

**Seminar Report**  
**“Cultural Change and Public Policy”**

**Thursday, October 16, 2008**

**Islamabad**



**Institute of  
Social and Policy Sciences**



## Welcome Remarks

Mr. Kashif Mumtaz, Research Fellow, Institute of Social and Policy Sciences (I-SAPS), welcomed the participants and introduced the theme of the seminar. The selection of the topic of the seminar, he said, stemmed from the realization that several public policy choices of recent past had resulted in increased social exclusion in Pakistani society. Besides, there had been a rapid cultural change in the society over the last several years. However, he noted, the linkage between public policy and cultural change remained under-debated. He said today’s seminar would initiate a debate on the topic and I-SAPS would follow on this with further research. The speaker, he added, would particularly focus on the moot points that had already been shared with the participants, and which ranged from definitional issues to exploring the causes of cultural change in Pakistan and the public policy choices vis-à-vis management of this change. He then introduced the speaker and the discussant.

## ‘Cultural Change and Public Policy’

### Dr. Safdar A. Sohail

Director General, Foreign Trade Institute of Pakistan.

In his presentation Dr. Sohail talked about the dynamics of socio-economic change in Pakistan, its linkages with public policy and the possible way forward. He started by congratulating I-SAPS for taking this initiative and wished good luck for the I-SAPS Seminar series. Referring to the Concept Note on the Seminar series which had been shared with the participants, he drew attention towards the mention therein that the Seminar series aimed at providing the best minds with a platform to apply themselves to pressing social and public policy problems faced by Pakistan. The Concept Note, he added, specially mentioned that theoretical analyses of those problems were perhaps not getting enough attention by the academia or by the public policy practitioners. He appreciated that the movement from practices, from social phenomena to Theory and then back to practice was the distinguishing element of I-SAPS Seminar series.

The basic purpose of his presentation, Dr. Sohail said, was to initiate a debate on the possible linkages between ‘cultural change’ and ‘public policy’ and the consequent/possible implications, in the context of ongoing debates, controversies and conflict on the ‘cultural issues’. A continuous theme in these debates, he noted, was that the absence or weakness of ‘positive’ values was about to sink Pakistani society and state. He pointed out that Pakistanis were bemoaning more and more in the media, as if something fundamental had gone wrong and Pakistanis had become incorrigible at cultural and psychological levels, prompting such expressions that Pakistanis were confused; they were dangerous people; they liked authoritarian rule and were unable to put their act together. For him, it was an indication that people wanted the government to play its role in rectifying the situation which was sapping the social fabric in Pakistan. .

While elaborating on the desire or need of state intervention in social matters, he drew a parallel with government’s intervention in the market, which was considered ‘normal’ by almost everybody. But when it came to intervening in the social arena, the academia thought it to be very ‘ideological’ for the State to intervene in people’s way of life, cultural styles and thinking. He underscored the fact that there was an enhanced interest by the State in the market. And if it could be proved that our current state of psyche and cultural practices were a result of a failure of development strategies of the previous governments, then there was certain causal linkage, which called for an ‘interest’ by the government in the public space of culture also.

The phenomenon of ‘Social Exclusion’, which was feared due to its consequences in the form of crime and different negative cultural tendencies, he asserted, was essentially a result of past development strategies, which now needed to be addressed through Public Policy interventions. As was the case of government’s intervention in the market, the case of preventive and curative intervention in the cultural sphere also merited serious consideration by academia as well as public policy practitioners.

Highlighting the importance of cultural values, at the micro level, in the context of organizational development, he reminded the audience that, at the firm level, the attitudes and traits of the employee, informed by his cultural value and psychology were crucial factors, contributing to the firm’s outputs. It was due to this recognition that the firms would invest in inculcating positive traits like integrity, trust, team spirit, transparency, politeness etc. among their employees. On the other hand, the government did not seem much concerned with the benefits of similar investments, creating a general perception about government servants, that they were insensitive, corrupt, irresponsive i.e., imbued with all types of negative cultural traits. He asserted that the cultural atmosphere in our offices was very close to the culture of public space in Pakistan, expressed through the cliché that the government servants reflected the society. Such clichés gave precedence to cultural values, traits, and attitudes in public place, which needed theoretical scrutiny. If the societal values were ‘poisoning’ the public space, the government should also be able, like firms, to invest a lot of money on creating positive cultural values. He asserted that the nature of linkages between Cultural Change and Public Policy would depend on the answer to the basic question i.e., *Was it ok for the government to intervene in the public space to produce positive cultural changes in any country?*

