KNOWLEDGE IN TIMES OF CRISIS: TRANSFORMING RESEARCH–TO–POLICY APPROACHES

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Policy Influence in Crisis: Reflections from a Southern Thinktank*

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Abstract This article is a reflection by LIRNEasia, a thinktank working in the developing Asia Pacific, on factors enabling and hindering its ability to influence policy during two separate but related crises in Sri Lanka: the Covid-19 pandemic and the fully fledged economic collapse that the country underwent in 2022. The article discusses LIRNEasia's readiness and ability to respond to the unprecedented situation of crisis in the country it is headquartered in and where most of its staff are located. We detail the specific actions LIRNEasia took during each crisis in terms of research (both new and repurposed) and dissemination of research in order to frame debates and influence policy.

Keywords policy windows, research to policy, policy influence, policy impact, crisis response, Covid-19, global South.

1 Introduction
This article is a reflection by a South Asian thinktank on factors enabling and hindering its ability to influence policy during two separate but related crises in Sri Lanka. The organisation is LIRNEasia, a pro-poor, pro-market thinktank working in South and Southeast Asia on infrastructure policy and regulatory issues. The two crises are the Covid-19 pandemic and the fully fledged economic collapse that Sri Lanka is undergoing at the time of writing (2022). We explain the context of these two interconnected crises in the country and focus on the related government policies. We then discuss the way in which LIRNEasia has been operating since its inception in order to explain its readiness to engage with these unprecedented crises in the country that it is headquartered in and where a majority of its staff are located. We detail the specific actions LIRNEasia took during each crisis in terms of research (both new and repurposed) and dissemination of research in order to frame debates and influence policy.

2 Context of the Covid-19 pandemic and economic crisis in Sri Lanka

The Covid-19 pandemic required unprecedented policy interventions, both of type and magnitude, around the world. Sri Lanka was no exception. Stringent restrictions on movement helped curtail the spread of the virus but had multiple knock-on effects on economic activity, highlighted by the economy contracting by 3.6 per cent in 2020. This curtailed income streams for those who were unable to work from home, with daily wage earners being particularly impacted (UNICEF 2020). Hence, food was unaffordable to many, given the income losses. Additionally, schools closed their (physical) doors nationwide in March 2020 and attempted to deliver education remotely.

Vaccination began in early 2021. By the end of March 2022, 82 per cent of the population aged 12 and above had received two doses of the vaccine (Ministry of Health Epidemiology Unit 2022).

Then in 2022, as many other countries were entering into their 'post-Covid-19' recovery phase, Sri Lanka transitioned seamlessly into a major economic crisis. The country experienced twin deficits, given shortages in foreign exchange reserves and government revenue. These deficits led to shortages in multiple essential items including food, medicine, fuel, and cooking gas. Fuel shortages had a domino effect on people's ability to go to work and school. Hence, the school closures continued into 2022, just as people in other countries were returning to schools and workplaces.

Unsustainable inflation rose to 66.7 per cent year-on-year in July 2022. Food inflation, which soared further to 82.5 per cent (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2022), had a disproportionate impact on the poor, as they spend a larger than average share of income on food. In June 2022, the United Nations (UN) estimated that nearly 6 million people – over one quarter of the country's population – needed humanitarian aid (*UN News* 2022). At the time of writing (November 2022), schools have reopened after one of the longest periods of school closure in the world (UNICEF 2022). However, the cost of living remains high and mass brain drain is occurring, while negotiations with the countries' creditors and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are ongoing.

The pandemic certainly contributed towards this economic crisis; for example, travel restrictions reduced tourist arrivals, impacting foreign exchange earnings. However, the government's misinformed, miscalculated policies over decades was the key driver of the economic crisis. A populist tax cut in 2019 reduced local income in a country with an already-small tax base (Verité Research 2022). A high debt burden undertaken to support vanity infrastructure projects, unaffordable but politically motivated subsidies, and high government expenditure on unproductive labour and state-owned enterprises were also root causes (Rafi 2022; Fernando 2022).

