



# THE ROLE OF THINK TANKS AND RESEARCH INSTITUTES FOR MORE NATIONAL OWNERSHIP & ALIGNMENT OF EVIDENCE TO POLICY

CASES FROM CONFLICT COUNTRIES, EMERGING  
DEMOCRACIES AND GROWTH OVER - ACHIEVERS

**IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON  
"THE ROLE OF THINK TANKS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES"**

ORGANIZED BY THE INFORMATION AND DECISION SUPPORT CENTRE  
PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, EGYPT

**Report Commissioned by UNDP Governance Centre  
(Oslo)**

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Workshop Preliminary Interim Report

Pending Final Consolidated Report from ODI

**Discussion Paper 24**  
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#### DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this discussion paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations, including UNDP, or UN Member States.



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## PROBLEMATIC AND JUSTIFICATION

J. Keynes once claimed that governments shy away from evidence-based debates as seeking evidence and discussing it complicate and prolong decision making. That may be more so when the evidence is not technical but relates to issues of good and responsive governance and when such evidence comes from think tanks and research institutes. This roundtable sought to identify factors which affect the likelihood of evidence on governance influencing reforms and the role which think tanks and research institutes play in developing governance evidence and having it enter the governance reform discourse and policy process.

While the context in which evidence on governance can influence reform is wide and varied, three specific contexts have been highlighted, namely that of developing countries in the context of rapid economic growth and less open political systems, developing countries with successful growth models yet more open political systems and countries that have experienced /are experiencing severe violent conflict. While rapid growth may reduce incentive to accept think tank dissenting evidence on governance, democratic institutions may encourage some types of governance evidence and provide an enabling environment for think tanks. Conflict on the other hand, often hampers the development of governance evidence and its usage in the name of avoiding polarization, though some may look towards improved evidence and the use thereof to encourage early warning and / or peace building.

Another necessary typology to understand the relationship between evidence and policy revolves around the scope of evidence. Some governance evidence is macro in scope, i.e. perceptions of corruption or trust in institutions. Other governance evidence is sector specific, e.g. health and education<sup>1</sup>. Research produced by a variety of institutions indicates that while policy is not always guided by evidence, some policy issues in some sectors are. How contested knowledge is in a sector and how dense political and economic interests are in specific sectors may affect the ability of think tanks to collect evidence, create knowledge and bring them to bear on policy.

Finally, there is the typology of actors producing and using evidence. Most evidence on governance is currently being produced predominantly by international actors who have the option of influencing country-based policy by scoring and ranking countries. In-country producers of governance evidence (esp. national think tanks and research institutes) may, in contrast, suffer from questioned rigor and / or independence and may be burdened not only with technical capacity deficits but also with the burden of managing relationships with government and other civil society. The situation in post conflict countries is quite dramatic in this regard.

## THINK TANKS AND RESEARCH INSTITUTES

The term 'think tank' is used to describe a wide range of research organisations which undertake public policy research and analysis and intend to influence policy dialogues and advocate policy solutions. Some are strictly non-partisan, researching policy issues without regard to partisan political outcomes, while others see one of their main functions as providing intellectual support to political parties and legislators. For most of the twentieth century, think tanks were primarily found in the United States; with a much smaller number in Canada, Australasia and Western Europe. However, there has been a proliferation of think tanks across the globe (since the 1970s). According to McGann, there are over 5000 think tanks worldwide (2007).