The answer to this question would be affirmative if the absence of positive cultural values was producing additional costs for Pakistani firms and tax payers as well as the government. For Dr. Sohail, the answer to this question was surely affirmative and a further neglect would result in further loss of competitiveness and social erosion. Mapping the public space in Pakistan, he noted, that the dominant structures of our mentalities were a product of our historical failures and as we were not attending to the ‘effects’ of our failed development strategies in a comprehensive way, we did not know where and how to enter into the vicious cycle to reverse the trend and have a positive change.

Following this introduction, Dr. Sohail highlighted the theoretical aspects to explain the process of social change. Social change, he explained, involved institutions and agents (citizens) both of which had the agency to effect change. But the institutions and agents operated within a context created by demographic changes, rural-urban migration, technological changes, production pattern etc. at the national level and the major international phenomena such as globalization and acculturation. There was, he said, a reciprocal relationship between the context and the drivers of change i.e., institutions and the actors in a society. So, it was not a linear process that you would have a technological change and then progress and change in cultural habits. He said the circularity of the whole process actually gave the Social Change a characteristic complexity because a cause produced an effect which itself became a cause of another effect. So it was difficult to neatly identify a cause where one could intervene.

Dr. Sohail then proceeded to present the dynamics of social change. He said if one conceived social change as a transition from a point A to a point B that could possibly enable one to identify the more important transitions *en course* and then intervene to influence them. In this regard, he discussed the statement which defined social change as ‘essentially a transition, a shift from an initial dynamic equilibrium to a new dynamic equilibrium’, and opined that the usage of term ‘equilibrium’ was a dangerous practice as the dynamics of economic change were very different from those of social change. Market, he explained, would find its own

equilibrium which would remain valid only for a certain length of time before it would change. Now, he asked, could one talk about that equilibrium in relation to societies because in societies, social changes happened over a very long durations of time. Consensus, conscious or ‘*by default*’, he thought, was a better term as the societies did have a consensus over certain cultural issues and then after certain periods, there were transitions for better or worse.

Social change, he continued, could also be identified by its *pace* that whether it was a fast or slow social change. For example, he said, during the last ten years or so in Pakistan, due to proliferation of mass/electronic media the pace of socio-cultural change had gained a momentum unseen in the past, creating a *flux* in social norms and values. Innovation, he said, could be an important source of fast social change, crying for a quick new cultural consensus. He referred to several studies showing the impact of mobile phones on our way of life, culture, and relationships to prove how one innovation could bring about huge results in terms of effecting cultural change.

Fast paced changes might actually be closer to ‘Hiatus’/rupture in their effects, which create disruption as well as an opportunity for an effective response such as the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, cessation of East Pakistan in 1971, war on terrorism etc. A related point in this regard was that the chaotic, big events could produce transitions in a big way. But an important theoretical insight was that the processes of social change did have end points, though it was hard to perceive them in case of slow paced social changes.

Dr, Sohail challenged the notion that the societies kept on finding new equilibrium all the times as an internal dynamic and cultural systems were neutral and open ended like markets. Certain consensus were accepted by the society; sanctified by the powers in place; and would continue for a certain time and then if there were more potent factors requiring change, transitions would take place. So, he argued, if we conceived that social systems could have normative end points then we could start conceiving them as those units where one could apply public policies also. He supplemented his argument by suggesting that even the markets wanted stable social sub-systems to operate and if these systems were in a continuous flux, the markets would not be able to work.

