained to take research to policy, so a lot of think tanks are continually retraining people, re-skilling them, and so on. So, you could say there's a bit of a problem. There's a lot of good knowledge in the universities, and there's a need for knowledge in the public policy process, in the public policy institutions, but there's a gap. So how do we fill the gap?

On-screen Content:

New slide. Title reads, "A model that worked."

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

Instead of talking abstractly, I thought I'll share with you an example of what we've done. I'm not talking about my organization, which is a very highly focused organization - and we can talk about that during the discussion - which has had significant public policy impact; but that's because we actually put money into it and resources into it and so on. I'm talking about something that was much less hands-on, and I would say a very low-cost kind of activity, which was an Asia-Africa network of academics and reflective practitioners within government and Industry.

What I mean by this - I cooked up this word, by the way, I don't know anybody else who uses it - it means that there are people in these organizations within government and industry, who just like to think about what they're doing, like to reflect on it, and like to learn more about what they're doing. Somewhat even in abstract conceptual knowledge related to what they are doing.

That's a subset. But it's an interesting and useful subset. And then, people are working in think tanks. So, we created something called Communication Policy Research south. This was focused on ICT issues, information and communication technology issues. One of the key elements was a two-and-a-half-day intense academy of how to become effective policy intellectuals.

Recall what I said about people not being trained in the university. So, we were saying, "Okay, this is how the public policy process works. This is the kind of communication that works in the public policy process," and so on, with a lot of examples, and exercises, and participatory presentations, teamwork, and so on.

When we had a bit of money, I actually had one of my former colleagues from Ohio State look over the presentations that they would make on YouTube. She would get them to send the YouTube presentations, and would comment about how they were speaking, and their time management, and things of that nature. And it's just one-on-one coaching on a presentation, oral presentation also was provided. But we ran out of money, and I had to discontinue that. But they got a lot of feedback from senior scholars, senior people who were involved in talking to governance and influencing policy.

So, there is this training activity, and then immediately following that is a conference, where you'd have people who have come through some form of competitive process, who are

presenting formal papers like in a normal academic conference, except they're all policy oriented. Everybody has to make policy recommendations as part of their presentations.

So, the young people who are in the academy are now observing this, talking to the people who've done it, people who have done the presentations. And then they would ideally come back at a subsequent conference and make their own presentations.

On-screen content:

Same slide. Final point reads, "CPRsouth's mission was to 'facilitate the creation, sustenance and continuous advancement of policy intellectuals capable of informed and effective intervention in ICT policy and regulation processes in specific country and regional contexts in the south.'"

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

So, I'll show you some numbers that this actually happened. We also put some resources in through questionnaires and tracking studies and so on to find out what people did in between, and we asked, you know, did you influence policy? Did you try? What kind of results did you get? Did you also publish your research, etc.?

So, here are a few success stories. And you can, I think you can, in this day and age - you know, I have this thing which says, I don't know whether you guys remember Bishop Berkeley saying, "If a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, does it actually fall?"

What I say these days is, if you're an intellectual and you're not visible on the internet, do you really exist? So, you should be able to check these people's names out. Grace Mirandilla Santos in the Philippines - she drove the broadband quality debate, and I was actually intrigued. I came to the US this time for the main Telecom policy research conference called TPRC, and they're talking about broadband quality now.

Grace and LIRNEasia backing her, we were talking about it maybe 10 years ago, or even more. She shaped the debate, got standards implemented and so on, and made some very significant contributions about introducing competition in the Philippines Telecom sector. You can find out - you can just search her name and things should come up.

Ibrahim Rohman, from Indonesia, he had a PhD from Sweden. Now, Grace by the way doesn't even have a PhD, right? When she started on this, she was I think only an undergrad, and while over the last 15 years she got herself a Master's in public policy part-time - while you know, supporting herself and her family, doing all these consulting kinds of things.