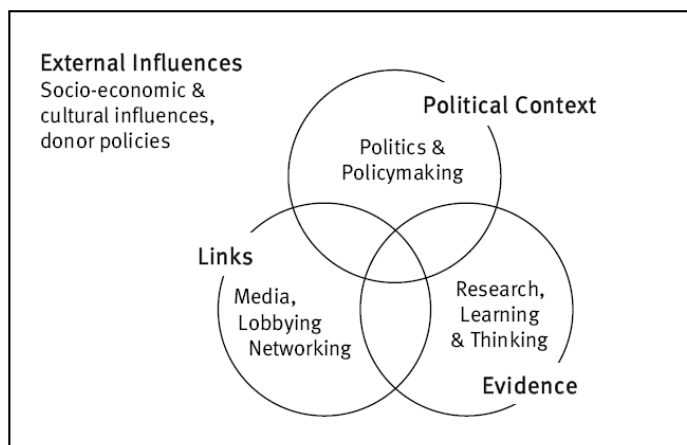
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<sup>1</sup> Gray, J.A.M. 1997 Evidence-Based Healthcare: How to Make Health Policy and Management Decisions, New York, Edinburgh, London, Churchill Livingstone. This was cited in P. Davies "Is Government-Based Evidence Possible" 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Campbell Collaboration Colloquium Washington D.C. 19 February 2004

We define think tanks as organisations that (1) produce research products, which inform decision making on specific policy issues and (2) aim to influence policy content. We include in our analysis policy research centres associated with academic institutions and research focused Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), as well as party and state-affiliated institutes. This suggests a significant departure from the somewhat structural definition popularly associated with think tanks which emphasise their non-profit, non-governmental independent status, instead focussing on those organisations with knowledge generation and translation functions (Datta et al. forthcoming).

Think tanks and research institutes are influenced by several factors as summarized in box 1. The specific sector in which they produce evidence to influence policy also has a dynamic of its own. Overall, think tanks are also influenced by supply and demand for evidence within a policy environment characterized by certain values, actors (interests & capacities) and certain institutional arrangements (formal and informal).

Box 1: the RAPID framework (Source: ODI Tools for Policy Impact)<sup>2</sup>



## WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED?

Firstly, poverty reduction efforts are still de-linked from efforts to make governance more effective, responsive, and democratic although many voices attest to the inherent linkage of governance and poverty reduction (Millennium Declaration 2000, World Summit 2005).

Secondly, on the supply side of evidence on governance official data owned by official statistical offices and national ministries is socio economic. Evidence on the quality of democratic governance (e.g. perceptions of corruption, trust in political institutions, surveys of daily democratic practice etc) is less likely to be collected regularly and institutionalized into agenda setting and policy making. Still on the supply side, social science evidence in general has suffered from a prejudice among policy makers who consider it fuzzy and not rigorous enough. The recent trend of developing quantitative measures for governance may be perceived by some as a solution, but many others see quantitative methods as also based on assumptions and hypotheses rooted in ideological frailties<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Start, D. and Hovland, I. (2004). *Tools for Policy Impact: A Handbook for Researchers*, London: ODI.

<sup>3</sup> 'Government, Knowledge and the Business of Policy Making', Paper given at the Australian National University, Conference of the Australian Public Policy Network, 23 April, 2003, Canberra. Cited in P. Davies "Is Government-Based Evidence Possible?" 4 Annual Campbell Collaboration Colloquium Washington D.C. 19 February 2004

Thirdly, there is questionable demand for governance evidence. Though there is a mushrooming industry of governance indicators, it is questionable how much of that evidence is taken up by policy makers to improve democratic governance.

Fourthly, like most public policy issues, governance reforms are often affected by non-evidence factors such as judgment and timing. Furthermore, values, habits and traditions not only of individuals but also of institutions can affect the prospects of evidence influencing policy on governance. Finally, political business cycles and lobbying by special interest groups are formidable factors affecting the type of evidence and the way evidence comes into policy<sup>4</sup>.

## **THE POST-CONFLICT CONTEXT**

The problematic of bringing evidence on governance to bear on reform and to make the role of think tanks and research institutes strong in this regard is particularly complex in countries coming out of conflict. Three types of post conflict situations exist: mediated peace agreement, stalemate or outright victory by one of the warring parties. Three types of international contexts exist: intense international / regional interest in the conflict and its aftermath, more confined international / regional interest in the conflict and its aftermath, and finally neglect or avoidance. It is usually in post conflicts where there is intense or confined interest and a mediated peace agreement that governance reforms are contemplated, designed and often financed. Our research and workshop have focused on the case of protracted post peace agreement conflict and lack of trust among peace partners (Sudan), crisis of institution building and provision of services (Nepal), protracted sense of siege by the country's neighborhood and denial of causes of conflict (Serbia) and slow emerging democratic practices after conflict (Peru). Think tanks and research institutes in conflict contexts suffer from the same institutional and structural damages that the entire country confronts. At the same time, think tanks and research institutes continue to be sought as collectors of evidence, creators of knowledge and policy influence despite the conflict challenges that impact on them. Hence, the importance of documenting their role.

