



SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN THE INDO-PACIFIC FOR
SUSTAINABLE FUTURES:

AASSREC – ICSSR 26th BIENNIAL GENERAL CONFERENCE

3-5 DECEMBER, 2025
NEW DELHI

CONFERENCE REPORT

HOSTED BY



Association of
Asian Social Science
Research Councils



Indian Council of
Social Science Research

SUPPORTED BY



IDRC · CRDI

International Development Research Centre
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

Canada

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	03
Background	
▶ The Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils (AASSREC)	04
▶ Participating Organisations	06
Proceedings	
▶ Opening Ceremony	07
▶ Keynote Address: Professor Ramika Shavi	09
▶ Panel Session 1: Navigating Change: Social Science Responses to Emerging Global Realities	10
▶ Panel Session 2: Sustainability and Society: Interdisciplinary Responses to Environmental and Technological Change (part 1)	13
▶ Panel Session 3: Sustainability and Society: Interdisciplinary approaches to Environmental and Technological Change (part 2)	16
▶ Panel Session 4: Reimagining Indo-Pacific Social Sciences: Local Knowledge and Global Discourse	19
▶ Panel Session 5: Social Sciences in the Age of AI: Ethics, Inclusion, and Transformation	22
▶ Panel Session 6: Transforming Institutions, Research Agendas, and Public Engagement in the Indo-Pacific	24
▶ IDRC and Boosting Social Sciences Program Presentation	27
▶ Doing Research Assessments Presentation	29
▶ UNESCO Session: Sustainable Policies for a Changing Indo-Pacific	31
▶ Special Session on Climate and Agriculture	34
▶ Valedictory Session	36
▶ Closing Ceremony	37
Conclusion	38
Appendix: Conference Program	39

Executive Summary

The ASSREC-ICSSR 26th Biennial Conference (the Conference), held in New Delhi, India from 3–5 December 2025, brought together over 90 leading social science experts, researchers, policymakers and practitioners from across the Asia-Pacific and beyond to examine the role of the social sciences in shaping sustainable and equitable futures. The Conference, centred on the theme “Social Science Research in the Indo-Pacific for Sustainable Futures,” provided a platform for participants to reflect and explore how interdisciplinary, locally grounded, and globally informed research can generate actionable insights for sustainable, inclusive, and just futures. This significant event was hosted by the Association of Asian-Social Science Research Councils (AASSREC) and the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) at the Royal Plaza Hotel New Delhi, with generous financial support from the International Development Research Centre (Canada) through the 2023–2026 *Boosting Social Sciences in the Indo-Pacific and their Contributions to Better Lives* program.

The Indo-Pacific region is undergoing rapid, multidimensional change shaped by demographic transitions, technological disruption, geopolitical realignments, environmental degradation, and widening socioeconomic inequalities. As these forces intersect and intensify, they present a series of interdependent challenges that are reshaping the region’s political, cultural, and ecological landscape. Importantly, the Conference aimed to move beyond viewing the Indo-Pacific as merely a strategic or geographic category. It instead foregrounded the region as a complex, evolving socio-cultural and ecological space marked by historical entanglements, cultural diversity, and economic interdependence. The environmental, social, and political sustainability of the region depends on our ability to produce research that is responsive to local realities while engaging critically with dominant paradigms.

The Conference marked a renewed commitment to social science enquiry as one that draws from indigenous knowledge systems, bridges theory with practice, and places equity, rights, and inclusion at its core. Over the three days, participants affirmed the need for inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches that integrate insights from sociology, political science, economics, anthropology, psychology and allied fields to address the region’s interconnected challenges.

BACKGROUND

The Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils

AASSREC is an organisation of national social science research councils, academies and institutes committed to the promotion of regional cooperation in the field of social sciences among Asia-Pacific countries.

Set up in 1973 to help promote the social sciences in the region and to create an Asia-Pacific identity for the social sciences, AASSREC's core objectives include facilitating collaborative research among scholars in the region, exchanging scholarly publications and information and organising exchange visits for researchers and scholars from its member countries. AASSREC's activities are diverse, encompassing biennial general conferences, collaborative research programmes addressing shared regional issues and assessments of trends in social science research and education.