Ibrahim got a PhD from Sweden, came back. He has a tendency to contribute op-ed articles. Ministers in Indonesia listen to the guy. Ibrahim and Ayesha Zainudeen, one of my colleagues. Now, Ibrahim doesn't actually get rewarded in money. Now, Ayesha, part of her job is getting research out. So, when Indonesia sought to ban Facebook in 2018, the two of them got together. Ayesha had researched survey data and things like that, Ibrahim had the name and

the recognition. The two of them got together and published an op-ed. Shortly thereafter, the ministry announced that they would not block Facebook.

Yudhanjaya Wijerante is a very interesting guy. He just came to CPR South being from Sri Lanka, then he applied to work with LIRNEasia, worked on our data analytics team, and is now the founder of a fact checking organization in Sri Lanka. So, you know, you can see from one of our surveys - if anyone is interested, I can make available some of the papers that have this data in more detail - you can see that. So, we distinguish between those who presented papers, that is the senior people, and the young scholars. And the young scholars who came back a second time. That is who came for one event as a young scholar, then came back as a paper presenter.

So, from that category where they have repeated interactions, only 4% were inactive. 96% were doing both research and policy interventions. Young scholars, those who just come for the training, again not bad. 73% of them had done research and policy, 17% of them had been active in terms of research. These are some of the tracking studies that we did.

On-screen content:

New slide. Title reads, "Research to Policy south initiatives in specific domains will:"

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

So, my argument is that this kind of activity, I mean again, I said it's relatively cheap, but actually it's not because we ran out of money. IDRC in Canada was funding this for maybe 13, 14 years from 2006 to 2018, and then you know the funding stopped. So, we also stopped.

One reason why the costs were high was that there was grading. I tried to keep it to Asia only, but there was a huge demand from Africa, and encouragement that we do it in Africa, and then we brought the two regions together about halfway through the process - by about the sixth conference. And then it got costly, because you know you got to move people back and around. One conference in Asia where we bring the Africans there, and then another conference in Africa where we take the Asians there, and so on.

So, one way of reducing the costs is taking smaller units. I tried very hard to do something for ASEAN, southern Africa and so on. You know, you could save some money. But there is some value in learning from each other, and cross-national learning. But anyways, that's a different question we can get into.

What this can do, is that it will leverage what people are doing in a very - so people are doing what they're doing in think tanks, in university and so on. But this product takes that subset of people who are motivated to change the world, and helps it sort of leverage what you're working on. They got a lot of others. We don't give any money in CPRsouth to anybody, to do any research. There are no formal mentorship programs.

It's you know, really up to them if they manage to get hold of some senior person and convince them to read their papers through the informal networking. You know, talking over coffee or whatever that was up to them. We didn't formalize those things. This would also support and

encourage policy-oriented faculty within universities, it's extremely rewarding. People were bothering me to get on the board and come to these conferences, people who are in the universities. And generally speaking, you know assist universities to produce graduates who are better equipped to take research to policy. So, I think I have stayed at about 20 minutes. I'm open to your questions.

Naresh Thevathasan:

Thank you very much, Dr. Samarajiva, for your in-depth analysis on how effectively we can bring policies change from the university by involving a think tank, as well as young scholars who can be effective in bringing about change. I would like to - I have some questions, but I don't want to ask them now. I would like to open it to the audience to ask some questions, and then I will follow up with my questions. Any questions from the audience? Yes.

Dr. Sharada Srinivasan:

Just to break ice and keep things going. I mean, I think this is absolutely fascinating, and I'm very glad you did what you did Rohan, because I've just submitted a grant application and I think the one actor that's missing in all of this is our donors themselves.

IDRC is slightly different in the way they operate; you know their mission and everything else. But typically, you know donors that fund university research of late, especially in the last twenty-odd years I think, expect that the research that you do actually influenced policy.

And I'm not sure academics are really acute to doing that. So, I go back to your earlier slide, you know the second or the third, you know - should academic researchers be doing the sort of policy stuff? You know that slide. And while I think as a researcher, I want my research and the sort of research I do to benefit and to influence issues on the ground; I don't know if academic researchers are, especially in the social sciences, do we have the skills to do that kind of, you know influencing and impacting policy? And, how do we go about, what sort of skills? I mean you articulated some of the things that that you did in this project.

