DECODE Panel
AASREC Conference,
The Royal Plaza Hotel, New Delhi, India
Friday 5th December 2025

The Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils (AASSREC) held its 2025 Biennial Conference from 3- 5 December 2025 in New Delhi, India.

Hosted by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), the conference brought together social science scholars and practitioners to discuss the role of the social sciences in building sustainable and equitable futures in the Indo-Pacific region.

On 5 December 2025, the DECODE team presented its work at the conference.

The session offered an opportunity to introduce the DECODE Model and to highlight the project's focus on knowledge hierarchies, the validation of different forms of knowledge, and the importance of community-based and Indigenous knowledge in addressing climate challenges.

The DECODE Panel at the AASREC Conference

DECODE was represented' through two interconnected contributions. The first was a paper presented by Rabi Raj and Saanya Sodhi, which examined the systematic marginalisation and devaluation of the humanities. The paper situated this trend within broader struggles over knowledge hierarchies, power, and the increasing narrowing of what is recognised as "useful" or legitimate knowledge within contemporary education and research systems. In doing so, the paper reaffirmed the centrality of the humanities to democratic

inquiry, ethical reasoning, and socially grounded research, and argued for the need to dismantle rigid hierarchies of knowledge in order to unlock the transformative potential of education.

This paper presentation was followed by a panel discussion moderated by UNESCO Co-Chair Dr Rajesh Tandon. The panel brought together regional perspectives and lived experiences from across the DECODE project. It included Shailesh Panwar, representing the India case study from the Himalayas; Paloma Aguilar, DECODE's Latin America Regional Coordinator, who spoke on the Pachagrama case study from Bolivia and the Guardians of the Forest case study from Putumayo, Colombia; and Saanya Sodhi, UNESCO Chair Coordinator, representing the Apong case study from Malaysia.

Through empirical examples drawn from these case studies, the panel highlighted how research and interventions that are co-created participatorily with communities and Indigenous knowledge holders lead to outcomes that are both just and contextually relevant, creating reciprocal benefits for all parties involved.

Drawing on the Pachagrama case study from Bolivia, Paloma Aguilar highlighted how PROSUCO systematised Indigenous knowledge of local weather systems and supported the creation of community-led weather observation processes. This not only strengthened climate resilience but also provided an added layer of protection against the impacts of climate change, while contributing to the reinstatement of food sovereignty for participating communities. From the India case study, Shailesh Panwar shared how integrating market mechanisms with women's traditional knowledge of wild fruits and herbs enabled new livelihood opportunities, leading to greater financial independence and empowerment for the women involved. Representing the Apong case study from Malaysia, Saanya Sodhi explained that because scientific interventions and efforts towards advancement were undertaken with and by the community itself, rather than imposed externally, the process led to greater sovereignty, independence, and improved living conditions for everyone.

Building further on these examples, Paloma Aguilar also reflected on insights from the Guardians of the Forest case study from Putumayo, Colombia, emphasising how Indigenous communities maintain deeply relational and respectful relationships with their environment and territory, living in balance with nature rather than in opposition to it. She underscored that recognising and working with these relational worldviews and integrating them thoughtfully opens up pathways for addressing broader questions of environmental protection

and community wellbeing. Together, these contributions reaffirmed that academic knowledge and community or Indigenous knowledge are not in opposition to one another but are complementary, and that when approached as mutually reinforcing rather than hierarchically ordered, they enable more effective, grounded, and socially meaningful outcomes rooted in long-term engagement rather than extractive or top-down models of knowledge production.

Furthermore, when approached as mutually reinforcing rather than hierarchically ordered, these knowledge systems enable more effective, grounded, and socially meaningful outcomes. The panel highlighted how community-based and Indigenous knowledge systems challenge dominant epistemologies and offer grounded approaches to addressing social and environmental concerns.

Additionally, across the discussion, special attention was drawn to participatory and alternative methodologies, ongoing feedback loops during the research process, and research processes rooted in long-term engagement with communities, rather than extractive or top-down models of knowledge production.

The session reflected the ethos at the heart of DECODE: knowledge as relational, plural, and embedded within community realities. Through the paper presentation and panel discussion, DECODE's work was situated within wider academic conversations at AASREC, contributing to ongoing dialogue on knowledge democracy, the role of the humanities, and the importance of participatory and community-anchored research approaches.

DECODE Representatives at AASREC