3 LIRNEasia's response

3.1 About LIRNEasia

LIRNEasia is an independent thinktank working on digital policy issues across South and Southeast Asia. Founded in 2004, its mission is 'catalyzing policy change through research to improve people's lives in the emerging Asia Pacific by facilitating their use of hard and soft infrastructures through the use of knowledge, information and technology'.[4] To achieve this, LIRNEasia has undertaken a three-pronged approach: (1) conducting policy-relevant research, (2) communicating that research to relevant policymakers, and (3) improving the capacity of policymakers and stakeholders in the region. It has a small core staff of researchers and administrators (primarily based in Colombo, Sri Lanka, but with some staff working permanently from outside the country) and a larger group of Research Fellows and Policy Fellows dispersed throughout and working in the Asian region.

3.1.1 Model of policy influence

Over the years, LIRNEasia's model of policy influence broadly aligns with that of Lindquist (2001) and therefore its activities fit into the framework as follows:

- **Affecting policy regimes:** includes the modification of existing policies and re-design of new ones. Examples include facilitating changes in Sri Lanka's data protection law (Samaratunga and Tissera 2022) and Myanmar's Universal Service Policy (LIRNEasia 2018). In each instance, the organisation identified emerging policy windows, or at times created them, ensuring policy-relevant knowledge was available to policy actors and policy influencers. Thanks to the foresight and flexibility of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC, one of LIRNEasia's long-standing funders), many past research grants from the IDRC allowed a budget line item titled 'rapid response', intended to mobilise experts and communication resources if and when a new policy window opened, even when the policy window was not directly related to the project that was being funded.

- **Broadening policy horizons:** includes providing policymakers with opportunities for networking and learning with colleagues elsewhere, introducing new concepts to frame debates, putting ideas onto the agenda or stimulating public debate; educating researchers and others to take up new positions with a broader understanding of issues and stimulating quiet dialogue among decision makers. Examples include LIRNEasia's 'Expert Fora', invitation-only events that are attended by senior policy actors, aimed at discussing policy challenges and solutions, where the discussion is seeded by LIRNEasia's own research. The Expert Forum on Broadband Policy and the series of Virtual Dialogues on Digital Trade and Content Regulation are examples of slightly different formats, where the events were conducted under modified Chatham House rule[5] in order to facilitate open discussion, without the presence of the media.

- **Expanding policy capacity:** improving the knowledge/data of certain actors; supporting recipients to develop innovative ideas; improving capacities to communicate ideas; developing new talent for research and analysis. A long-standing example of this is the 12 years of Communication Policy Research South (CPRsouth) conferences that brought together young scholars and mid-career policy researchers and developed their capacities in communicating research to policy (Samarajiva 2019; Samarajiva and Gamage 2022). Another example is the 13 consecutive series of the Executive Course on Telecom Reform that targeted policymakers and private sector actors in Africa and Asia.[6] Multiple rounds of training for parliamentarians (e.g. in the Upper and Lower House of Myanmar's Parliament, as well as the Yangon regional parliament) also illustrate LIRNEasia's approach (LIRNEasia 2016).

The latter two actions are also discussed by Weiss (1977), who points out that even if not implemented by policymakers, organisations such as LIRNEasia can still provide value to the policy arena. The enlightenment model of research highlights how research that challenges the status quo offers innovative ways of thinking about issues and identifying problems and possible responses (*ibid*.). The same research may lead to different questions being asked. This leads to the reframing of questions and debates, which could allow for the resolution of problems more efficiently by approaching the policy issue in a different way.

3.1.2 Values and ways of working
LIRNEasia's philosophy towards its work can be understood through the following principles.

