A two-day conference on business and public policy with a special focus on Uttar Pradesh was organised at Integral University in Lucknow on 18-19 March, 2016. The organising partners of the conference were ÁEequitas Consulting, Digital Empowerment Foundation, E&H Foundation, Fifth Estate, Wadhwani Foundation and OMC Power.

**DAY 1**

The conference started with a speech by Prof Aftab Alam of Integral University, introducing and welcoming everyone to the conference. This was followed by the inaugural address by Dr Amir Ullah Khan, Director (Research) at Áequitas Consulting.

In his speech, Dr Khan emphasised the need for solid research and clean data to back blueprints being prepared for public policy and its practice. Dr Khan, who was a key member of the Post Sachar Evaluation Committee headed by Prof Amitabh Kundu, explained the challenges of working with the Telangana State Committee on socio-economic reforms for Muslims. On the issue of reservation for Muslims in Telangana as they comprise 12% of the total Muslim population in the country, Dr Khan said there was no research or study to prove the impact of reservation on social reform. No development economist would be in a position to give a robust answer to the question, he said.

Dr Khan then went on to discuss issues pertinent to the human development of Muslims – education, health and security. Though enrolment rates were high, 70-80% students dropped out, he said. He also pointed out that only 3% Muslim students went on to complete higher education. On matters health, Dr Khan said, “Muslims do better - lower anaemia, lower malnutrition and better sex ratio”. Referring to the decline in incidence of riots in Hyderabad, he wondered if it “was because of political empowerment alone”. If that was the case, why was this not working in Uttar Pradesh, where Muslims have 64 MLAs and 35% representation at the panchayat level, he asked. The development of Uttar Pradesh is vital for India’s achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). If UP misses the SDGs, even the world cannot meet the SDGs, he said.

During his keynote address, Mr Osama Manzar (founder and director of the Digital Empowerment Foundation) talked about the role digital empowerment played in rural development. Technology is a valuable asset to the uneducated and illiterate masses, he said. Digital empowerment can revolutionise health, education and governance. Outlining a plan for the digital empowerment of Uttar Pradesh, Mr Manzar said websites should be maintained for information and records pertaining to governance even at the panchayat levels. This can help ensure greater transparency and accountability.

Distinguished economist and former professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University Dr Amitabh Kundu delivered his lecture on Urbanisation and Human Development. The Indian economy is poised to
grow at 7-8% in the 21st century, while the world economy will grow below 3%, he said. Due to a paradigm shift, traditionally underdeveloped states are growing at a much higher rate. According to the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, India will be home to 29% of the world’s middle class by 2050, much higher than what is predicted for China. The projected growth rate for UP will be higher than of the entire nation’s. The state’s demographic dividend and large adult population will enable it to grow at higher rate, he said. UP’s biggest challenge, he said, is the urban-rural divide. As much as 75% of the rural population depended on agriculture for its survival. Urban growth in UP is low; however, there are more efforts being taken to improve the infrastructure and manufacturing sectors in the state. Structural changes can help the state achieve its dream target of 8.1% growth, he said.

Mr Ranjan Diwedi I.P.S. was the guest of honour at the inaugural ceremony. In the light of his experience during his work with UNAIDS India and WHO India, Mr Dwivedi spoke about the challenges for healthcare in UP. The senior officer went on to say that the nation’s growth has been hampered by civil servants, who are not motivated enough to work efficiently. Due credit should be given to the private sector and its employees for their role in the country’s growth story so far, he said.

Mr. Diwedi said UP was behind many other states as far as certain indicators of health were concerned - the number of beds per lakh are low, Infant Mortality Rate is high, and medical and nursing colleges are fewer in UP. He called for the better use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in medical science to make it more accessible and affordable to the masses. Expressing hope in the development and use of telemedicine, he said information on health and life sciences should be made available in regional languages.

Prof Adeel Maqbool, Head of Department (Business Management), ended the inaugural session with a vote of thanks.