What do you do with people who are already in universities? And I'm talking about universities in Canada, and so I'm not even talking about universities in India or other parts of South Asia. So, maybe some thoughts on that would be very helpful. And be careful what you say, we might rope you into doing some things.

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

[Laughs] No, I mean I've done things like this. So, for example there's some kind of refresher courses that the University Grants Commission in India has people to go through to get their promotions or whatever. And Jamia Millia asked me to come and do a workshop for these young faculty, which I was very happy to do.

My point is, well let me put it this way. You know, when I was teaching at Ohio State, I was talking to some of the fundraising guys and I said, "Hey, you know I mean can you raise some - how do you do this business?" They said, "Look, we opened the doors, but you guys have to

come in and close the deal," right? They listen who's handing over, you know, X amount of dollars, X million to Ohio State. They want to see the researcher; they want to see the university faculty who will be in charge before the thing is closed.

So, in the same way for the public policy process also. There, you know you can't completely outsource it, the university faculty have to be involved in this activity, because that's where the credibility of the information comes in. So, what the public policy units can do is sort of create payment, help them to write the op-eds, help them to write the policy briefs and so on. Help them to, you know deal with television, cameras, better than they normally do and things of that nature.

And that's the kind of thing that I think without having a specialized unit, if you have a network like this even within Canada or you know, within people doing South Asia studies, or you know some definition. That can be developed. It's not like we outsource it. And what we say that university faculty are incapable, what I'm saying is there's a subset of faculty you know. One of the things that I was sort of disappointed by when I started teaching on the radio track at Ohio State, he said there weren't enough weird and unusual people in the university.

You know, at Simon Fraser there was one of my professors Tony Bilden, who was extraordinarily eccentric. I mean, right against his name on the faculty directory, it said do not call before 4 pm. The guy just - you know he was a night bird, he just functioned only in the night. And I was sitting behind him at a defense, and I think I must have smoked several cigarettes - you know, like three cigarettes just from secondary smoke inhalation. The guy was a maniac, but he was brilliant, right? It couldn't be put in a public policy context, he was a pure intellectual, right? But you know, more and more we have become corporatized. So many of us can do all these things.

But anyway, what I think is, it's a subset. Not everybody, but a subset. And that subset has to be equipped. And what I think is that kind this kind of network can do that effectively and at a low cost. I hope I've answered your question.

Dr. Sharada Srinivasan:

Can I do a follow-up question, Naresh?

Naresh Thevathasan:

Sure, sure. Yeah.

Dr. Sharada Srinivasan:

Thanks. So, you know - I mean it's not totally related to what you're saying, but it's kind of related. You know, one of the things about - you know what we do with policy is, as researchers we are told, you know you have to write for the policy audience. So, not the sort of dense prose that that we keep writing.

And then we have to do these elevator pitches. So, you ran into the president of your country, if you had two seconds, what would you tell them? And you know, these sorts of things. But a lot of work that we do, especially with all this emphasis on lived experiences, and lived realities - the devil is really in the details. So how do you get policy folks to actually spend time and reflect on the details, which they can then use to shape policy?

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

Well, you mentioned elevator pitches, that's something we used to do in the Young Scholars Academy. I used to be the grumpy old policy maker, and I would be walking around the room, and they had to come and sort of get my attention and do an elevator pitch, and I say, "Okay, now we are sixth floor I'm out of here!"

But the bottom line is, you see, attention is the most valuable and the most scarce commodity. That's something we have to understand. Attention is the most valuable and and scarce commodity today, not information – attention. So, if that is the case; and remember I have been in the university, and I've been a regulator, I've been a policy guy, I've been a policy intellectual throwing things at people from the outside. You know, I've sort of played all sides of this game.

You've got to get people's attention. There are a lot of people trying to get their attention. You know, the most difficult thing is to get a meeting with the prime minister or the president. That's the most valuable thing. Right when you get it, if you can't get your point across in the first two minutes, game over. So, the whole point is, I mean I tell people to read, to think of newspaper articles, the way the newspaper articles are structured.