Policies that work in context
LIRNEasia was founded at a time when global North models and priorities of digital infrastructure governance were imposed on emerging economies. The organisation has often pointed out how such models from developed, well-governed, highly resourced countries do not work in poorly governed, less resourced, low-capacity institutions in emerging Asia. An example would be promoting light-touch regulation of retail prices in mobile telecom markets where high levels of competition exist, instead of significant market power (SMP)-based price regulation that is employed in many global North markets (Samarajiva and Iqbal 2009). Focus on the Asian context also lends itself to regional benchmarking and identification of best-fit practices from comparable countries instead of ideal ones. Comparative studies across Asia are enabled by LIRNEasia's network of Research and Policy Fellows. Over 15 years of partnerships with African and Latin American organisations (Research ICT Africa and Centro Latam Digital) enables global South comparisons and learning.

User-centric research, supported by policy and legal analysis

Connecting ground truths of how a technology is used is central to our research. While LIRNEasia employs traditional tools (such as policy and legal analysis), the recommendations are nearly always informed by the impact that the proposed (or ongoing) policies or technology has on users. For example, at a time when mobile number portability was pushed for in many markets, our research showed that the poorest were keener on lower prices, and that they had already solved the off-net pricing challenges by having multiple SIM cards and missed calls (LIRNEasia 2008). As such, LIRNEasia argued for licensing (i.e. increased competition in the market) as a regulatory priority over implementation of number portability.

User-centricity is supported by a multidisciplinary approach to research. LIRNEasia's data scientists analyse very large data sets using algorithms; social scientists study how marginalised groups are impacted by algorithm-controlled digital work platforms; quantitative researchers conduct nationally representative surveys to quantify the level of digital platform use; an ethicist will develop guidelines on how ethical principles should be incorporated into platform regulation; and a lawyer will make recommendations on platform-related laws.

Emphasis on dissemination of results

From its inception, LIRNEasia has placed high emphasis on dissemination. It uses multiple modes of dissemination to reach target audiences. Where possible, direct presentations to policymakers are made or policy briefs are sent directly. The evidence is presented (sometimes repeatedly) at national, regional, and international policy events. LIRNEasia also organises its own events and invites key stakeholders to attend and discuss the results and their impact on policy. Traditional media (newspapers, television) and new digital and social media are used to influence the symbolic environment in which policymakers exist. LIRNEasia often employs established public relations firms in the countries it works in to convene relevant journalists and hold press conferences. Given the heavy private provision of digital services, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of private sector service providers have been one of the first audiences that LIRNEasia disseminated to. Even as far back as the 2006 and 2008 household survey results, these were first disseminated to e-telecom operators, enabling them to make better pro-poor product offerings. LIRNEasia uploads to its website nearly all its intermediary and final outputs including data sets (with personally identifiable data stripped).

3.2 LIRNEasia's response to the Covid-19 crisis

Covid-19 restrictions impacted many facets of people's lives. The education sector was one that saw significant impact. In Sri Lanka, once schools (physically) closed in mid-March 2020, the government made several attempts to facilitate remote

education for students. It zero-rated the *e-thaksalawa* learning platform by the end of March, allowing users to access the platform free of charge, and launched a dedicated distance-learning helpline by mid-April. These were steps in the right direction. The assumption was that these actions would enable students to keep learning.

However, our nationally representative survey of information and communications technology (ICT) use conducted two years prior in 2018 showed that only 48 per cent of households with children had a smartphone or computer; only 34 per cent had an internet connection (Zainudeen and Amarasinghe 2020). The survey finding allowed us to compare such access against households with other forms of communication such as television and radio. Despite our data being a few years old, we knew this was the only relevant data available for Sri Lanka.

We knew also that the numbers from 2018 would not have grown significantly enough to invalidate the key takeaway in this context – that relying solely on digitally enabled remote education would exclude many, further widening disparities in education, and possibly even leading to children dropping out of school. Therefore, we mobilised resources from a newly funded research grant to analyse the data further and pushed out the message through multiple channels (traditional and social media) with some urgency. These findings were also shared at international events of strategic importance, such as when the LIRNEasia CEO participated in the opening panel of the Stockholm Internet Forum (Sverige 2021) and the South Asia Digital Opportunity (online) panel discussion organised by the World Bank.[7]

In keeping with LIRNEasia's model of policy influence, the aim was to expand the capacities of policymakers. In this case, the desired change was advocating for education delivery through multiple modes (instead of relying on purely internet-based channels) and creating remedial programmes for those who may have been left behind. This was achieved in part with the Sri Lankan opposition leader using our research to highlight how more accessible channels such as television, radio, and the postal service should be used to augment digitally enabled education (*Economynext* 2020; *ColomboPage* 2021).

