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Synthesis of think pieces

By Enrique Mendizabal

Introduction

This synthesis is based on a series of think pieces commissioned and offered by researchers and practitioners working across five continents. It includes the following pieces:

- Goran Buldioski – lessons from the Think Tank Fund in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union on core and institutional support for organisational development;
- Hans Gutbrod – lessons from Eastern Europe on the need for reliable data and the opportunity this presents for think tanks;
- Ajay Datta – lessons from a long term organisational development project in Vietnam.
- Stephen Yeo – lessons from economic policy research institutes in Sub-Saharan Africa and the challenge to develop local policy research capacity; and
- A Policy Analyst working in the Select Committee Office in the UK Parliament provides a discussion of the challenges faced by a public think tank working with and across all political parties in the UK.

The authors wrote the think pieces from their own points of view and with the intention of informing an important effort such as the Knowledge Sector Initiative as well as further public debate on the subject of supporting think tanks in developing countries.

In addition, this synthesis section draws on some ideas from conversations with other individuals (for instance, Norma Correa from Peru and Savior Mwamba from Zambia) as well as the author's own experience and research, much of which is documented in On Think Tanks (www.onthinktanks.org).

The analysis and some of the conclusions and recommendations have been developed during the drafting of this synthesis. Additional questions have been addressed as the result of feedback from the evaluation team, personnel involved in the Knowledge Sector Initiative, and AusAID Indonesia.

Finally, like the think pieces themselves, this synthesis presents a number of challenge statements and opinions of the author.¹ These are intended to generate a discussion among the various parties involved in the Knowledge Sector Initiative and to inform the planning process. By publishing the pieces and the synthesis via On Think Tanks other will be able to join the discussion.

The synthesis is structured in two main sections: a) context-related challenges; and b) some practical advice based on the think pieces that an effort such as the Knowledge Sector Initiative could take into account.

Context: challenges that need to be taken into account

The think pieces offer interesting insights into the question of context. Yes, it matters, but why, how, and what does this mean for interventions to develop the research, policy analysis, and policymaking capacity of developing countries?

The think pieces identify at least six key aspects of the context that should appear high in any assessment of think tank support effort: culture; politics; the labour market; information availability; donor-grantee relationships; and donor/grantee interests.

¹ The opinions of the synthesis are not necessarily those of the authors of the think pieces, the pilot's evaluation team, or AusAID.

Culture: rules and behaviours

Ajoy Datta's assessment of the lessons learned from a project to develop the research communication and management capacity of a public 'think tank' in Vietnam, the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS)², places culture at the core of the problems that the implementing ODI team faced.

But rather than culture itself being the problem, Ajoy Datta accurately identifies a limited understanding of the culture by the consultants as the source of many of the shortfalls of the project. In a way, culture needs to be seen as a given – a constant – that the intervention itself cannot change. Culture, too, cannot be seen as an external factor –foreign or exogenous to the organisation or the project – and therefore something that can be kept out of the way or avoided, but rather a set of rules and behaviours that are present within the organisation and that affect, directly, any intervention made on it; or by it.

Datta's examples of the kind of rules and behaviours that may not be given the necessary attention include:

- hierarchy: communication channels are hierarchical but so is everything else, including the participation of key people in different types of capacity development activities –for example, senior researchers and managers participate in study tours but not in workshops, which are deemed, by the organisation's leaders, as below their position;
- relations: in the office, line-management hierarchies are more important than simple formalities (as may be the case in an office in London or Canberra) but at the same time not as important as personal relations between staff members. The latter are rooted deeply in the local culture and permeate the office space and all its rules and behaviours;
- losing face: this is a commonly used term by many foreign consultants in developing countries but its consequences are rarely considered to their full extent. In Datta's example, the consequence was that the evaluation of the intervention was cancelled. So in a way, the funders did not take this into account when designing the project but were fast to accept a significant change in it because they realised the damage that a negative evaluation would inflict on their relationship with the think tank.

Arguably then, interventions such as this one need to consider how to avoid situations where the consultants involved are not surprised to find that what they thought was going on was in fact not entirely accurate or true. The rules above are not difficult to identify but are very hard, certainly for anyone not subject to them, to fully understand. And there are likely to be many other rules that a foreign observer will simply not be able to identify – at least not in the short or medium-term.

Language proficiency, long-term experience in the country or society, a comparable professional experience (for example, working in the same sector or type of organisation elsewhere), and close personal connections to the community can help to address the challenges that culture presents to an intervention.

Politics

The case of the House of Lords' internal think tank³ offers an interesting account of the way in which culture and politics collude to complicate things further for researchers. In the international development literature exploring the links between research and politics, politics is often considered as an external factor or exogenous to the workings of think tanks. This translates into analyses of their external environments in an attempt to establish clear rules (for example, democracy leads to more think tanks) and addressing political actors as 'audiences' or 'targets', and their behaviour change as 'objectives'.