For Dr. Sohail, the main question therefore was to identify the negative from positive social changes. Social changes always had a certain direction and, he thought, in Pakistan we did not need a lot of arguments in the favour of this view point because we had seen our society going from bad to verse in the last few decades. Therefore, if the transitions in a society were leading to collapse, disaster, and degeneration then there was no doubt that the social change was going towards the negative side. Another very important indicator of a negative social change was that an isolated deviant social behaviour would become a collective mentality or attitude. One, he explained, would have often heard that given the opportunity every body in Pakistan could be corrupt. Technically, he said, that was not correct. But that was a pointer that some people had reached the level of mentality that you could predict that given the opportunity the man would tend to be more corrupt.

Explaining the negative social changes as ‘policy challenge’, he drew the attention of the audience to the fact that in media or in the discussions in general public the negative social change in Pakistan was described in cultural terms –*mahool kharab hay, loog kharab ho gay hain* – as if something deep inside had gone rotten. In fact, in all the societies, the long term trends in a society were always described in cultural terms. This basically meant the social change would have cultural *markers* which could help us understand the negative or positive nature of social change. In other words the public policy had to address to the cultural norms to effect a positive cultural change.

Dr. Sohail proceeded to explain how an individual behaviour would become a norm. A norm, he said, was necessarily social; it was never individual. Explaining his argument, he said behavioural intentions would enter into behavioural drivers which could enable/engage/exemplify/encourage/create behavioural paths resulting into certain kind of behaviour which then through behavioural norms entered into the main society which had the cultural capital, attitudes, values, and aspirations in the middle of it, surrounded by family, organization, and work place. On the other hand, he continued, if we regrouped major drivers of cultural change, globalization was one of them; technology was second, and ideology was third. The literature on the subject, he informed the audience, regrouped the drivers of cultural change into the above-mentioned three categories which created those paths and which would produce certain kind of change.

The above discussion, he said, would lead us to the heart of the theoretical and practical debate on the etiology of cultural norms. If the cultural norms could be induced, the same could be controlled and directed also. He said in Pakistan’s context, the debate had been mainly modeled in such a way that it favored the notion as if the cultural change was natural and neutral. Natural change, he said, suggested a fatality in it; if it was natural it had to happen. But if it was induced, it could possibly be controlled.

Referring to the examples from Pakistan and some other countries, he said that cultural change could be a managed process. Dedicated people with effective communication and mass campaigning could induce change. For example, anti-slavery campaign in UK started with a pastor, who got hold of a few MPs and produced books and articles and was able to have huge anti-slavery sentiment in UK within 50-60 years. Nature of economic decision making, he said, was another driver of cultural change. For example, in 1970s in Pakistan, with the change in tenancy rules, there was an exodus of people from the countryside to cities, which significantly impacted upon the social structure and cultural milieu of Pakistan. Political activism was the next factor that Dr. Sohail listed as a driver of social change, which he said was evident from the way, leftist movements or environmentalist movements had created cultural change in a number of countries. The cultural change, he said, could also come in the form of unintended consequences. The way we industrialized our country; the way we attended or did not attend our agriculture, created so many unintended or unconscious effects. Referring to the last category of unaccounted-for factors, he said those were terribly important for the public policy because it was the job of the public policy to predict all the possible effects any development intervention could have.

Following this, Dr. Sohail talked about the measurement issues within the context of whole debate on cultural change. Cultural change, he said, was a very nebulous term as everyone had one’s own definition of cultural change, attitudes, and behavior. Some would see culture in terms of heritage; others would see it in terms of surroundings; and some would assert it was all about subjective impressions. He said many Pakistanis would even say that Pakistan did not have ‘a’ culture, or that its culture was very poor, or that it had a culture of poverty evidenced by a lack of trust among the people, willingness to deceive the others and expect the worst from the society and the government.

Many people in Pakistan, he asserted, were not convinced of any linkages between public policy and cultural change as the later could be so nebulous and subjective. This, he said, was the challenge for the academicians and for the people who wanted to work in this area. If there were scientific tools to measure the cultural change, the academia could give their inputs to decision makers. However, he said, the very assumption of the measurability of cultural change could lead to the state managed control of cultural behaviour. This, he said, many would view as not a state’s job. He, however, suggested that we needed a more nuanced approach on this issue. He gave the examples from the studies on Acculturation in UK, other European countries and also from the US where there was a considerable literature on

immigrants showing how their cultural traits would make them more or less responsive to public policy.