## **EVIDENCE, VOICE AND NATIONAL OWNERSHIP**

Three international trends raise concerns about national ownership and bring the role of evidence in empowering voice to the forefront. One such trend is the aid effectiveness trend. It links governance to MDG performance and transparency of accounts. Well intentioned as it may be, there is not yet any clear idea how to make evidence on democratic governance weigh in on aid effectiveness processes, especially in post violent conflict.

The other trend is that which calls for marginalizing evidence on democratic governance because evidence on socio economic performance and state capacity is more critical. Though spearheaded by Chinese success at times, this trend may have its own drivers based on disillusionment with democracy in Latin America and Africa.

Even if one accepts the priority of socio economic evidence for better socio economic state performance, evidence on governance structures, practices and processes is important for equitable delivery of better socio economic results. It is such governance evidence which allows for corrective measures when state delivery is faltering. It gives societal voices power and policy relevance. This is, in theory, particularly pertinent in conflict countries, where trust between state and citizen is weakened and thus equitable delivery is a recipe for stability.

As the issue of national ownership of development should be broadly defined to go beyond ownership of development by the state, there is a need to explore the role of non state actors in the nexus of governance evidence and governance reform. If one is to assume that national

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<sup>4</sup> in P. Davies "Is Government-Based Evidence Possible" <sup>th</sup> 4 Annual Campbell Collaboration Colloquium Washington D.C. 19 February 2004

research institutes and think tanks are channels of local voice, then it is apt to pose two questions:

- a) Which mechanisms of evidence creation, dissemination, & networking with policy circles, civil society & media can be identified and replicated in the developing world?
- b) Under which conditions will research institutes and think tanks perceived as producers of data, analysis and trend identification function best as agenda setters and as providers of public space for the voices of the marginalized and vulnerable groups whose concerns may be less well represented in official data.
- c) Are participative methods of collecting evidence and creating knowledge useful across the board, also in conflict contexts?

No model will fit all country contexts; various experiences and processes include:

- Different country contexts, e.g. democratic, less democratic;
- Countries in transition out of conflict;
- Different research institutes and think tanks, e.g. state owned & independent;
- Different types of evidence by sector.

## OBJECTIVES

- To document cases of success and failure in expanding national ownership of governance reform through enhancing the role of research institutes and think tanks;
- To understand the processes of uptake of evidence on democratic governance into governance reform policies, with special reference to sector specific evidence;
- Better appreciate the role of think tanks and research institutes bringing governance evidence into public policy processes to foster inclusive participation and responsive institutions; this entails networking between policy makers, research, and media;
- In the case of conflict countries, the aforementioned objectives are explored with special aim to enhance the chances of institutional and peace building.
- Validate the knowledge product 'Pro-Poor Governance and the Policy Process: A Framework' produced by OGC in partnership with IDS

## METHOD

We adopt a political power lens that includes looking at the policy environment in different political economy settings, conflict vulnerabilities, technical capacities, values and linkage to national-regional-international development discourses. The central hypothesis is the positive relationship of inclusive participation, in terms of users and producers of data, on the one hand, and success in improving policy making, in the direction of more responsiveness.

The research documents cases from various countries:

- Middle income countries with high growth rates (India and China)
- Developing countries that are emerging democracies and have a pioneering experience in governance evidence that is nationally owned (Ghana & Kenya as APRM countries);
- Post conflict countries with various degrees of continuing conflict vulnerability

Exchange of field experiences facilitated through the roundtable was preceded by two analytical frameworks on policy processes and governance evidence in sectors, with special reference to

conflict countries developed by the Overseas Development Institute and the Institute for Development Studies, UK. While OGC is UNDP's leading unit on nationally owned governance assessments, ODI has long years of experience in research and its role in policy making; IDS is a leading UK based institute on development, sector strategies and participatory methods (Workshop Agenda Annexed)

The papers reflected on country cases. A synthesis report of the workshop will provide a summary of lessons learnt and shed light on needed action for capacity development and institutional enabling environment reforms.

