

Reflecting on My Fellowship Experience

Kgosietsile Matthews Mmopi

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The Avantha International Fellowship was developed to cultivate youth-focused and multicultural thought leadership in the field of foreign policy and international relations. Overall, I believe my experiences as a fellow at the Ananta Aspen Centre were enriching and bore testament to the noble mission of this fellowship. I feel humbled and privileged to have been awarded the Avantha International Fellowship at one of India's leading organizations in foreign policy and diplomacy. Most importantly, the exposure I gained through the Avantha fellowship has charged me with a responsibility to apply this credo of international cooperation in my future endeavors.

I was initially drawn to the fellowship because of its focus on engaging critically with government, market actors and civil society organizations to influence the international political economy of India's development opportunities and challenges. I was excited to participate in this discourse through knowledge sharing and collaborative research. My graduate studies at the University of Oxford exploited interdisciplinary methods to explore the political, institutional and bureaucratic linkages of policy reform in India. Specifically, I investigated the emergence of a government-run cash transfer system called the Aadhaar-enabled Direct Benefit Transfer Scheme. This research helped to broaden my understanding of the policy process and challenged by capacity to grapple with 'the big questions' of what governments should do to improve the conditions of their societies and how better governance can be achieved in developing countries. Consequently, I saw the fellowship as a meaningful extension of my intellectual pursuits in economics and international development. The remainder of this paper is a reflection of my experience.

These reflections have been organized into three sections. The first section outlines my main preoccupations at the Ananta Aspen Centre and the impact it has had on my intellectual development and creativity. The second section discusses my broader interactions and experiences at the Ananta Aspen Centre. The last section offers more of a personal reflection and a call to action!

Knowledge sharing

I spent the majority of my fellowship writing a research paper on India's public expenditure policy, with a focus on fertilizer, food and fuel subsidies. I chose to focus on subsidies because these three subsidies constitute a significant portion of the union government's non-plan expenditure. Moreover, since the economic reforms in 1991, despite providing safety nets for the poor, there have been grave concerns that these subsidy payments were not sustainable. Therefore, I used the fellowship as an opportunity to research the extent to which India has been able to curb built-in expenditure growth and bring about structural changes in the composition of public expenditure. I was thrilled to discover that this is a topic that the office was already seriously engaged. Through the support of numerous colleagues at the Ananta Aspen Centre, I secured interviews with leading experts and influential policymakers, including former and current government ministers and advisers. I received ample guidance and resources from my

colleagues to conduct my fieldwork and to develop nuanced arguments for my research paper. To further support and expand my learning experience, I was supported in building relationships with various partners of the Ananta Aspen Centre, such as members of the Confederation of Indian Industry. Overall, research experience has significantly stretched my capacity for in-depth intellectual engagement with discourses on public policy, development, and social change.

In addition to my research paper, I conducted preliminary research on topical issues in domestic and foreign policy convened by the institute. For instance, over the years, the institute has held strategic dialogues between India and the United States. One of the main themes of mutual concern is energy security. This theme has come to occupy greater significance in the bilateral discourse between these two countries since 2005, following the establishment of the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal. Climate change is another theme of mutual importance, and I was fortunate enough to participate in this strategic dialogue during my time in India. This year's dialogue brought together thought leaders from diverse backgrounds and political inclinations, which contributed to the depth and breadth of the discussion. My overall impression of the dialogue was mixed, however. Although the discussions were lively and critical, I found some of the opinions shared to be largely self-interested, which further amplified of how politicized this issue has become. More importantly, this exposure led me to gain a deeper appreciation for the work of the Ananta Aspen Centre – I came to understand how and why dialogue is a necessary pillar of any supranational policy framework.

Programming and Communication

During my tenure as an Avantha International Fellow, I often collaborated with my colleagues at the Ananta Aspen Centre on regular programs and events through which I developed new skills in policy communication. A few policy events and programs come to mind. My first public session for instance was entitled, “Reforms to the Global Drug Policy.” the Ananta Aspen Centre hosted a public session to showcase the important work of Guatemala in championing the dialogue to review global drug policies, which ultimately set the precedent to review drug policies in the Americas. The session featured His Excellency Carlos Raúl Morales, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Guatemala and Mr. Deepak Bhojwani, former Ambassador of India to Cuba. A week later, we hosted another public session to engage the Indian public on the recent structural reforms approved by the Mexican Congress, which are expected to have a significant impact on bilateral relations between Indian and Mexico. His Excellency Jose Antonio Meade Kuribrena, Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Mexico was the keynote speaker at the event.

Through my involvement in policy messaging at the Ananta Aspen Centre, I learned and applied core fundamental principles, including but not limited to: (1) people become more emotional when images are used in communication and logical when factual data is provided, and (2) image and emotion have a greater impact on people's perception than logical arguments based on objective facts and data. I saw this first-hand during my last and most cherished experience as an Avantha International Fellow: An engagement with His Holiness The Dalai Lama on “Cultivating Key Human Values”. His Holiness used vivid imagery and emotive stories and illustrations to motivate and advocate for the fundamental pursuit of happiness and purposefulness. I came to understand why his messages of compassion, love and service have

come to touch the hearts of entire nations. I also came to understand how he applied similar policy communication strategies to fight for the self-determination of Tibet.

Personal Reflections

I am excited to have joined a new community of thought leaders passionate about leveraging a diversity of perspectives, academically and personally to further international cooperation. This fellowship has served to broaden my horizons and help me refine my perspective of how policy and institutions can better serve the needs of people. I pledge to use the wealth of tools and knowledge that I have amassed to engage with and tackle the ‘enigma of development’ and the accompanying structures that limit growth, access and rights in the Global South.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Ms. Kiran Pasricha, the CEO and Executive Director, and the entire staff of the Ananta Aspen Centre for a life-changing experience and for reinvigorating my faith in humanity. I am equally grateful to Mr. Gautam Thapar and the Avantha Group for their patronage towards the Avantha International Fellowship. I wholeheartedly encourage anyone interested in international development and international relations to seize this great opportunity.