True success in taking research to policy lies with seeing the desired policy changes and outcomes. As part of our Covid-19 response, under the same research grant, a new nationally representative survey was commissioned in 2021 to understand the impacts of the pandemic on accessing education, health care, food, and work (LIRNEasia 2021). A particular focus of the survey was understanding what impact being digitally connected (or unconnected) had on accessing these services. The survey results showed that while only 63 per cent of children accessed education through online channels during school closures,

a further 22 per cent had used offline channels (television, radio, and picking up physical notes and workbooks from schools) to access education at that time (2021). We cannot draw causal links between our research and advocacy efforts, programmes implemented by government and schools, and access to education (nor comment on the efficacy of these programmes for educational attainment/learning outcomes *vis-à-vis* online education). However, we can see that the concurrent delivery of education through non-digital channels gave many children who would otherwise not have been able to access education some access at this time.

Education was not the only sector that we studied. We explored mobile payments, the access to and use of credit cards, and the use of digital commerce for purchasing and selling goods, all relevant factors when contactless payments and remote ordering of food became a habit in some households when movement was restricted. The data showed very poor use of these services by a majority outside the higher economic strata and outside the urban centres. But finding out how those without constant digital access or credit cards were accessing food and other services was key.

It was not possible to travel to conduct field research. Therefore, LIRNEasia used an innovative 'e-diary' method to remotely study 20 families during a stage when lockdown was severest. The insights were illuminating, both about survival techniques and the importance of local grocery shop infrastructure and supply chains. The organisation once again went public with these findings regarding access to food (Samaratunga 2020). The confusing messaging to people during lockdowns and the need for better lockdown/movement restriction strategies was pointed out in the media by LIRNEasia researchers (Hurulle 2021). Others, including the team's ethicist, had output related to incorporating ethical principles in pandemic-related policymaking (Bandaranayake and Chandana 2020a) and were invited to write a blog on the topic by the London School of Economics (Bandaranayake and Chandana 2020b). The data scientists engaged in new research examining the possibilities and issues around using wearable technology and mobile phone-based Covid-19 tracking systems and expressed the findings in articles well-circulated over social media (Chandana 2020). The issues around the collection of personally identifiable data during the control of the pandemic were explored through new research in Sri Lanka and Thailand (Bandaranayake *et al.* 2021) and led to media dissemination in both countries. In Sri Lanka, we received feedback that the findings were very relevant to how government handled quarantine measures and related data (Bandaranayake and Natesan 2021; Suriyawongkul 2021).

3.3 Response to the economic crisis

While many countries faced the economic impact of the Covid-19 health crisis, Sri Lanka's economy was impacted more than average. For the LIRNEasia team, this meant our Covid-19 response had to take into account the economic crisis, instead of a more straightforward post-pandemic recovery. As Sri Lanka was attempting to re-negotiate with its creditors and reach a debt-support agreement with the IMF, many political parties, trade unions, and chambers of commerce were proposing policy solutions that the country should adopt.

An analysis showed that support for poor people in the form of cash transfers was one of the few areas that parties and organisations across the political spectrum could agree on as part of a Common Minimum Programme (CMP) that the government could adopt to bring the country out of the debt crisis. We realised that one of the ways we could contribute to making the economic recovery equitable and pro-poor was to rapidly gather and present knowledge related to cash transfers and social welfare. As such, the research broadened to situate cash payments in the context of the new austerity measures and the inflation seen in the country.