They're not written the way we write academic papers. The first paragraph must convince you to keep reading. So, in our case, we start with the background, the literature search, blah blah blah, and then we get to the point at the end, right? So, I think those things - I think what you need to do is, you have to do in-depth research in order to do a tight policy brief, or even a tight presentation.

You really have to spend a lot of time on it. It's only with that depth of understanding that you can write that type thing. And what we tend to do, is we tend to do the presentation, the conversation across the desk. Leave a policy brief, and at the bottom of the policy brief says, "if you want to read the report, here's the report etc."

The internet really is very helpful, conveniently getting people to get into more detail, and more detail. And you know, I've been surprised by how many people in the academy, in public policy, senior people in the Indian civil service and so on; who keep asking me, "Okay, so what is that research about, what are your sample sizes, what is your confidence interval?" You know, they want detail. So, then you want detail? I'll give you detail there - but I am not giving you detail in that first five minutes.

Naresh Thevathasan:

So, let me interrupt here, and then there's a question from Dilshan. Dilshan, go ahead.

Dilshan Fernando:

Yeah. I'm going to ask a boring my PhD question. You keep mentioning policy contribution. How is policy different from, let's say problem-oriented research? You know, every research has to introduce a problem. How is it different? Are we talking about influencing the bureaucrats? And how is it different from writing one page at the end of your PhD thesis about policy implications? Is it about asking the research questions themselves in a different way?

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

Yeah. Policy and problem oriented, I don't see a big distinction. Perhaps there is that I'm missing. A policy brief can be given to company guys, anybody who has the ability, who is in a position to do something about some problem, right? So, for example, I can remember - well I mean, I've done so many things for phone companies; you know how about activating their disaster warning systems, about designing packages for a person with disabilities. I've done endless numbers for private sector companies.

But even say, other big social service or community-based organizations. I can remember one of the things that we did with Sarvodaya, which is Sri Lanka's largest community-based organization after the tsunami, was that we got them to think about disasters differently, I think. I mean I'm not talking about this you know, here's a particular thing that you're doing and change that - I'm saying, we got them to think about it differently. Which is, they were saying, "Okay, disasters happen. We packed our lorries, and we go and help them."

I said, no! You know, how do you develop preparedness in the communities? How do you get people ready to minimize the damage? And they actually shifted gears. They actually had a sort of a strategy session, and they said, now from this point we are going to think about disasters differently, right.

So, I don't think it's this sort of very narrow - we use structure by Lindquist, who may actually be a Canadian scholar if I could recall correctly. If anybody wants any references, we can provide them. That's also to Sharada, you know, I don't give these footnotes and references endlessly because I'm now more or less in the policy world, but in the academic world you've got to keep flagging: "Now, I've read the literature, I know this stuff," right?

I think this is Lindquist who did it, who talks about three different kinds of policy influence. One is the simple form, where you know, there's somebody trying to raise a tax and you knock it off or modify. Easy. Second one is you get them to ask different questions. Third one is that you ensure that the bureaucrats, the decision makers themselves change, and then you are no longer needed. And that's really, I think, the most powerful aspect of what we can do.

Naresh Thevathasan:

Thank you Dr. Samarajiva, there's another question from Ataharul, let's go ahead, yeah.

Ataharul Chowdhury:

Thank you, Dr. Samarajiva, for enlightening presentation. It draws my attention about your suggestion about attention. I think we're living in an attention economy. And that makes me to think about that policy and politics is directly related. And especially now, the days that we are leaving right now, I mean science is not the only mechanism to create our shared reality, right? So, the knowledge we produce, the knowledge we disseminate, you know, there are many other aspects of it; like geopolitical issues, or you know, cultural issues, national political issues.

So, my question is that, do you think that policy and politics is related? And number two is like, you know, I am even within the academia, if you're not involving some kind of power relation and politics; you could be doing very nice research, but it doesn't get through and doesn't recognized. Or even you know, like in your own scholarly community. Or sometimes let alone forget about the, you know, policy or practice.

