

The International Science Programme in Bangladesh: Self-Interest or Empowerment?

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1 ABSTRACT

The International Science Programme (ISP) at Uppsala University, Sweden, is devoted to building institutional capacity in the basic sciences in low-income countries, since 1961 in physics, since 1970 in chemistry, and since 2002 mathematics. ISP collaborates with other Swedish and European universities, and with numerous universities in low-income countries and their regions, and functions as a common hub for natural science collaboration.

ISP has since the start received its main funding from the Swedish government, presently through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). In Bangladesh, ISP has supported the development of scientific research and higher education in chemistry and physics since the 1970's.

The outcome of ISP support in the latest three decades is substantial and consistent with regard to awarded scientific degrees and dissemination of scientific results by supported research groups and networks. The impact on the production of scientific publications in countries with ISP-supported research groups and scientific networks is significant.

In 2012, a Master thesis in International and European Relations was published focusing on ISP's collaboration with scientists in Bangladesh. Three theoretical perspectives – realism, interdependence liberalism and constructivism – provide the framework of the case study and serve as guiding tools to understand ISP's role and motivations as an actor in international relations. It was found that, on the whole, ISP's approach can be regarded as a successful instance of North-South development support. The data indicates that benefits of the collaboration between ISP and the supported scientists in Bangladesh are felt on both sides and that empowerment does take place with regard to several key issues.

The enormous impact that ISP-related scientists in Bangladesh have on their own country seems to be wide-reaching and sustainable because it involves firm establishment of research and higher education in the basic sciences, which can solve health-related, environmental, technological etc. problems, the training of future teachers and the strengthening of human resources in many societal areas. When the objective of development assistance is determined by self-interest it is very unlikely to bring about long-lasting development or foster empowerment and local ownership.



2 INTRODUCTION

The International Science Programme (ISP) at Uppsala University, Sweden, is devoted to building institutional capacity in the basic sciences in low-income countries, since 1961 in

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physics, since 1970 in chemistry, and since 2002 in mathematics. It has an international reputation for effectively strengthening research and postgraduate education capacity. The Swedish policy for development cooperation 2010-2014 stresses the need to strengthen and develop scientific research as a means for strategically combating poverty in low-income countries.

While being a unit at Uppsala University, ISP collaborates with other Swedish and European universities, and with numerous universities in low-income countries and their regions. In this context, ISP functions as a common hub for facilitating natural science collaboration, in particular between Swedish universities and universities in low-income countries, contributing to their reciprocal development.

ISP has since the start received its main funding from the Swedish government, presently through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). In earlier years, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), UNESCO, and the Norwegian government have also provided financial support. Uppsala University has for a long time been a significant financial contributor, and since 2012, also Stockholm University, Sweden, provides significant funding. Because of the collaborative nature of support, in kind-contribution from institutions with supported research groups as well as from cooperating host institutions is also very important.

In Bangladesh, ISP has supported the development of scientific research and higher education in chemistry and physics since the 1970's.

3 BACKGROUND

ISP provides support for the development of active and sustainable research in the basic sciences. The support is directed towards academic, institution-based scientific research groups and towards regional scientific networks. The support is collaborative and long-term, and is managed on a collegial scientist-to-scientist level with a strong ownership of activities at the receiving end. The supported activities need to be demand-driven, of strong relevance to the countries and regions concerned, and in accordance with local strategies and plans.

The basic sciences – mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology– provide a fundamental understanding of natural phenomena and the processes by which natural resources are transformed and utilized. Interdisciplinary and applied research is important in solving a number of development challenges, but without a strong fundament of basic sciences it is difficult to sustain applied sciences and quality science, engineering and medical education. Basic sciences are therefore important for development and should be supported for three main reasons:

- 1) their contribution to applied sciences,
- 2) their role in university training and education, and
- 3) their role in technological development.

Additional important factors that result from scientific training include:

- 4) the development of scientific, critical thinking based on reproducible evidence (promoting rational governance, democracy development, and human rights),
- 5) the development of technology, innovation, and engineering; stimulating entrepreneurship and contributing to poverty amelioration, and
- 6) an increased productivity and international competitiveness.

Increased domestic capacity for research and higher education in basic sciences has a long-term impact on economic growth and poverty alleviation in a country, driven by an increasingly knowledge-based society.

In most low-income countries, however, funding for research and training in basic sciences is scarce, which was particularly pointed out in the 2011 evaluation of ISP (1). Regional and interregional cooperation is one way to overcome this, by generating

complementary scientific activities, give access to advanced equipment, and increase the human capital needed for good standard postgraduate education. ISP support not only to research groups, but also to scientific networks is, therefore, strategically important.