When responding to the economic crisis too, expanding on and pushing out existing knowledge while identifying new questions and deploying new research became our strategy. Luckily (and as mentioned in section 3.2), our response to the pandemic included a new nationally representative survey of individuals and households to understand the impacts of the pandemic along various dimensions – livelihood, access to food, education, and digital platform use. These 2021 survey results enabled LIRNEasia to understand several key trends around various types of welfare benefits offered to poor people.

The starkest finding was that there were issues in targeting those that were most in need of the assistance, with both inclusion and exclusion errors. For example, 55 per cent of households most in need (those in socioeconomic category E, which refers to the poorest segment of society) did not receive any assistance; meanwhile, 7 per cent of those least in need (those in socioeconomic category A, the richest) did receive assistance. The reasons for this are multifold, ranging from the lack of objective and easy-to-assess entry and exit criteria to politicisation.

Most, if not all, these faulty structural underpinnings predated the current crisis. Given that it would have a significant impact on how any relief relevant to the crisis was distributed, there was broad interest to reform the social protection system from both government and the Bretton Woods institutions.[8] Also relevant is that by the second quarter of 2022, LIRNEasia's 2021 data was once again the only new/latest data set that could shed light on

this topic, despite the original survey not being focused on social safety nets *per se* (just a handful of questions were directly about routine and Covid-19-related government payments). As defined by Kingdon (1984: 165), a policy window opened.

Noteworthy is that social protection was not an area LIRNEasia had studied in detail prior to this. We had, however, studied many other areas that were a natural complement, such as service delivery to the poor and digital access and use. Therefore, we identified several ways in which we could capitalise on our core expertise to contribute to the discourse on policy reform related to social welfare. One was to explore better ways of identifying those in need of benefits, to reduce the notable inclusion and exclusion errors in targeting mentioned earlier. Here we are paying particular attention to the role digital data traces can play in identifying household-level poverty.

Another approach was to explore the role bank accounts and mobile phones could play in streamlining the welfare payment system, which is currently very fragmented and prone to leakages. LIRNEasia's previous research in the area of 'big data analytics' had examined how near-real-time data streams from mobile network operators could be combined with other large data sets to map socioeconomic levels in a city, to predict population movements, thereby avoiding the problems of out-dated or slow data from traditional tools such as census surveys. Therefore, the research team knew we were not wasting time exploring the possibilities of extending such thinking to social welfare payments.

Within a few weeks of actively researching and engaging in this topic, LIRNEasia began sharing its work publicly. The LIRNEasia CEO participated in a local-language online webinar conducted weekly called Kathikawa (Sadharana Samajayak 2022), where the problems with traditional targeting mechanisms were discussed and the potential improvements achievable through the use of data streams from mobile networks and electricity consumption were presented. The CEO then wrote an opinion editorial in the *DailyFT*, a reputed national newspaper (Galpaya 2022). Thereafter, the Senior Research Manager participated in and conducted the opening presentation for a panel on social safety nets (Hurulle 2022b) attended by several Members of Parliament and thought leaders at the Advocata Institute's two-day conference on economic reform.[9] The Senior Research Manager also used this work as a basis for conversation on a local-language 45-minute primetime television interview (*Newsfirst Sri Lanka* 2022). LIRNEasia's Chair, who is widely regarded as a policy intellectual and was previously a policymaker and regulator himself, was a key connector in driving conversations.

These efforts helped LIRNEasia build traction and credibility in this space, allowing it to engage with key policymakers such as government officials (who were engaged in unifying and

automating some of the welfare beneficiary databases), the World Bank (which had diverted funds from other projects to pay cash transfers to the poor), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (which was interested in identifying the newly poor and rolling out efficient systems of cash transfer), and other academics and policy practitioners. The CEO also presented the data to the visiting IMF delegation that was negotiating the bailout agreement with the Government of Sri Lanka.