So, what is your suggestion, for you know, there are people like, "I feel like I just like to research, I'm not much involved in those kind of you know thing that we need to do." Like what he was saying, attention, drawing attention. So, what is your suggestion? Like, when you started your career and when you see - I mean, I'm this generation, and I see that you know, things are I feel like a little bit different right now then what we used to read from, you know, some other people like successful people's biography. So, what is your take on that? Like yeah. What is your suggestion?

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

You had a question, you said policy and politics? Or policy and poetics?

Ataharul Chowdhury:

Politics.

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

Politics, yeah. Okay, well forgive me if I haven't understood your question perfectly, but I'll take a run at it. And then if you want, I'll further clarify. So, first and foremost, you know taking evidence to policy doesn't involve only survey data, confidence intervals, blah blah blah, right. The stories are what really matter. So, I can remember there was an occasion where we had done some surveys of small, micro enterprises in Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh. And we made a pitch to the big electricity monopoly in Sri Lanka. And the guy was, you know as I said, you know he's a guy whose sort of interested in things, a reflective practitioner. I'm still in touch with him now he's retired. He said, "Hey, this is good stuff, man."

So, he brought all his people. You know, the top brass. I was joking that if somebody blew up that room that day, we would have no electricity. Everybody was in the room, right. All the additional general managers, deputy general managers, God knows what the hierarchy is. And I got one of my colleagues who had been deeply involved in the research to do the presentation, and while she was doing it, we had inserted these stories based on qualitative research.

So, there was this little clip. It wasn't even a video, it was photographs and text underneath in two languages, which said, this young woman, who was a beautician running a little shop out of her home providing beauty care. And she was saying, "Oh my God, why can't they tell me beforehand when they are cutting the electricity, when they are load shedding? Because that way, I can reschedule my appointments. Now, here I can't even reschedule, because you do it in a random manner, and that means that I don't get the money that they would give me. My income is affected. And then you still expect me to pay the electricity bill at the end of the month."

You know, she had this nice little sort of thing. So, as we were going through, my friend of the - the GM, the general manager. He says, "Stop! Stop that! Run that again, run that again!" So, that was what really, he wanted his senior staff to see, that their customers' livelihoods, ability to pay was being affected. It's not the statistics that we were throwing out, it's the stories. So, that's why I, you know I value, well learner sharers, we value multi-method research.

We believe that we have more credibility if we have, you know, science. Properly rigorous scientific methods, and so on. And you know, I go back to Aristotle in these matters. You know, Aristotle talks about ethos pathos and logos, right? The standing, the stature, the credibility of the speaker that he or she has developed over the years. That's what university academics sort of come with a free allowance in that department.

And then you know, people like us in the think tanks, we got to really ramp up the logos, which is the rationality-based appeals. But without the ethos, without the pathos, without the appeal to emotion, we are not going to get anywhere. So, it's that combination of the three that actually gets us across the line. And a lot of us don't do that. A lot of academics don't do the pathos part. But then, you know, if we're working into disciplinary teams and so on, I think we can get the combination. I hope I answered your question.

Ataharul Chowdhury:

Yeah, actually yeah, definitely. I totally agree, stories matter. But you know, there is no disagreement with that - but you know something, or you know made me worried about, like when - because you're talking about micro credit. And probably, you know about Dr. Yunus, he was a very famous person.

I'm saying was because he's not anymore famous person to Bangladesh, especially Bangladeshi government, right? Now, and that's because, you know, he's not with the politics and then political parties. So, I'm saying that there is a power relation, right, that the researcher - I mean knowledge is not neutral right now. And knowledge cannot create a shared reality. That's the problem we are living at, this you know era.

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

Yeah, I know. I mean, I followed Yunus's life, how he got in the gun sights of Hasina, and so on, that happens. But I think people, researchers, can navigate that better than - you know, he's

not just, I mean he's not a researcher anymore. I mean I know he started off as an academic, but he started researcher, he said entrepreneur.