## HIGHLIGHTS OF DISCUSSIONS

The opening session by IDS established a framework for analysis of policy processes in which think tanks function. It also pointed towards some of the "so what" questions that will need to inform capacity development and partnerships with think tanks in the developing countries. These "so what" questions relate to fostering knit-working champions, sticky messages, and strategic opportunism based on the political economy of the specific policy environment at hand.

OECD "global initiative on measuring progress" presented research findings which highlighted how contested the term governance and progress are, the role of intermediaries in packaging and communication statistics to different audiences, the need to generate data in sectors, apart from economic and partnering different groups of society in doing so.

ODI explored analytical signposts for conflict countries with special reference to governance evidence in specific sectors. Four factors characterize dynamics of governance generation of knowledge and translation thereof into sector policy: (i) level of technical expertise, (ii) level/extent of knowledge contestation, (iii) strength of economic interests, and (iv) level of internationalization of policy in the sector. The framework drew on cases from Nepal, Serbia and Peru where social inclusion and social protection policies reflected country political deficits and country need for future stabilization. These cases also feature participative governance evidence creation, which highlights - as Robert Chambers put it- the importance of attempting the ridiculous, namely public involvement in evidence generation and policy discussions. ODI is currently putting together individual country cases based on accounts from nationally based experts as well as a synthesis report to draw some cross cutting and comparative lessons.

The workshop also featured the case of Sudan, where research and think tank work has been helping build evidence on issues of peace and security in Darfur and other pockets of conflict after the signing of the Peace agreement. The case of the African Peer Review countries clearly identifies the weakness of inclusion of think tank role in the production of governance evidence with some variations depending on level of conflict countries have experienced in the past.

The cases of India and China provided the backdrop comparator outside of the developing world in countries experiencing economic growth success yet two different democracy records. The case of India highlights two important aspects. The contestation of knowledge during various phases of development in the country (whether and how development is state-led and pro poor). The Indian story also underlines an aspect of historical evolution of research and think tank infrastructure, whereby the Socialist era has been important for the development of knowledge creation and public interest research. A long term perspective, therefore, shows that opportunities for evidence creation and participation in governance policy debates will differ over time depending on changes in political regime and developmental discourse. This story is echoed in the Peruvian case. The China case, in comparison, shows a recent proliferation of

think tank and research infrastructure to reflect a variety of opinion not present in the political arena.

#### VALIDATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE PRODUCT 'PRO-POOR GOVERNANCE AND THE POLICY PROCESS: A FRAMEWORK' PRODUCED BY OGC IN PARTNERSHIP WITH IDS

The presentation of the framework, which is informed by joint ODI and IDS work, was well-received by the participants in the workshop and set the stage for the discussions on the role of think-tanks in the policy process. The presentation was held by Andy Sumner, one of the core writers of the paper. Comments will be integrated in a possible next round of revisions. Highlights of the discussion following the presentation included:

- It was considered useful to understand pro-poor policies as an *outcome* of a policy process where the interests of the poor need to be better presented. Pro-poor policies should not be treated as technical exercises, but are inherently rooted in politics.
- Donor assistance, including UNDP assistance, need to be aware that the voices of the poor need to be included in the policy process in order to make pro-poor policies sustainable. Including the voices of the marginalised may also reduce discriminatory practices in service delivery.
- Think tank may serve a critical role in voicing the concerns of the poor in the policy-process, both by supplying research and messages to decision-makers, and by raising demand through awareness among the relatively poorer segments of the population, and by conducting participatory research.

#### FOLLOW UP

Country level dissemination of findings and implications for think tank capacity development will be explored through wide networks such as those available to UNDP and its partners.