In Asia, ISP currently provides research group support in the fields of chemistry, physics, and geophysics in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Laos. Recently, support in the field of mathematics has been initiated in Cambodia and Laos. In earlier years, support has been provided to research groups in chemistry and physics/geophysics in Sri Lanka and Thailand.

In Bangladesh, research group support started in the 1970's. In chemistry, natural products chemistry at the University of Dhaka was the main focus up to 2002, but was then shifted to environmental chemistry regarding organic pollutants in food, biota and environmental matrices with special emphasis on analysis of pesticide residues, persistent organic pollutants, antibiotics and other food contaminants. This group is still being supported, and is lately increasingly used as a training facility for staff and students from in particular Royal University in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and National University of Laos in the Lao PDR, which receive ISP research group support also in environmental chemistry. A scientific network has recently been formed between these groups, Asian Network of Research on Food and Environment Contamination (ANFEC), to formalize the cooperation in order to commonly develop in particular the quality and performance of environmental and food contamination analytical chemistry.

Between 1973 and 1992, support was provided also to research in inorganic and organometallic chemistry at University of Dhaka, and to natural products chemistry at Jahangirnagar University. During 1998 to 2008, support was provided to research on the biochemical and molecular basis of diabetes and its complications in the Bangladesh population, including nutritional evaluation of local food materials with particular reference to management and prevention of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, at the Biomedical Research Group at the Bangladesh Institute of Research and Rehabilitation in Diabetes, Endocrine and Metabolic Disorders (BIRDEM), Dhaka.

In addition, two chemistry networks centered in Bangladesh are supported (2), both from 1994. The Asian Network of Research on Antidiabetic Plants (ANRAP) has the objective to develop cooperation between scientists in the region that work in the field of antidiabetic plants research, and has received ISP support since 1994. The Network of Instrument Technical Personnel and User Scientists of Bangladesh (NITUB), has the objective to improve the capabilities in handling, maintaining, trouble-shooting, and repairing scientific instruments in Bangladesh.

In physics, a research group in solid-state physics at University of Dhaka was supported from 1977 to 1994, and a research group in photovoltaics at Rajshahi University from 1986 to 2002. Current support is since 1986 to research on magnetic materials, in cooperation between Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) and the Atomic Energy Centre, Dhaka (AECDC), and since 2011 to a research group in biomedical physics and technology at University of Dhaka.

4 GENERAL RESULTS OF ISP SUPPORT

In the nine-year period 2003 to 2011, the quantitative outcome per each million EUR spent by ISP-supported research groups and scientific networks together was in average:

- 12 PhD graduations, *plus*
- 50 MSc graduations, *plus*
- 87 scientific publications (40% of which in peer-reviewed, international journals), *plus*
- 113 conference contributions (40% of which international), *plus*
- 21 meetings organized (workshops, conferences, summer schools, etc.),

plus development of technical resources within research groups and networks, as well as increased collaboration with scientists at e.g. Swedish universities and in the regions. A

similar quantitative outcome was observed in a study of ISP reports covering periods dating back to 1985 (3), indicating a notable consistency in such results over the last decades.

Compared to the outcomes mentioned above, the results are similar or better for the long-lasting support to research groups in chemistry and physics in Bangladesh, and to research groups in physics in Thailand (Table 1). In Sri Lanka huge investments have been made in instrumentation. The support to research groups in Cambodia and Laos started much later than in Bangladesh and Thailand. Therefore, results are yet scarce because of the long time required to build capacity to a scientifically productive level.

Table 1. Duration of support, quantitative scientific outcome (up to 2011), and total funding of ISP research groups (up to 2011) in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka and Thailand

(P = physics; C = chemistry; yrs = total number of years of support, # = number of groups supported; PhD = number of doctorate graduations; MS/P = number of MSc and MPhil graduations; Int.P. = number of publications in peer-reviewed, international scientific journals; Funding € = total funding provided during the period of support, converted from SEK to EUR at present rate of exchange)

	Period	yrs	#	PhD	MS/P	Int. P.	Funding K€
Bangladesh - P	1977 - present	36	4	11	116	88	≈900
Bangladesh - C	1973 - present	40	6	44	251	59	≈980
Cambodia - P	2005 - present	8	1	0	16	3	≈164
Cambodia - C	2010 - present	3	1	0	0	0	≈60
Laos - P	2004 - present	9	1	0	2	0	≈37
Laos - C	2005 - present	8	2	0	0	0	≈27
Sri Lanka - P	1978 - 2010	32	4	34	87	134	≈3,700
Sri Lanka - C	1973 - 2009	37	12	28	54	155	≈6,378
Thailand - P	1980 - 2005	25	5	20	103	164	≈981
Thailand - C	1970 - 1995	25	4	1	35	30	≈376

In the 2011 evaluation of ISP it is noted that:

“ISP reports an average of 192 published research papers per year over the period 2003 to 2010, from an average of approximately 42 research groups. Given that a research group generally comprises only 1-2 leading researchers together with their research students, this quantity of output per person is satisfactory.”