While disseminating data and calling for new ways of designing cash welfare payments, LIRNEasia also began work on several new studies that would enable policymakers and implementers to better target and implement the new welfare payment mechanisms. The first was a 10,000-sample nationally representative survey to answer our questions on targeting, delivery, and graduation from welfare schemes, and the second was a qualitative study across 12 districts to understand administrative processes and user perceptions on the same. We have continued to engage the key entities mentioned above when designing our studies, both to capitalise on their expertise and to build awareness of our work from an early stage, which we hope will allow us to contribute towards policy change once these studies are completed. The design of the survey was greatly aided by technical input from the World Food Programme, which helped us identify questions that would enable the measurement of food poverty in the country. At the time of writing, both research projects are underway, with multiple organisations, including multilateral and government entities involved in social welfare, indicating they are awaiting the findings.

In the meantime, LIRNEasia continues to engage with the topic as key reforms take place. A Senior Research Manager wrote an opinion piece in a newspaper with national reach, arguing that the new proposed delivery of four welfare benefits through Samurdhi banks was not citizen-centric (Hurulle 2022c), and this article was shared with the newly appointed Welfare Benefits Board. LIRNEasia used its pre-existing work (LIRNEasia 2022) and ongoing qualitative fieldwork to understand the on-ground impact of the new welfare reforms. These qualitative findings were almost in real time, with stakeholders including heads of key government institutions, Members of Parliament, and partners.

4 Synthesis and conclusions
The sections above describe how LIRNEasia, a thinktank located in Sri Lanka and working across emerging Asia, responded to the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis that followed in Sri Lanka. Most of the research mentioned above (excluding the 2018 national surveys) and all the dissemination was funded by the competitively awarded Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) grant from the IDRC, Canada as part of the rapid response to the pandemic and related recovery. Work under the grant is still ongoing, with perhaps the most impactful research (on improving

social safety nets in Sri Lanka) still being at the fieldwork stage. Nevertheless, the authors reflect here upon factors we think contributed to LIRNEasia's ability to deploy knowledge to achieve change under two sub-themes: institutional readiness and knowledge fit for purpose.

4.1 Institutional readiness

Several factors point to LIRNEasia's readiness to influence policy during the pandemic and related economic crisis period(s).

A history of credible research

LIRNEasia has been engaged in bringing credible research-to-policy processes in Sri Lanka and the region. Thus, when it re-used existing research to shed new light on Covid-19-related issues, the data was seen as rigorous and taken seriously. The data used in our initial interventions was the fifth in a series of nationally representative surveys of household and individual digital access and use in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This data, supplemented by qualitative research, enabled us to paint a clear picture of digital access and barriers in the country. This credibility carried through when we entered new research areas such as social welfare payments.

Further to this, the credibility of the individual researchers, their profiles, and networks of influence also helped. Several of LIRNEasia's senior staff have worked in government in the past, which helped build credibility in relation to current work. LIRNEasia's Chair and Senior Research Manager conducted the analysis (in a voluntary capacity) on the CMP for the National Movement for Social Justice (NMSJ), which serendipitously was instrumental in linking our research on social safety nets to the CMP. The CEO's opinion piece on cash transfers in the *DailyFT* newspaper (Galpaya 2022) was instrumental in potential partners such as UNDP reaching out to LIRNEasia to work strategically on cash transfers.

Multidisciplinary skills and approach

LIRNEasia had just a few data points on the poor distribution of cash-based welfare payments. But within a few weeks of seeing the policy window, the research team was able to utilise their training in economics, social science, big data analytics, and legal and policy analysis to not only get up to speed on all the different ways of thinking about Covid-19 lockdowns and welfare payments but also to design new research that could contribute to ongoing improvements to the system. The mix of subject-matter specialists and generalists in the team helped.

Visibility in the media and to policymakers

When it has research relevant to an ongoing policy issue, or even in between such policy windows, LIRNEasia's staff keep engaging with policy issues in public fora. The Chair is a regular face on national television. The CEO participates in international public

fora regularly, as do some of the senior staff, who also wrote multiple opinion pieces in major newspapers on the issues around Covid-19-related economic development and welfare payments. Building a personal 'brand' is encouraged as much as building LIRNEasia's organisational brand, with annual staff reviews rewarding the use of research to build brand and influence policy.