And entrepreneurs, especially powerful entrepreneurs, have difficulty with politicians, you know. But Putin is throwing people through windows these days. Right? So, no. But I think, you know, I mean I think people like Dilshan know, I'm a controversial guy. But you know, it doesn't matter which. And people think, you know, I'm aligned with, sort of more sympathetic to one side or not.

But I still get phone calls from the guys on the other side, right? Because they know that I am not considered - I'm not a party line guy, right? I may be more sympathetic to a certain way of running the country and certain kind of politics; but I'm not aligned with a political party, and I don't have that bigger power base, you know. So, in my country Sarvodaya's boss Arya Ratna had, he also got on the gun sites of the government and experienced all sorts of difficulties.

I think economics can navigate that. One of the best certificates I got was, one of my colleagues had met some people from the President's Secretariat in a foreign country. This was Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa's heyday in Sri Lanka when he was right at the top of his game. And they said, oh you'll be somewhere we don't know whether he's against us or with us. So, I thought, now that's really where I want to be, where they don't know whether I'm with them or not, or against them. That's the ideal question for us to be in.

Naresh Thevathasan:

Thank you so much, Dr. Samarajiva. Well, like we are about four minutes about the time, but however, I have a burning question to get to your view. When it comes to national security policies, whichever the color of the government that comes into power, they cannot do nothing with those policies. But when it comes to environmental policies, I'm particularly focusing on climate change related policies; every color of the government comes, they flip-flop. But when it comes to national security policies, no government can penetrate and do any changes to the national security.

So, why we can - like some of the environmental policies related to climate change, I mean that's the reality, we see a lot of devastation due to climate change. Why is that we have not yet put some of the salient environmental policy that directly has an influence on common people like you and me, into a category of policies where, whichever the color of the government that comes into power, they cannot change that?

Rather than going flip-flop. Like if we see in U.S and other countries, you know, one government comes, they go pro-climate change policies; then other government comes and undo all the pro-climate change policies. What is your view?

Dr. Rohan Samarajiva:

I think it's a wicked problem. You know, there is this category of public policy problems called wicked problems. Where you know whatever you do, you're going to piss off somebody. And

the information, however much we in the academy think the information is solid, in fact there are problems with the information.

So, just take - I mean Canada will go and make all sorts of wonderful speeches about climate change, but they are doing oil sands. And they won't back off on that, because that's really what keeps Alberta going. And if Alberta goes, flips the other way, the Liberal party will lose the entire Western Canadian vote, and so on and so forth. Right, I mean we know what the politics of this game is, right?

So, short-term gains, long-term costs. Those are never easy to reconcile. So much so that in the environment that we are in in Sri Lanka, where we are rethinking everything because of this mad situation that our government put us into; they basically took our economy and drove it off the cliff. We're thinking that maybe some of the things that have been done in places like France and Ireland, which is to take a random sample of citizens.

I mean do it in a sort of constitutional manner. Random sample of citizens, create something like a jury, a public - what we call a public assembly, people's assembly. Where they will function as a jury, and they will be people with different views. You know, the guys who want climate change to be given absolute priority over economic development or poverty alleviation; and the people who are the diametrically opposite views to make presentations to this jury.

And the jury will come up with some conclusions. And maybe we'll run that through a referendum or something that like that and solidify it. I would invite you to take a look at what Macron has done with regard to climate change, not very successful. And look at what Ireland did with regard to abortion, highly successful. So, think about some of those. We may not be able to do this through the conventional procedures.

Naresh Thevathasan:

Thank you so much. I think there is a question from Sharada, I think. But since we are running out and next session starts at 11:15, Sharada we'll hold on to that question and maybe Dr. Samarajiva can answer that later. Thank you very much for coming. I know it's a bit late in – oh, not late in the evening. I think it's about around 8:30 or so in Sri Lanka. Thank you so much for allocating your time, Dr. Samarajiva, and for the excellent insight into how to handle policy change, utilizing the think tank and their abilities to influence political change, and policy change. Thank you very much, it's a pleasure to listen to you. Thanks. Bye.

[End of transcript]