Board Paper 2018.4

Pilot project on continued policy engagement between conferences

Problem
Building a community of persons who want to influence public-policy and regulatory processes within their countries in a decentralized manner is a key element of what we want to do with CPRsouth. Given resources constraints, the widely differing skill and knowledge levels of participants, especially those who go through the Young Scholar Academy, and their differing research interests, we have limited ourselves to creating a platform and conditions, leaving it to individuals to make the connections, which some have.[1] But many have not. Given the long funding commitment made by IDRC (this is the 13th annual conference and young scholar program that has been supported), we must continually seek to improve the output from our activities and, indeed, to reinvent CPRsouth.

Solution
Young scholars come from over 20 countries each year. Some of them (hopefully, an increasing percentage) will come again as paper givers. This is a rich resource with enormous potential for comparative research. If we can use our members to collect data for comparative research and also mobilize them more effectively for policy impact within their own countries we would have a much stronger case for continued support from IDRC and other funders.

The fact that this rather obvious solution has not been pursued by any of the experienced researchers on the Board indicates that it is not easy to implement. Perhaps the coordination costs are too high; perhaps it's difficult to motivate the country researchers who have other priorities; perhaps they are not able to engage in sophisticated comparative research.

But speculation is not productive. It is proposed that we run a pilot project and see what works and what does not. The attached article, accepted for publication in early 2019 by *Digital Policy, Regulation and Governance* (formerly Info), suggests a possible mechanism.[2] It was rejected for CPRsouth in 2016 but was accepted and won best policy brief in 2017. The basic thesis is that governments all over the world have great difficulty disbursing universal-service funds that they collect. It proposes simple metrics that will allow disbursements to be tracked and compared. This looks after the necessary condition for outputs. Checking whether the sufficient condition of the money being spent for the purposes the fund was set up for cannot be done in a uniform manner across countries. Someone has to undertake the comparative analysis and there is no one stepping up at this stage. Data collection is straightforward. The policy recommendations are relatively simple: disburse the money that you collect for the purposes collected for; stop collecting if you cannot spend.

Universal-service funds are important elements of telecom policy in almost all countries, with a bearing on multiple issues ranging from impact on prices of services to subsidies for the disabled. It has more emotional resonance than most issues in the ICT space. Not all the young scholars (and

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[1] Rohman, I.K. & Stork, C. (2013). Application of the Rohman-Stork price basket to unlock the complexities of cellular price in Indonesia, *Info*, 15(5): https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/info-05-2013-0024
[2] Samarajiva, R. & Hurulle, G. (2019). Metrics to improve universal-service fund disbursements, *Digital Policy, Regulation and Governance*, 21(1). In press.

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the others at the conference) will respond. But even if half of them do it would be a significant achievement.

The comparative analysis can be done with just three data points: how much was disbursed in a particular years (Year n); how much was collected in Year n-1; and what was the accumulated balance at end of Year n-1. If these data can be collected over a period of time, all the better. For country-specific analysis, the amounts spent for defined purposes would also be necessary (but this part is not necessary for the comparative analysis).

Proposal
Approval is sought for following actions:

1. All participants of CPRsouth 2018 will be offered the opportunity to participate in collective project to assess the efficacy of universal service funds and will be provided with the base paper on the last day of the conference.
2. They will be provided with a template for data collection in February 2019. How the data is obtained may range from simple web search to Right to Information requests.
3. The CPRsouth secretariat will compile the data and make the results available to all who contributed data as a report and in the form of a generic news release that they would have to modify to highlight the relative position of their countries and define the comparators.
4. All participants in the research activity are expected to communicate the research to decision makers and media in their countries with no additional assistance from the secretariat and to report their actions and outcomes, if any.
5. A report on the pilot project will be presented to the Board with recommendations on making between-conferences comparative research a continuing feature of CPRsouth.

If the above is approved, LIRNEasia will include the activity as part of the proposal that has to be written to raise money for 2019 and 2020 conferences and YS academies. The activity has obvious educational and community-building potential. If the pilot succeeds, other Board Members may wish to initiate similar multi-country data-gathering and policy-influencing activities.

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