A comparison of the number of peer-reviewed, international publications by ISP-supported research groups and scientific networks with the data reported by UNESCO (4) for the years 2002 and 2008 gives an indication of the impact of ISP support, with regard to scientific publications, in a wider perspective (Table 2).

In physics, ISP-supported groups and networks published about 10% of the physics papers in Bangladesh and about 30% of those in African countries, both in 2002 and 2008, and 16% of the physics papers in Thailand in 2002. The impact in this respect was largest in Sri Lanka, with ISP support behind 36% of the physics publications in 2002, and 62% of those in 2008.

In chemistry, ISP-supported groups and networks published 6% of the chemistry papers in 2002 and 2-3% of those in 2008, in both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and about 15% of those in African countries in both 2002 and 2008.

In mathematics, only Africa South of the Sahara was subject to ISP support in 2002 and 2008. The activities were in an initial state in 2002, and no publications were reported. In the four countries subject to ISP support that year, UNESCO noted merely two publications in total. In 2008, ISP-supported activities in ten countries accounted for 33 publications, while UNESCO noted 51 in total in those countries, that is, 65% by ISP-supported activities.

With regard to quality, it is observed in the 2011 evaluation (1) that:

“inspection of citation rates for a sample of publications supported by ISP reveals much high-satisfactory research work.”

Further, it is observed that the rates of citation of several ISP-supported papers are above world benchmarks.

Table 2. Share of international, peer-reviewed publications by ISP-supported research groups and scientific networks of the numbers reported for 2002 and 2008 in the UNESCO Science Report 2010. The comparison only considers countries having ISP-supported activities each of the investigated years. (Chem. = chemistry including biomedical; Math. = mathematics; empty slots = no ISP support was provided)

Region/Country	Physics 2002	Chem 2002	Math. 2002	Physics 2008	Chem 2008	Math. 2008
Africa South of Sahara	30%	14%	0%	29%	15%	65%
Bangladesh	11%	6%		9%	3%	
Sri Lanka	36%	6%		62%	2%	
Thailand	16%					

5 CASE STUDY OF ISP-BANGLADESH COOPERATION

5.1 Research question and case study design

In 2012, a Master thesis in International and European Relations was published focusing on ISP's collaboration with scientists in Bangladesh (5). It explores different forms of North-South development assistance with regard to its widespread critique and examines whether the field of international research capacity building holds alternative development cooperation strategies that have the potential to reconcile some of the criticisms.

The main object of investigation within the study is the International Science Programme (ISP). The empirical research in the form of semi-structured personal interviews carried out in Bangladesh and Sweden, on the ISP-Bangladesh collaboration, constitutes the core case study evidence. Three theoretical perspectives – realism, interdependence liberalism and constructivism – provide the framework of the case study and serve as guiding tools to understand ISP's role and motivations as an actor in international relations. The main question of investigation is whether ISP can be best perceived as an instance of self-interest (realism), interconnectedness (interdependence liberalism) or social empowerment (constructivism).

The research unfolds on two levels: a theoretical and an empirical one. Both levels are intertwined, with one informing the other. The starting point of the case study is a deductive approach, i.e. several hypotheses are derived from realism, interdependence liberalism and constructivism and – in the form of concrete predictions – guide the interviews carried out

with supported scientists, ISP staff and related officials. The indicators of success are based on concepts underlying the Paris Declaration for Aid Effectiveness as well as concepts from feminist, post-colonial and post-structuralist writings, i.e. local ownership, empowerment and partnership. These indicators are operationalized through 6 different themes related to research capacity building which are explored in interviews and ISP documents. The themes are:

1. Sweden's motivations;
2. Brain drain;
3. South-South collaboration;
4. Scientific (in)dependence;
5. Impact on own country; and
6. Quality of collaboration.