In Pakistan, he noted, there was not enough literature on such issues but the management of behavior was an active concern of social psychology and social policy in US and elsewhere and it was possible to find many useful measures and scales for measurement of cultural change and its nature. We could and should learn from them because the purpose of those measures was to enhance the effectiveness of public policy. Even in health care, he said, the psychosomatic state of individual was directly related to the health condition of the individual. So certain immigrants would behave in a certain way in a new context. There was, he said, extensive literature on the observation of behavior through the influences of acculturation in the individuals. He reiterated that there were scientific tools available to observe and measure cultural change and determine its nature.

Dr. Sohail then talked about public policy, highlighting the major contours of the debate on the nature of cultural change and its linkage with public policy. He said there was a popular cliché in Pakistan that people had the government and the public policy which they deserved. This, he said, was a circular argument which would lead us nowhere. He asked whether we were willing to ascribe Agency to government or public policy institutions, which were responsible for the implementation of the public policy.

The foremost question within this debate, he said, was whether public policy could be a tool of social change? If the answer was affirmative then there had to be a definition of what public good was? What actually was public good was again a very controversial concept. In his view, if the presence of negative cultural tendencies in a society were creating negative results for the society and for the public good, then social change had to be a governmental concern and the government needed to invest in that. Based on the Singapore experience, he said, there was a lot of literature available which argued for the use of public policy to shift the balance of power in a society and enforce desirable behaviour in public space.

In this context, he said, public policy was conceived bigger than political actors and the governments in power. In such situations, the public policy was believed to be supported by the government servants, law and civil society, and it acted as a balancer between the state and the political government. Resultantly, he added, there was a neat and clean separation between the state and the government with the law, government servants, and civil society on the one side trying to balance out through their criticism and evaluation of the public policy and of the vested interests, which might be there in the political government. But, he added, a logical corollary of such a way of thinking was that you had to make public policy institutions immune from the vested interests. But if you thought that public policy institutions should be larger than the political interests then the question would arise how those institutions could be made immune from the vested interests and periodic political alternations.

Dr. Sohail invited the attention of academia to the relevance of donor driven social policy in Pakistan in the last twenty years suggesting that, in their perspectives and policies they concerned with social policies through a very limited definition of social sectors like health and education. He suggested more work on donors’ perspectives on the linkages between public policies and socio-cultural change.

He further said there was no denying the fact that Pakistan was having a cultural crisis, a cultural conflict which was evident from the fact that there were a large number of people who displayed negative cultural traits. He said we needed to develop a consensus in theory on cultural change management. There was, he said, a great need to highlight the potential and limits of individual actors to produce positive social change because in Pakistan people had become cynical about the potential of an individual to bring about change. People would say that things could not be improved; a single person could not do anything and that even the



groups could not do much. That, he said, was the result – conscious or unconscious – of our theoretical belief or presumption that individuals could not be a source of cultural change as if the economic relationships were the sole source of cultural change. He argued for revisiting this whole debate, analyzing the role of intellectual movements such as socialism and neo-liberalism on these issues.

Discussing the linkage between Agency and Public Policy, he said that if an individual could have an agency then an individual idea could also grow up to a movement. There were evidences, he said, to show that positive cultural change had happened in groups or in communities, and the observation was that the reason behind that change was a combination of active citizens with effective states. To successfully forge a combination of active citizens with effective states was a challenge for all of us because only such a combination could produce national change at a sustainable basis. If, he said, we adopted this perspective then the role of intellectuals and the initiators like I-SAPS which wanted to focus on theory would become more relevant. Intellectuals, academia, and the development sector were the agents of change which essentially started from the individual and from the idea and from there, one could think of having a positive change through the development and implementation of better public policies.