AASSREC's organisational structure has evolved over time and important changes were incorporated in its Constitution and By-laws in 1994, 1999 and 2025. As a regional organisation for the social sciences, AASSREC is an accredited non-government organisation maintaining consultative and official relations with UNESCO.

AASSREC is governed by the General Conference, consisting of duly designated representatives of all members (regular and associate). The General Conference meets in regular session once every two years and is responsible for the overall strategy and direction of AASSREC. The Executive Council is the governing body of AASSREC when the General Conference is not in session. It oversees the Secretariat which is responsible for the day to day management of the association. The Executive Council is elected every two years and through the years, the post of President, Vice-Presidents and Secretary-General have rotated among the member organisations.

The Secretariat is located in the country of residence of the Secretary-General. The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia currently hosts the Secretariat, with an international composition led by Dr Claire Rioult, with Ms Anna Devenport (ASSA), Mr Miguel Karaan (PSSC), and Ms Neha Yedav (ICSSR).

AASSREC Executive Council: 2023–2025

President:

Professor Dhananjay Singh – Member Secretary of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), India

First Vice-President:

Professor Wonho Jang – President of the Korean Social Science Research Council (KOSSREC), Korea

Second Vice-President:

Dr Wiparat De-ong – Executive Director of the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT), Thailand

Secretary-General:

Dr Claire Rioult – International Director at the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, Australia

PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

AASSREC Member Organisations

1. Australia: Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia
2. Bangladesh: Social Science Research Council Bangladesh
3. Cambodia: Cambodia Development Resource Institute
4. China: Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences (absent)
5. India: Indian Council of Social Science Research
6. Iran: Iranian Sociological Association
7. Japan: Science Council of Japan
8. Korea: Korean Social Science Research Council
9. Malaysia: Malaysian Social Science Research Association
10. Nepal: Nepal Academy
11. New Zealand: Royal Society Te Aparangi
12. Philippines: Philippine Social Science Council
13. Sri Lanka: National Science Foundation
14. Thailand: National Research Council of Thailand
15. Vietnam: Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

Associate Members

1. Fiji: University of the South Pacific
2. Taipei/Taiwan: Academia Sinica

Other Organisations

1. Cambodia: Royal Academy of Cambodia
2. Canada: International Development Research Centre
3. Global Development Network
4. India: Centre for International Politics, Organisation and Disarmament
5. India: Indian Institute of Public Administration
6. India: Research and Information System for Developing Countries
7. India: NDTV
8. Laos: Laos Academy of Social and Economic Sciences
9. Switzerland: The University of Basel
10. UNESCO: Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education / Participatory Research in Asia

PROCEEDINGS

Opening Ceremony and Keynote Address

Welcoming Remarks:

- **Dr Claire Rioult**, Secretary-General, ASSREC
- **Prof. Dhananjay**, AASSREC President and ICSSR Member Secretary

Keynote Address:

- **Prof. Shamika Ravi**, Member of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister and Secretary to the Government of India



Over 90 leading experts, researchers and policymakers from across the Asia-Pacific gathered for the Conference

Dr Claire Rioult's opening address welcomed AASSREC delegates and strategic partners to the Conference, acknowledging the strong turnout with 16 of 17 member countries represented, and acknowledged collaborative partners from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Global Development Network (GDN). Dr Rioult situated the meeting in a moment of heightened regional flux: societies across Asia and the Pacific being reshaped by climate vulnerability, demographic shifts, widening inequality, rapid digital transformation, and evolving geopolitics that can unsettle national research systems and cross-border cooperation. Against this backdrop, she urged that social sciences are indispensable for explaining institutional adaptation and community resilience, and for equipping governments, civil society and multilaterals with evidence, nuance, and empathy to navigate complexity.

Dr Rioult's address was candid about sector constraints: uneven and limited funding, capacity gaps, weak research uptake and persistent structural inequities. She linked these realities to GDN's characterisation of regional systems as 'disconnected, diverse, and growing,' and then to AASSREC's 50-year mission: convert fragmentation into collaboration and policy-relevance. The Secretary-General further highlighted the IDRC-funded *Boosting Social Sciences in the Indo-Pacific* program as proof that region-centred, inclusive capacity building works. It has expanded networks, revealed priority investment areas, and translates research toward policy.