5.2 Theoretical background: realism, interdependence liberalism and constructivism

As one of the main International Relations (IR) theories, **realism** derives its explanatory power from the emphasis on power relations, with states as the dominant actors in the global arena, and the constant struggle for power between states motivated by political, economic etc. interests (6,7). For realists, a concept such as altruism does not possess any significant meaning because in the anarchical global society with no overarching authority to control the behavior of states, every state is considered to be struggling for survival (self-help system) and cooperation only takes place when it is considered strategically profitable (8). Hence, development assistance is viewed as an instrument of states to pursue their own goals.

Interdependence liberalism, on the other hand, is characterized by a more optimistic worldview and by a belief in change, progress and in human development. Instead of focusing on power relations, interdependence liberalism stresses (rational) interests and (free) choices of individuals and acknowledges the importance of non-state actors such as international organizations, civil society groups, NGOs, transnational corporations etc. (9). Interdependence liberals emphasize the benefits of economic, political and social interaction between different global actors as they believe that interdependence increases the costs of conflict for all involved and fosters peaceful cooperation in the global arena. From this perspective, development assistance is viewed as a win-win situation in which the collaborating parties profit more or less equally.

Constructivism is a broad meta-theoretical approach to social theory rather than a single IR theory. Whereas empiricism makes postulations about phenomena in an objectively measurable world that can be correctly perceived through human senses, constructivism views the reality in which we live as a product of conceptualizations in the creation of which every single person is constantly involved in (10). As constructivism acknowledges the role of identity, ideas and values, the study of development assistance becomes a practice in which shared meaning, established norms and the quality of interaction are emphasized. Every state and organization must be viewed distinctively as they have different identities and derive their motivations for action from different historical contexts and related institutions.

5.3 Main results of the case study in Bangladesh

The analysis of 23 conducted interviews with ISP supported scientists, students and officials in Bangladesh and Sweden suggests that satisfaction with the ISP mode of operation and with the way that ISP has approached and supported scientific groups and networks is very high. The concept of **local ownership** has been explored with regard to the ability of supported scientists to be independent in their research and to establish South-South bridges in order to eventually overcome dependency of Northern support. This aspect is quite strong within ISP as the freedom of building alliances and sending students to other Southern universities is given. Moreover, scientists report to have freedom in the choice of research topic and methodology and are encouraged by ISP to engage in areas that are of concern to their own

country. The only disadvantage with regard to local ownership that can be found in ISP's approach is the process of micro-management and monitoring that puts collaborators under constant observation and requires them to spend a large amount of time on Grant Applications and yearly Activity Reports. Although this creates pressure and stress, the supported scientists view it as necessary as they understand it as a means of transparency towards the Swedish taxpayers whose money they are using.

The idea of **empowerment** is linked to the ability to tackle problems that surround you with your own effort. The impact of ISP supported individuals on the societal level can be identified on several dimensions. Firstly, teaching and supervising students creates future human resources needed in various societal areas. Secondly, contribution to the scientific body of knowledge that is created in Bangladesh has an impact to long-term development of a knowledge-based society, which enables Bangladesh to compete with more advanced countries. Thirdly, several groups work directly on health and environmental problems as in the case of research on food safety, anti-diabetic plants, healthcare technology etc. Output in these areas is captured in detail in Activity Reports and Project Catalogues. The role of ISP in creating empowerment is most strongly expressed in the prevention of brain drain through ISP sandwich programs. It is reported that PhD sandwich programs are attractive alternatives for MPhil students who would otherwise have done their PhDs entirely abroad. The majority of graduated PhD sandwich students stays in Bangladesh and occupies high positions in academic and research institutions, public service, industry, medical facilities etc., hence, benefiting the broader society.

Regarding the **partnership** criterion, the observation can be made that the quality of the collaboration the ISP and Bangladeshi scientists does not strongly reflect the structural inequality that exists between Sweden as the richer, donating country and Bangladesh as the poorer, receiving country. Collaborators on both sides view each other as scholars who have similar goals and who trust and respect each other. Especially among the research group leaders, strong bonds with previous program directors and collaborating scientists as well friendly feelings towards ISP staff were characteristic of the answers. Younger research group members have a more distanced relationship to the ISP, but report to have never felt disrespect or encountered a condescending attitude on the side of ISP collaborators. As face-to-face meetings between the program directors and supported groups take place at least once a year, room is given for the development of a personal connection. Face-to-face interaction between North-South collaborators has been found to have great advantages for the quality and the effectiveness of development projects (11). The personal nature of the collaboration between the ISP and supported scientists can be viewed as a strength and a model to other donors.

