

A conversation with Milan Vaishnav on February 27, 2014

Participants

- Milan Vaishnav – Associate, South Asia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
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Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Dr. Milan Vaishnav.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Dr. Milan Vaishnav to better understand opportunities to engage in policy advocacy outside the United States. Conversation topics included: the general methods and goals of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, its non-US-based offices, and its policy priorities in India.

Carnegie research centers around the world

One of numerous endowments created by philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (hereafter, Carnegie), was initially based entirely in Washington, D.C. As the Soviet Union collapsed, Carnegie saw an opportunity to replicate its success in the US with a new center in Moscow, providing a transforming Russia with an independent, apolitical, research-based institution dedicated to generating and refining policy ideas. Conceived as a self-sustaining, locally-controlled policy think tank for foreign affairs and adjacent policy issues, the success of the Moscow center in the early 90's led to the creation of a series of centers in Brussels, Beirut, and Beijing. Today, these centers are controlled and staffed almost entirely by citizens of their host countries, with their own independent endowments and policy interests. Each acts as an independent center for ideas and debate and participates in an international network for sharing policy ideas.

Most recently, Carnegie has begun the process of raising money for a new South Asia center in Delhi.

Challenges and benefits of a new center

Central to the Carnegie centers' approach is creating an opportunity to select issues for study and policy development without the need to chase immediate, specific sources of grant funding or produce an immediate outcome. New centers need an independent endowment and talented, dedicated staff to create such an opportunity.

For a center in India, identifying people with the necessary talent and issues that deserve long-term focus is challenging. To gain traction in the community, Carnegie has to avoid or overcome the perception of being an outsider to Indian policy issues.

The cost of launching a center can vary significantly from country to country; in India, where the cost of setting up a center is expected to be relatively high.

Benefits of Carnegie's approach

Carnegie centers work on the issues that they believe are the most important, even if those issues do not currently receive a significant amount of attention. Policy questions are generally posed in terms of what challenges and changes are expected in a period of five to ten years.

Rather than producing a local branch of a foreign think tank, individual endowments like the planned Delhi center allow issues to be tackled by local scholars with a local perspective. Community support can then be built around a combination of genuine local perspective and Carnegie's reputation for rigorous research, active field work, and long term policy planning. Additionally, Carnegie centers identify, recruit and nurture talented members of the community who lack a clear way to become involved in the policy world, providing them a chance to develop into leading contributors in important issue areas.

Numerous groups in India engage in rigorous research into public and community issues, but are generally working in partnership with the government itself, so the government sets their agenda. The Indian government, particularly the Ministry of Finance and the Reserve Bank, frequently contracts with third party think tanks for research, producing significant technical data, but most reports do not offer policy recommendations that are easily digestible by the broader policy community (i.e. civil society, media interest groups and even key policymakers). Processing the data, generating recommendations, and considering political economy obstacles are all left as additional steps in policy development. Carnegie's model offers a more comprehensive approach, aiming to generate concrete policy recommendations for legislatures and administrators that are presented in a format in sync with policymakers' limited bandwidth on any given issue.

Key policy interests

Carnegie's main interests in India fall into three broad categories: India's foreign policy and national security, the US-India relationship, and the political economy of India's development. While the first two are obvious issue areas for a foundation devoted to global peace, it is the third area that most defines India's unique policy environment.

Rule of Law

Governance and administration of law in India currently suffers from dysfunction in almost every aspect of legal policy (elections, courts, legal counsel, law enforcement, prisons). Finding ways to identify the specific problems in each area and presenting workable ideas for improvement could both improve day-to-day life in India and make reforms in all other areas easier to achieve. A large number of ideas have already been generated on how to address these problems, but most have not moved beyond a government report or a scholarly abstract.

Regulation

The latest wave of economic reforms reduced or eliminated excessive regulation in some areas of the economy, but India's system of domestic regulations still needs significant improvement. Industries that are still heavily regulated by the Indian government have been the source of numerous scandals and fraud accusations.

Drug regulation has received a great deal of attention in Indian media, with ongoing public discourse on intellectual property rights, counterfeit pharmaceuticals, and disagreements between the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and its equivalent agencies in India. Despite public attention, drug regulation has not made significant progress.

Financial sector reforms, including new legislation, regulatory codes, and statutes, have taken a very long-term view, anticipating where an increasingly large and diverse Indian financial market can expect to be in twenty to thirty years. It may be possible to apply this kind of forward-thinking system of regulation to other industries in India. Ila Patnaik, a columnist and economics professor at the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy based in New Delhi (she is also affiliated with Carnegie), has been active in this area in a quasi-government initiative called the Financial Sector Legislative Reforms Commission and would be a good resource for more information on this topic.

Areas of interest for long-term policy planning

Some of these general issue areas require research and planning that consider problems and challenges that are expected to grow and change significantly in the next few decades, such as:

- Regulation of natural resources. India needs credible public institutions and policy frameworks for allocating, regulating and arbitrating the use of natural resources. These will need to be designed and built in the next few decades as growing populations (and rising energy demand) make the issue more urgent.
- Decentralization of political power, especially increasing political power in urban areas. Many cities or townships have local governments with little or no political power even as urbanization swells their populations. Changes to empower mayors and city councils similar to US reforms will be a serious need in the near future.
- Election finance in India operates without an effective system of public regulation. The end result is huge amounts of unaccounted "black money" in the political system.

- Lobbying in India functions on the borderline of being an illicit activity. While some level of this kind of political influence will likely always exist, it is currently far from the level of needed public transparency.

Groups and activities working in these issue areas

- Parliamentary Research Service has worked to raise awareness and understanding of the Indian legislative process.
 - The PRS works to provide the public with a general understanding of the parliamentary system and publicizes data on the parliament and its members, such as attendance at parliamentary sessions, how time is spent in parliamentary sessions, what bills are under consideration, etc.
 - It also works to provide training on parliamentary rules and procedures to the lawmakers themselves; India has no institutional provision for training elected officials or their staffs.
- Accountability Initiative, run by the Center for Policy Research, is active in a number of research and advocacy projects around accountability in service delivery. It provides detailed briefs on use of public money and provides focused reporting on some specific large-scale social services expenditures, tracking how much money is finally used, what the bottlenecks are, and tracking outcomes.
- Association for Democratic Reforms is a political transparency group working with considerable success to create publicly available background profiles on lawmakers, drawing on affidavit disclosures submitted by politicians themselves.
- Janaagraha is a government transparency group based in Bangalore that works to provide the public with information on what agents and agencies to hold accountable for service delivery and quality of life grievances. It also launched the website ipaidabribe.com to fight corruption through bribe reporting.
- Omidyar Network is highly active India, providing funding and support to many diverse groups (including some mentioned here) as part of their worldwide involvement in consumer and mobile technology, financial inclusion, government transparency, and entrepreneurship.
- Brookings Institution has its own center in India that is focused on independent research and raising knowledge and awareness for Indian policy issues in India and the US.
- Center for Advanced Study of India, based in the University of Pennsylvania, is one of the first University-based institutions devoted to modern India and its political economy. Devesh Kapur, Associate Professor of Political Science at University of Pennsylvania and current Director of the center, could provide more information about this.

Others to talk to about these issues

- For more information on Carnegie's international centers:
 - Andrew Weiss, VP for Studies at Carnegie, head of research on Russia & Eurasia
 - Dmitri Trenin, Director, Carnegie Moscow Center
 - Paul Haenle, Director, Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, Beijing
- Sonal Shah, founding Executive Director of Beeck Center for Social Impact & Innovation at Georgetown University

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