During the day’s second session, Mr Sarraju Narasinga Rao of OMC Power shared his expertise on the role of renewable energy in Uttar Pradesh’s development. Electricity is expensive in the state because 30% of it is lost in transmission and distribution alone. The UP Electricity Board said in February 2016 that it could no longer provide power to rural areas. Around 20 crore people do not have access to electricity in Uttar Pradesh, Mr Rao said. The solution to this problem lies in solar energy, he said. “In one month, a solar plant can be set up in a village ... 60 villages have been covered in UP... each plant is of 5 KW and it generates 200 units on a nanoscale, he explained. Jangaon in Hardoi village was the first to be electrified two-and-a-half years back.

This session was followed by a panel discussion on the causes & initiatives to bridge digital exclusion of women. The session was moderated by Mr Osama Manzar, who said DEF was working to bridge the gap between rural and urban India.

During the discussion, Ms Sutapa Sanyal, A.D.G Uttar Pradesh Police Mahila Samman Prakoshth, shared her experience on the digital inclusion of women and children. Gender disparity was the main reason behind the digital divide, she felt. Ms. Niloufar Pourzand of the UNICEF said mobility remained a challenge. Dr. Nishi Pandey of Lucknow University discussed how patriarchy continues to manifest itself in newer ways to relegate women to the social margins.
Ms Jyotsna Kaur Habibullah, FLO Lucknow-Kanpur Chapter, said women continue to suffer in terms of digital reach. Only 30% retailers of Snapdeal are women. Only 30% of the women have access to internet. Dr Upma Chaturvedi, Principal of Avadh Girl’s Degree College, laid stress on the role of technology in bridging gender disparity. Ms Ashwini Syed of Safe City talked about her organisation’s role in tackling sexual harassment in collaboration with the police. Mr. Manzar apprised the people about the work being done by DEF across the country. He cited the example of Baran district, where members of the Saharia tribe manage wireless networking. The session also heard from Radha Devi and Noori Khatun, who hailed from villages in Barabanki and picked up soft skills thanks to DEF’s efforts in this regard.

DAY 2

19 March, 2016

The day began with paper presentations by practitioners and research scholars of development policy and practice. A total of six papers on education, health, empowerment and inclusion were presented during the session. The session was chaired by Dr. Amir Ullah Khan.

The second session of the day saw a robust discussion on the topic ‘Collaborative Governance (Public, Private and Development Sectors): Skills, Education and Livelihoods’ and was moderated by Prof. Amir Ullah Khan.

During the session, Ms Pallavi Gupta of Fifth Estate shared her experience on working with government officials in the state. She said all officers could not be categorised as corrupt. She also urged students to become entrepreneurs instead of looking for jobs.

Dr Rajesh Chakrabarti, Vice-President, Research & Policy, Wadhwani Foundation, said jobs have not grown at the same pace as the GDP. He said job creation remains one of the main challenges of public policy. He said that during 2005-12, the GDP grew at 54%, while jobs grew at a meagre 3%. Outlining the trends, he said agriculture was shrinking and construction sector was bloating in terms of absorption of the workforce.

Mr Sanjeev Kumar Gupta, CEO of E&H Foundation, showcased his organisation’s work in Uttar Pradesh. His NGO works with the Gyan Shala in Uttar Pradesh to impart education to underprivileged children. He was happy with the results and showcased movies about the achievements of the kids. He said NGOs were doing good work and policy should be made to promote education among underprivileged children.

Prof Sudhir Panwar, Member of State Planning Board, Govt. of Uttar Pradesh, said the state has the potential to grow but there has to be meaningful education and skills development first. Uttar Pradesh lacked opportunities for educated youth, he said.

The third session was devoted to NGOs. Dozens of members of civil society organisations spoke about e-NGOs - a digital empowerment drive being spearheaded by DEF to help NGOs and grassroots level organisations make use of the internet.

The vote of thanks was given by Prof. Aftab Alam.