From a theoretical perspective, constructivism and interdependence liberalism are much more likely to account for the research findings of the case study than realism. The realist view that ISP as a predominantly state-financed institution is following egoistic motives could not be confirmed in the study. In all 6 examined themes, the data indicates that benefits of the collaboration between ISP and the supported scientists in Bangladesh are felt on both sides and that empowerment does take place with regard to the freedom of supported scientists to handle the ISP grant, freedom to choose the destination of "sandwich students", the ability to conduct research on local issues etc. Interdependence liberalism offers a valuable lens to view the attained advantages of linking individuals from a similar professional background in two countries while constructivism helps to explain the good quality of the collaboration as a result personal interactions between Swedish and Bangladeshi scientists over a long period of time.

5.4 The ISP model compared to traditional strategies of development assistance

The approach that ISP has taken stands in stark contrast to orthodox North-South development approaches adopted by official donors such as development banks, national development agencies and multilateral organizations. The most fundamental difference is that ISP is not an institution that has been deliberately set up to "develop" individuals living in

poorer countries, but has evolved from cooperation between scientists in the North and the South. Individuals on both sides of the collaboration work in a similar field and can interact in a more egalitarian and mutually empowering way. This kind of mutuality is rarely given in a setting where development agency officials, who are not personally linked to the professional environment of supported individuals, create strategies on how to solve their problems and often distribute financial support in an impersonal manner. This traditional way of development assistance runs the risk of perpetuating colonial beliefs as it creates an ideational hierarchy between aid donors and aid receivers.

Another contrast to official donors is that ISP works on the micro-economic instead of a macro-economic level. It follows a bottom-up approach that starts with researchers, entrepreneurs and individuals who are working in the field of health-care, environmental problems or technological problems and who are aware of the problems of the poorer population rather than starting with high-level officials who come from a separate sector in society and must follow specific bureaucratic guidelines. Through its personal contact with supported scientists, its small size and its mode of operation, ISP is much more flexible and can adapt to changing demands on the local level.

Furthermore, there are no conditionalities attached to ISP support in comparison to most funds available through institutions such as the World Bank, the EU, bilateral donors etc. Although tied aid could be globally reduced to 18 percent in the last decade (13), many donors still establish internal conditionalities which have been described by the interviewed scientists. The freedom of procuring the best and cheapest laboratory equipment, developing own technology or sending students for exchange to any country with the donor's money, which is given within the ISP, is an exceptional instance in the area of development support. Finally, ISP has a long-lasting impact on the supported countries in comparison to a large amount of Official development assistance, which is mostly organized as project aid. ISP supports groups over a very long period of time, focuses on the promotion of basic scientific knowledge, which can tackle societal problems and contributes to the creation of future teachers and human resources for other societal areas. This view has been shared by the former Sida official who stated in the interview that:

“You can compare ISP's work to other things like projects on material infrastructure that are now rusting away, you can compare it to democracy projects which focus on promoting NGOs etc. that are withering away because they are not constituted by the local people but by some individuals, you can compare it to money that has been running through general banking support and is now in Swedish bank accounts and so on, but what the ISP has been doing is for real, you can never take it away, it's there and it has many traces in society.”

6 CONCLUSION

The outcome of ISP support in the latest three decades is substantial and consistent with regard to awarded scientific degrees and dissemination of scientific results by supported research groups and networks. The impact on the production of scientific publications in countries with ISP-supported research groups and scientific networks is significant, in particular in African countries. In mathematics, already after six years of activity the ISP had a very large impact of the publication rate in the Southern African countries where support is provided. In Asian countries with ISP support, the impact on publication rate was larger in physics than in chemistry.

The social science study conducted by Kuhn (2012) found that, on the whole, ISP's approach can be regarded as a successful instance of North-South development support which can be followed by other donors to the extent that is feasible in their specific field of activity. Although certain aspects have been criticized by interviewees such as the pressure to compose detailed activity reports by the end of the year, the lacking information system for students and a too strong focus on basic sciences are seen as problematic aspects, the reported advantages of the ISP approach by far exceed the disadvantages.

The enormous impact that ISP-related scientists in Bangladesh have on their own country seems to be wide-reaching and sustainable because it involves firm establishment of research and higher education in the basic sciences, which can solve health-related, environmental, technological etc. problems, the training of future teachers and the strengthening of human resources in many societal areas.

The reasons for the satisfaction of Bangladeshi scientists with ISP's work have been the long-lasting support, involvement of individuals from a similar background at ISP, a bottom-up, micro-economic approach, untied distribution of grants, promotion of South-South collaboration and a sincere motive. The last aspect might be the crucial starting point for the effective implementation of other approaches because when the objective of development assistance is determined by self-interest, which interviewees have experienced in collaboration with other donors, it is very unlikely to bring about long-lasting development or foster empowerment and local ownership.

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