Dr. Sohail then discussed the public policy responses which were more closely correlated with a positive cultural change in Pakistani public space. Planning system, he said, was the most important element in this respect. Referring to the documents that the Planning Commission used for its development interventions, he said, though they did talk about the economic and financial returns and the environmental concerns, they did not carry any mention to cultural consequences. The possible social impacts of a project did not even enter into their calculations in any meaningful way. The problem with this approach, he said, was that we had not developed those sophisticated instruments to capture and measure the social impact of any development initiative.

In the Planning Process, Dr. Sohail underscored, there was an important technical problem in public policy: development interventions usually had their own velocity which might not correspond to the velocity of the sector which was the recipient of that intervention. In the absence of ‘*adaptive governance*’,--- a hallmark of inefficient governments --- the potential of a development intervention would be very limited due to this differential velocity. He gave the example of Baluchistan to elaborate his argument. In Baluchistan, he said, we had been pumping so much money but situation on ground had been changing faster and our responses had not been adaptive. This discordance of co-evolutionary interactions between government and different sectors was an important public policy challenge as far as planning systems were concerned. We, he further said, had not been able to plan our development interventions in such a way that could reduce this discordance between co-evolutionary phenomena.

Then, he added, there was a problem with allocations also. Noting that, though in recent years there had been huge allocations for Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP), very little was allocated to mitigate the influences of negative social change; to mitigate the effects of our misdeeds of last sixty years. The task, he lamented, was mostly left to the donors who perhaps did not understand the dynamics of social change in Pakistan.

Other than Planning Process, another possible public policy intervention, he added, could be in governmental and political decision-making systems. If our public policy institutes could produce better policy inputs and oversight then our political and governmental decision-makings could improve. Interventions in judicial, legal, and peace/order keeping systems were very closely related to the cultural outcomes. There, he said, we should not neglect the judicial system because if in a society people lost faith in the rule of law, if they believed that they would not get justice that would create the most destructive auto-immune cultural



disease i.e., negative self-fulfilling prophecy. It was already rampant in Pakistan: people would expect that society was going to do injustice and bad things to them so they would start doing that by their own. In the wake of self-fulfilling prophecy, the coping strategies would be based on survival mode which would basically create negative cultural tendencies.

Our crisis response system, he said, were pathetic as had been seen during natural disasters as well as in the face of moral and cultural crises in Pakistan. That was another area identified by Dr. Sohail, where public policy interventions could make a difference. Corporate governance in Pakistan also, he continued, left a lot to be desired. He said there was a strong belief in Pakistan that private sector/market was not properly regulated and that we were in a state of *policy capture*. The system of market regulations, he said, was a problem and called for improvement. There again public policy had to produce the capacity to produce effective policies based on continuous research, monitoring and consumer groups’ pressures. We, he lamented, were notoriously weak in developing effective regulatory mechanisms and public policy needed to address to the performance of regulatory agencies urgently.

Dr. Sohail criticized the State also for having more or less withdrawn from health care and other social support systems as if health was not a public good. This, he said, needed a very serious reconsideration. Basic health services, he said, had to be State’s responsibility as a failure to do so could produce negative change. Continuing his argument, he focused on education and its ability to create positive cultural capital, but lamented that our education system was basically creating more of social exclusion. If the parents or the individual student did not believe that education would bring him social inclusion, then his whole reaction to the system would be very cynical. He argued that the world experience told us that the kind of hybrid system that we had, with more and more education delivery, going in the private hands, could not work. Education and health, he asserted, had to be primarily the responsibility of the government with very few exceptions made for the private sector. There again the public policy had to make a major contribution to reverse the despondency being created by ailing education and health sectors.

In the arena of leisure and recreational system, he said, we continued to have cultural conflict in our society. In this context, he referred to the often-reported burning of video shops and extremist positions by both sides as far as leisure was concerned. There, he said, Pakistan needed to have some consensus on the nature of leisure and recreational system, in the public place at least. In the private space, one could do what one felt like. This, he said, was another important area and the public policy had to come up with a very clear answer vis-à-vis this issue. He noted that in the name of freedom of expression excesses were being committed. We, he said, did not even have the restrictions on the local content so we had such media and cables which kept on beaming whatever they felt like as if it was free for all; as if the cultural space in a society was one such thing that there could be no regulations and as if there was no need to align this cultural space to anything in the constitution or to the preferences of the life style of the majority of people. This again, he said, was an area where public policy needed to take interest.