When issues relevant to (digital) infrastructure access and use come into play, senior staff were and are often a first point of call in the region, and certainly in the country. This was the case when it came to access to education using digital technology during the pandemic. The literature also highlights the need for the constant communication of ideas between knowledge brokers and policymakers, with actionable policy choices being explained to policymakers. LIRNEasia is not just a knowledge broker (in that it produces its own original research). A study conducted during the pandemic in Iran showed that having better communication links between policymakers and knowledge brokers led to more evidence-based policies being adopted (Bastani *et al*. 2022).

Partnerships
Given that LIRNEasia had never worked in social protection before, it worked with Advocata, a thinktank that has significant public presence in topics related to public finance and public enterprise reform. Advocata invited LIRNEasia to make the opening presentation on social welfare payments at its high-profile economic policy summit. This led to high levels of publicity for LIRNEasia research, amplifying our message and that of other groups.

LIRNEasia's close, ongoing partnership with Sri Lanka Education Forum was key to increasing the reach of our research on remote education. The Education Forum, co-founded by a former Secretary to the Ministry of Education and a long-time education policy practitioner (also a Senior Policy Fellow at LIRNEasia), convenes regular meetings with ministry officials and educators (Sri Lanka Education Forum 2022; Hurulle 2022a). These convenings and their regular interactions with the media using LIRNEasia's findings further amplified the message and broadened the policy horizons of other practitioners at large.

We argue that these partnerships were essential. LIRNEasia is a digital policy thinktank, but both instances of policy engagement required situating digital technology within a broader economic context and reaching a set of policymakers from across government, not just those related to digital technology.

Managing risk and being flexible under difficult conditions
Over the years, LIRNEasia's operational practices have been fine-tuned to provide a balance between procedure-driven repeatability (i.e. templated approaches that can be deployed quickly) and flexibility to allow innovation (i.e. ability to change based on circumstances). This has enabled the

organisation to use innovative research methods (e.g. remote e-diary observations of households during a deep lockdown) (Samaratunga, Hurulle and Galpaya 2021), while also updating vendor contracts (e.g. for household surveys) to manage new types of risks during the pandemic while maintaining data quality. LIRNEasia even presented its thoughts on conducting research under pandemic conditions to other research organisations in the global South as part of the CORE research consortium (Samaratunga and Amarasinghe 2020). As such, completing the research was possible even with exchange rate controls, extremely high inflation, and severely restricted movements.

Digital 'outsiders' coming into 'non-digital' policy spaces
While above are some of the factors that enable us to achieve impact, the two crises we describe and how we work also highlighted the challenges of LIRNEasia's institutional framing. In the eyes of stakeholders and policymakers, the pandemic was a health crisis on a global scale. As such, the natural allies in civil society or among knowledge producers/brokers were those working in the health space. LIRNEasia is seen as an expert on digital policy. Despite digital technology being a crucial and cross-cutting infrastructure which impacts every sector of the economy, when it comes to health, we need to not only produce new knowledge but make sure we frame it within the larger health challenge and communicate in ways that make it obvious why digital technology is important.

Similarly, in social welfare reform, many others have focused on traditional ways of data collection and beneficiary targeting. Most policies tend to be incremental improvements on these methods. Using the digital data trace and algorithms is a radical change and one that has to be experimented with and fine-tuned before being implemented. Policymaking in Sri Lanka does not reward experimentation. As such, we are once again in the situation of having to first convince the policy actors about our way of thinking, deliver a proof of concept, and then work towards scale-up/adoption. It can be a longer impact pathway than for organisations that use traditional approaches and which work on economic reforms or livelihood development.

4.2 Knowledge fit for purpose
The nature of knowledge that was produced by LIRNEasia and used during the pandemic and economic crisis had the following characteristics.