ODI will produce a consolidated synthesis report. Meanwhile, some preliminary highlights for follow up are:

#### PARTICIPATIVE EVIDENCE

Robert Chambers of IDS highlighted the need to remember the virtues of participative methods for creation of evidence. These methods also serve to legitimize evidence and empower the voices of the people in the policy process.

Some African cases of the APRM, the cases of Uganda and Malawi, as well as Bangladesh and Nepal attest to the importance of what some consider ridiculous, namely participative evidence creation. Nepal in 1991 generated statistics in hundreds of villages and the numbers proved credible. Bangladesh in 1996 engaged in participative poverty surveys, supported by UNDP, and the evidence proved credible. SIDA repeated the participative method for empowerment in Bangladesh in more recent years.

#### ROLE OF THINK TANKS

Think tanks and research institutes in the developing world are often also training institutes and CSOs for advocacy purposes. This should be well sorted out to inform any capacity development.

Think Tanks and research institutes have life cycles of institutionalization, credibility and intellectual integrity. This, too, should be analyzed to inform capacity development.

### *CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT*

Capacity development of think tanks and research institutes for bringing evidence into policy needs to go beyond technical research to include participative methods of creating evidence, facilitating participatory methods and building alliances for better influence on policy.

### *AUTONOMY / INDEPENDENCE OF THINK TANKS*

The enabling environment matters. The overall event within which this roundtable took place was organized by the Egyptian Prime Minister's Information and Decision Support Centre. It recommended a better understanding of the important role state-funded think tanks can play while negotiating a level of autonomy and intellectual integrity. Others voiced more concern and advocated for financially and politically independent public interest research and think tanks. Some wanted to explore the possibility of endowments for think tanks as a guarantee for autonomy.

### *ALIGNMENT TO POLICY*

Martin Greeley from IDS reminded of the need to link governance evidence to the MDGs and to specific pro poor policy options, especially as the aid community moves towards direct budget support. Only then will the MDGs, which currently lack a strong governance dimension, be supported by governance research. This echoed the voice of some ministry-related think tanks who emphasized the need by policy makers for immediate solutions to manage immediate crises.

Contexts of direct budget support, sector specific working groups in countries and public spending are entry points for "structural enthusiasm" about evidence.

### *THE CHALLENGES OF OWNERSHIP AND COORDINATION INSIDE COUNTRIES*

Several participants who lead think tanks or research institutes pointed towards the challenge of defining ownership within countries. There are multiple actors not only among independent think tanks and research institutes but also within line ministries. . Further, the point was made that donor influence was often driving the governance agenda including participation in diverse contexts such as Vietnam on one hand and Andhra Pradesh in India on the other.

### *SECTORAL DYNAMICS*

Several participants indicated the uptake of governance evidence in the education sector, in fragile and post conflict contexts. Social protection tended to be a priority in post-conflict situations to facilitate reconciliation and redress between once rival groups. Questions were thus raised about whether this could lead to a way of sequencing sectors when intervening in a post conflict situation

There was a point made about the challenge of achieving all human rights (political, social and economic) in policy contexts that ask for prioritization and sequencing. The challenge is exacerbated if people's voices focus on some of those rights and not others.

### *NORTH - SOUTH AND SOUTH – SOUTH COOPERATION*

UNDP and ODI will explore how to bring the findings of this research and workshop down to country level in order to enhance national ownership of evidence on governance and its uptake into policy processes to reflect voices of the people.

Finally, the Egyptian Minister of International Cooperation recommended more enhanced global cooperation between think tanks.

All of the above opens the road for some concrete action on the part of developing agencies with respect to:

- Helping to foster some elements of financial and political autonomy as well as an enabling environment of freedom of expression and access to information
- Helping to enhance national capacities for applied governance evidence to sector specific and pro poor policies
- Helping to enhance capacity for participative methods to evidence creation
- Helping to enhance think tank ability to build alliances with the state and civil society and manage these alliances without losing autonomy
- Help to enhance think tank ability to systematically create sticky messages, use opportune moments in policy processes, foster champions and maintain their influence in an institutionalized manner.

#### OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

UNDP's Portal on Governance Assessments, which is under development within the UNDP Global Program on Governance Assessments, presents an opportunity for exchange of lessons learned and of tools of methods for capacity development.

The opportunity is enhanced with the partial inheritance by UNDP of the OECD METAGORA network which contains a global membership of CSOs, Human Rights institutes and statistical offices.

ODI RAPID program includes another network of think tanks from the north and the south that enhance capacity development and exchange of lessons learnt.

**Evidence on Governance into Policy:  
The Role of Research Institutes and Think Tanks**  
**January 18 and 19 2009**  
**A UNDP Oslo Governance Centre & Canadian IDRC Event**  
**in context of Information and Decision Support Center IDSC**  
**International Conference 17-20 January 2009**  
**Mariott Hotel, Zamalek**  
**Cairo Egypt**

DAY ONE - SUNDAY 18 JAN 2009: SESSIONS OVERLAP WITH IDSC'S CONFERENCE		
11:15 – 13:00	<b>Measuring and Assessing Progress: International Experiences of Think Tanks Influencing Policy</b>  Northern Country Experiences: USA, UK, Ireland, Australia  The Challenge in Conflict Countries  Evidence Based Policy Processes: General Reflections	Moderator: Dr. Heba Handoussa, Lead Author of UNDP Egyptian National Human Development Reports  Katherine Scrivens, OECD Global Initiative on Measuring Progress (confirmed)  Nicola Jones, ODI, London  Andy Sumner, IDS
13:00 – 14:00	LUNCH	
14:00 – 15:45	<b>Think Tanks Influencing Political and Economic Policy: India and China Experiences</b>  India Experience  China Experience	Moderator: Dr. Heba Handoussa  Peter De Souza, Director of Advanced Studies Centre, Shimla in India (confirmed)  Minquan Liu, University of Beijing (confirmed)
15:45-16.15	BREAK	
16:15 – 17:15	Cairo Declaration on Role of Think Tanks Under auspices of Prime Minister of Egypt	Plenary

<b>DAY TWO - MONDAY 19 JAN 2009: GOVERNANCE EVIDENCE, THINK TANKS &amp; RESEARCH INSTITUTES IN POST CONFLICT COUNTRIES</b>		
8.15-8:30	Connecting to previous day	Noha el-Mikawy, UNDP
8:30 – 10: 00	<b>The Challenge of Think Tanks in Conflict Countries</b> Nepal Serbia Peru	Moderator: Nicola Jones, ODI, London  Binod Bhatta Maja Djuric Jorge Aragon
10.00-11.30	<b>The Challenge of Think Tanks in Conflict Countries</b>  The Experience of Sudan  Experiences from the African Peer Review Mechanism  Discussion	Moderator: Elissar Sarrouh, IDRC  Dr. al-Tayeb Atia, Peace Institute Khartoum University  Steve Gruzd, South African Institute for International Affairs
11.30-12.00	Leave Hotel in Shuttle Bus to IDSC	Tour of and Lunch at IDSC
12:00 – 14:00	Tour and Lunch at IDSC	
14:00 – 14:30	Travel back with Shuttle Bus to Hotel	
14.30-16.00	<b>Who Counts, Who Owns Evidence</b>  Reflections on the Future Role of Think Tanks in bringing governance evidence into policy reform in conflict countries, less developed and middle income countries	Moderator: Dr. Maged Osman, Chairman of the Information and Decision Support Centre IDSC, Cabinet of Ministers in Egypt (TBA)  Dr. Sahar El-Tawila, IDSC (IDSC)  Dr. Hanaa Kheir Eddin, Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies  Robert Chambers, IDS, London (confirmed)  Martin Greeley, IDS, London (confirmed)
16:00-16:20	<b>Coffee Break</b>	
16:20-17:45	WRAP UP  Canadian IDRC Program  ODI RAPID Program  UNDP Approach to national ownership of Governance Evidence and the Role of Think Tanks	Elissar Sarrouh, IDRC  Nicola Jones, ODI  Ingvild Oia, UNDP OGC (confirmed)  Noha El-Mikawy, UNDP OGC (confirmed)