Looking beyond April 2026, Dr Rioult committed AASSREC to an active, resilient and inclusive next chapter and invited delegates to turn conference panels into lasting partnerships.

Prof. Dhananjay Singh continued the opening address highlighting the importance of locally grounded research and insights for challenges faced by the Indo-Pacific region. Prof. Singh reflected on the importance of culture for regional cooperation and resilience, citing the historical maritime and Silk Road trade routes and the region now being home to some of the fastest growing economies in the world. By highlighting the historical relations among countries and communities, he highlighted cultural continuity, integrations, and interconnectedness that underpinned the significance of the conference gathering social scientists, institutional leaders, and policymakers from across the region. He discussed one of the six core themes of the conference, sustainability, and the tension of the word as it is commonly understood as a late 20th century concept with discursive implications of linear progression and hegemonic industrialisation, whereas in many societies of the world, the word would not exist because of these societies' cultural grounding and worldview of a cohesive and integrated existence with nature and non-humans.

Prof. Singh further highlighted the present moment as an opportunity to build directions and partnerships within the region, that represents and reflects global discourses as well as understands that there are histories of social thought in the Indo-Pacific that should be the foundation of today's and tomorrow's concepts, theories, frameworks and methods, not mere footnotes. Professor Singh called for recognition of the distinctiveness of the traditions and societies that would be represented at the conference, with studies and cross-border sharing of data that is mutually beneficial for the region and the globe.

Prof. Shamika Ravi's Keynote Address was a tribute to the work of social science researchers whose insights, data and careful analysis informs more effective and affordable government policies. She noted a key factor for doing research in a dynamic economy: there is more data than there has ever been, and so many things changing. When looking at past trends and data to make projections, the challenge for this approach to policymaking is that past trends give forecasts based on past averages, yet dynamic economies involve structural breaks to those trends. Prof. Ravi reflected that social scientists do not deal with certainties in the same way as do STEM fields, because for social scientists, the job is often to pre-empt and define problems. For economists providing advice to governments, she noted, this involves trade-offs: no solution can be provided without giving a trade-off of the commensurate costs associated with it. Prof. Ravi offered that policies based on averages are more likely to be inherently flawed, and that looking at distributional impact is key. She provides examples from India's growth in the past 20 years: where 12 years ago, India recorded a 30% poverty rate, and at the 2023-24 recording, a 3.6% rate. That has been 302 million people out of poverty. The necessary focus is on population size, demographic, and diversity between urban, rural, state-based politics, etc.

Distribution work by social scientists using the increased amount of data available in recent years has shown meaningful detail about impact beyond averages: the poverty level for women has decreased to = 1.8%, following a policy focused on resource allocation to women with a disproportionately greater impact on the family. A further example given whereby social science research had directly informed policy was India's toilet program: Health policy advice by researchers about the high rates of open defecation across the country was based on infant mortality, maternal mortality, neonatal deaths and waterborne diseases. As a result 120 million toilets were provided to household and communities within five years, and health and mortality rates drastically improved. The program had a further impact in that giving women and young girls access to toilets led to a significant decrease in the rate of assaults. She noted that while there is a direct positive correlation between toilets and quality of life for women in rural India, when policy needs to focus on health, the consequences are so widespread there is no way to assess this anecdotally. Professor Ravi's keynote address concluded that the power of research and careful analysis is that it breaks through false narratives and creates policies that are more affordable, effective, and make sense because they are scientific.