Taking into account the local context
The pandemic was a time when education was severely disrupted, and models of online teaching and learning became extremely popular. LIRNEasia's mantra has always been about solutions that work in context. The context in Sri Lanka during the pandemic was one of low internet penetration, poor broadband quality, high access to television, low access to radio, and low preparedness

among schools to deliver online content. In this situation, using multiple modes to reach households with children of school age is more important to ensure that everyone gets some contact with educators and some form of learning. It is also important to ensure that the most marginalised are not left behind. This was more crucial than getting the perfect educational content delivered digitally to a smaller percentage of households.

Similarly, in the case of the payment of cash welfare benefits, the government-implemented surveys to gather data to identify beneficiary households are out of date, and as such, not fit for identifying newly poor households. The sign-up process is one that is politicised and the payment channels are inefficient and not designed for citizen convenience. As such, using frequent digital transaction data is a way to eliminate delays in surveys, fill the data vacuum in a country with a low tax base, and reduce opportunities for 'playing the system' that physical asset verification by government officials enables.

Good enough, if not perfect

During this time, the data LIRNEasia had was methodologically rigorous and relevant. During Covid-19 lockdowns, LIRNEasia's was the only recent data on digital access relevant to remote learning. But in a fast-moving sector such as digital connectivity, the data was ultimately not up to date because digital adoption changes fast. Yet given the absence of anything else more recent, the organisation used the data to make policy interventions. Past knowledge was used to contribute to reasonable assumptions and predict current trends.

Similarly, in the case of cash-based welfare payments, the latest national survey commissioned by government to identify beneficiaries was completed, but the data was still being cleaned, analysed, and made public. At the onset of the economic crisis, LIRNEasia's 2021 survey data was the only source for understanding inequities in emergency cash transfers and social safety nets. The 2021 LIRNEasia data was intended for other purposes (to understand how digital access impacted access to education, food, and work during the pandemic), but sufficient insights were gained on the matter of welfare payments such that we could engage with policymakers.

'Fast to market'

In the unprecedented situation of the Covid-19 lockdowns, a quick input of relevant information was important to shape policy. The ability to re-analyse existing household digital access data fast and get it to policymakers was key.

In the case of the economic crisis, the synthesis of knowledge from across the world within a matter of weeks, examining existing survey data, and making recommendations rapidly was also key to getting into the right fora – such as being able to make

presentations at the CMP press conference and to the visiting IMF delegation.

Similarly, LIRNEasia's rapid response on welfare delivery utilised ongoing interviews and focus group discussions to obtain insights on the change in collection points (adding to the existing research questions). LIRNEasia then utilised the findings without waiting for research completion to meet the policy window.

Many of these factors align with the systematic review of Oliver *et al.* (2014) which found that a lack of access to evidence, non-clarity, trustworthiness of findings, timeliness, and high costs were the main barriers to policymakers applying evidence.

4.3 Concluding thoughts

This article presents specific ways in which LIRNEasia, a thinktank working in digital and infrastructure policy in the emerging Asia Pacific, engaged with policymakers using new and existing data during the Covid-19 crisis and the ongoing economic crisis in Sri Lanka. It identifies how the organisation's structure, ways of working, and values have ensured that is recognised as a trusted provider of knowledge to policy actors and able to mobilise resources and create new policy-relevant knowledge. This also explains why LIRNEasia's research may have reached and been taken up by policy actors.

The impacts of the organisation's work are still emerging but indications are that it has contributed to change in multiple ways.

Notes

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4　**LIRNEasia What We Do webpage**.

5 Chatham House rule: in which the identity or affiliation of the speakers is not identified in reporting.
6 For example, the 2009 **Executive Course on Telecom Reform** in Cape Town, South Africa.
7 See the **South Asia's Digital Opportunity** panel video recording.
8 Bretton Woods institutions refers to the World Bank and the IMF.
9 Advocata is a leading thinktank with a special focus on fiscal and monetary policy issues.

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