In the end, Dr. Sohail said he had only listed some of the areas where public policy needed to assert itself, change its perspective and start taking more interest. Those were the areas, he said, where government by itself was not in the best position to understand the issues. So this was the responsibility of policy think tanks to highlight these linkages, to highlight the importance of these areas where good intervention would create positive social change and lack of intervention or a poor intervention could create a negative social change.

### **Mr. Arshad Waheed**

Director, Social Policy Institute, Islamabad

Mr. Waheed started by appreciating Dr. Sohail’s presentation saying that his was a comprehensive presentation on the issues of social change and public policy and had made it difficult for him to decide which points he should highlight and which he should leave. Dr. Sohail, he said, had touched upon all important factors which related public policy and cultural change including economic and social changes, international ideas, globalization, market and other things. However, Mr, Waheed said, he would added a few points to Dr. Sohail’s presentation.

First of all, he said, we needed to focus on what the whole public policy formulation process was? Who would make and implement the public policy? Public policy – its formulation and implementation, he emphasized, was not a neutral process. It was primarily a political process. There were a lot of interest groups who had certain interests in public policy formulation and its implementation. Those interests ranged from material benefits and losses to intellectual gains and losses and some change in balance of power structure as well. So, he said, social change did affect public policy and the changes in public policy did affect power structures within a society and who gained from a public policy and who lost from it. So in this perspective, those who were making public policies - might be they were bureaucrats or political or technical leaders like engineers or other professionals - their perspective would be integrated within those policy frameworks. Similarly, during the implementation phase, the ones who would implement those policies, they would interpret them in such a way that would serve their interests. Therefore, he reiterated, it was very important to know and understand that policy making was not a neutral process: from its beginning to its end, it was heavily politicized and it related to a society’s power structures and also to who gained and who lost from a public policy.

Secondly, he continued, in Pakistan’s perspective it was very important to raise the question that how far our public policy makers had been sensitive to social changes occurring in Pakistan, in its neighborhood and within international arena. In Pakistan, he lamented, there had been a tendency to wake up only when there was a disaster. Referring to the exacerbating electricity crisis, depleting energy sources, and expanding conflict zones in Pakistan, he said all those crises did not prop up in a single day; they had been in the making for a considerable time. He asked whether those responsible for public policy formulation had been alive to those crises. If they were not, he asked, why so? What interests were they serving? Were they at the helm of affairs only due to some chance?

Thirdly, Mr. Waheed said, the resistance to social change was more in the arena of ideas. He mentioned that the relationship between policy and social change was relatively simple in market oriented change but had greater implications when it came to the contested ideas that who should have more rights. He said there would be groups which would like to sustain those ideas which perpetuated already existing power structures. Those groups would exploit such ideas. In this context he referred to the example of video shops’ burning in Dr. Sohail’s presentation. But, he asked, whether the burning of video shops was only a symptom or did it indicate something else. Might be someone’s political interests were being sabotaged by the social change, so they were resisting by creating such an environment. He suggested having a framework on how public policy and social change were interrelated? How did they affect each other? What was the nature of their interaction? Was that a neutral or a political process?

## **General Discussion**

Mr. Arshad Waheed’s remarks were followed by a lively discussion showing participants’ keen interest in the issues broached by the speaker and the discussant. The questions asked during the discussion ranged from the nature and causes of cultural change and related issues faced by Pakistani society to the possible role public policy could play in addressing these concerns. The development interventions’ incongruence with cultural sensitivities of the

target communities and the resultant public policy challenges were also mentioned during the debate. Another point raised was whether or not Pakistani society was willing to accept induced social change. Other suggestions and comments made included: theorizing our cultural practices to find ways to cope with the cultural problems we had been facing by using deductive logic. Dr. Safadr Sohail commented on the questions and the suggestions.

(The audio report of the Seminar, available on I-SAPS’ website, contains the complete discussion)