UNESCO PRIA Presentation: Sustainable Policies for a Changing Indo-Pacific

Chair: Dr. Rajesh Tandon, UNESCO PRIA Co-Founder and Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education (India)

SPEAKERS:

- **Mr Rabi Raj**, UNESCO PRIA Researcher
- **Ms Saanya Sodhi**, UNESCO PRIA Chair Coordinator
- **Mr Shri Shailesh Panwar**, Secretary, Himalayan Action Research Centre (HARC)
- **Ms Paloma Aguilar**, DECODE's Latin America Regional Coordinator
- **Dr Arjan de Haan**, Senior Program Specialist, (IDRC)



(L to R): Dr Rajesh Tandon,, Ms Saannya Sodhi, Mr Rabi Raj, Ms Paloma Aguilar, Mr Shri Shailesh Panwar and Dr Arjan Haan delivered the UNESCO PRIA Presentation

Under the title **Subjugation by Design? The Systemic Devaluation of Humanities and Social Sciences**, Mr Rabi Raj and Ms Saanya Sodhi presented an analysis of what they described as the structural and political marginalisation of humanities and social sciences across the Indo-Pacific. Drawing on secondary data from funding bodies and higher education policy sources, Rabi Raj argued that contemporary higher education systems increasingly prioritise STEM disciplines at the expense of critical, civic, and ethical inquiry. The presentation highlighted funding imbalances, policy decisions affecting curriculum content, and international examples where humanities disciplines have been defunded or restricted. These developments were framed not as neutral market trends, but as ideological shifts with implications for democratic life and public reasoning. Referencing theorists such as Marx, Althusser, Freire and Giroux, the presentation argued that weakening the humanities narrows critical consciousness and public imagination. Importantly, the presentation connected this debate to sustainability. While technological innovation can build infrastructure, questions of distribution, equity, access, behavioural change, and justice fall squarely within the domain of social sciences. The paper contended that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) requires not “STEM versus social science” but an integrated approach. The discussion concluded with a call to reinvest in public universities, protect academic freedom, and build regional knowledge alliances across the Indo-Pacific. In his remarks, panel chair Dr. Rajesh Tandon reinforced this integrative perspective, referencing global discussions on the complementarity of STEM and social sciences and underscoring the need to resist disciplinary silos.

The second part of the session presented findings from the **DECODE international study on decolonised co-construction of knowledge**, examining ten global case studies where indigenous and community knowledge contributed to climate resilience. Dr Tandon introduced the central premise that community and indigenous knowledge systems are frequently invisible within formal research, yet play a critical role in addressing climate impacts.

The study, supported by the IDRC, explored how participatory and community-based research methodologies can integrate local knowledge with academic expertise:

- In Kaleshwar, India, the **Women’s Forest Cooperative case** demonstrated how traditional ecological knowledge was systematised and transformed into a sustainable livelihood initiative. Women’s expertise in forest products was documented, strengthened, and linked to value addition strategies that prioritised sustainable harvesting and ecological stewardship, illustrating that economic empowerment need not result in environmental degradation.

- In Bolivia, the **Pachagrama initiative** showed how indigenous Aymara farmers' bio-indicators were systematically recorded and integrated with meteorological science, improving climate forecasting accuracy while preserving traditional knowledge systems. In Colombia, indigenous women worked with engineers and foresters to map and protect their territories from extractive pressures. Through this process, women strengthened their leadership roles, reaffirmed cultural knowledge, and enhanced forest protection.
- In Sarawak, Malaysia, **community knowledge of mangrove-based sugar production** was systematised through collaboration with university researchers, leading to the formation of a cooperative that improved productivity while maintaining mangrove conservation and community ownership of knowledge. In Arctic Canada, a case study on Inuit knowledge of polar bears demonstrated how indigenous ecological understanding (holistic, relational, and place-based) can complement Western scientific approaches to climate adaptation, highlighting both epistemological differences and their potential complementarity when grounded in mutual respect and trust.

Across the case studies, several cross-cutting themes emerged: the recognition of knowledge democracy and the complementarity of diverse knowledge systems; the need to systematise local knowledge without appropriating or displacing it; the central role of women's leadership in ecological stewardship and social resilience; and the importance of place-based, locally owned solutions. Participatory methodologies positioned community members as co-researchers, reinforcing epistemic justice. Rajesh Tandon concluded by stressing that co-production processes are as important as outcomes, noting that India's National Education Policy (2020) now mandates community engagement in higher education.

This session underscored that advancing climate resilience is inseparable from defending the humanities and social sciences. Sustainable policies for the Indo-Pacific require not only technological innovation, but also community knowledge, participatory research, and democratic imagination.