² VASS is made up of a number of institutes and could therefore also be described a network or umbrella organisation. However, it is modelled after the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) that is seen as a think tank in China and is managed, as in the case of VASS, by a President with authority over all the institutes of the Academy. This means that, in the cases of VASS and CASS, the institutes are more akin to large research programs within a think tank.

³ Here the label think tank has been loosely used to provide a link to the other think pieces. In the UK context this would not be considered a think tank.

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It also leads to studies that seek to explain the relationship between think tanks *and* politics, rather than think tanks *in* politics; it hardly ever considers them as political agents.

But the case of the House of Lords shows that politics is ever present and more so for an organisation that has to try to be as neutral as possible. The researchers in the British parliament have to deal with a series of potentially contradicting factors, for example:

- to work there, researchers must have a political interest and must be well connected to active political players (even party political) and to political debates and events to be able to do their job properly. If the researchers were unaware of the interests, views, positions, ideas, and so forth of the members of parliament that they seek to inform, their research findings and recommendations would fail to have an effect – and in fact could create significant problems for them and for the organisation. At the same time, the researchers must be able to work with and communicate to all parties and all politicians and must therefore avoid any expression of political preferences.
- in their quest for neutrality researchers must make a great effort to draw from as much evidence and expertise as possible, but:
 - not all researchers in the Select Committee Office, as in many think tanks, have an area of expertise – at most they will develop broad portfolios around one or two policy areas;
 - not all issues benefit from a prolific and balanced body of knowledge and cadre of experts from whom to seek advice – some issues are ‘monopolised’ by the Right and others by the Left, some by non-government organisations, and others by the private sector, and so forth⁴; and
 - often the turnaround of research outputs that Parliament demands is too quick to address the entire literature.

Of particular relevance to the issue of culture is that the rules that apply in a think tank in the Houses of Parliament are not, and cannot be, the same as the rules for any other organisation. To do good work, to excel, within these organisations, researchers must dedicate a significant amount of time and effort to understand their organisational cultures and to actively participate in them.

It is therefore difficult to assume that it is possible to undertake external needs assessments or rely on foreign (to the country and to the organisation) experts who can offer a sufficiently robust and complete picture of the culture and politics of the organisation. Nor can it be expected that their researchers, communicators, and managers will be able to reallocate sufficient time away from working with that culture and politics to champion changes with no immediate benefits for them. Experience suggests that this does not happen easily, not even among the better-resourced think tanks in the world.⁵

Rather, promoting a culture of critical thinking and self-reflection within the organisations themselves may be a more appropriate approach. This, of course, could be hindered by cultural dispositions against self-appraisals and critique.

Labour market – human resources

An element of Stephen Yeo’s think piece on African think tanks, and easily inferred from the others, is that at the top of the list of the challenges that think tanks and policy research communities in developing countries face is the lack of sufficiently well qualified researchers – as well as managers, communicators, and others.

Stephen Yeo’s account of the challenge in Africa provides an excellent illustration of a vicious process: the best qualified economists tend to emigrate to higher paying organisations - organisations that in effect set the wage rate in their countries’ labour market.

As a consequence, think tanks’ labour costs are much higher than the local market would dictate in the absence of these international competitors. In order to pay these wages, think tanks have to resort to these very same organisations, the only ones capable and willing to pay.

There are a number of contributing and compounding factors to this problem:

⁴ This relates to the idea of density on a policy issue. Low density makes it hard to explore alternative views and limits policymakers’ options: <http://wp.me/pYCOD-Pq>

⁵ Otherwise, the study of think tanks by think tanks would be far more common.

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- universities remain largely forgotten by funders with increasingly shorter attention spans and a focus on short-term impact indicators;
- donors are normally risk averse and therefore unwilling to invest in new think tanks or policy research initiatives;
- this unwillingness to fund new initiatives also reduces the pressure on existing think tanks to take the kind of decisive action that Goran Buldioski considers necessary for successful organisational development efforts; and
- limited human resources and competitors mean that a great number of policy issues are likely to go under-studied. And that those that are studied are unlikely to enjoy the range of views that are necessary for a balanced public policy debate and essential for a public think tank.

In this context it is difficult to think of convincing benchmarks for think tanks and think tanks' activities. Researchers' labour markets are too small to find sufficient peers to learn from; think tank leaders cannot find convincing benchmarks with which to compare themselves and compete with; and donors themselves cannot find suitable comparators to assess the real effect of their interventions.

The evidence base – information availability

Next to human resources, the key input necessary for a healthy policy research community is the availability of robust data. Quite simply, without it, researchers are dramatically limited in their capacity to fulfil their missions.

Hans Gutbrod's assessment of think tanks in Eastern Europe is that the evidence-base on which think tanks (private and public) rely is not sufficiently robust to sustain the kind of research and analysis that is required. The focus on data in this think piece is significant for at least two other reasons. Firstly, it highlights an issue that organisational development initiatives rarely address: the enabling environment for the activity of research – not just for research organisations.

And second, an opportunity for think tanks to fulfil functions not associated with direct policy influence, such as: the provision of inputs of research and analysis; the identification or framing of problems to address; monitoring and evaluating social, economic, and political indicators; and so forth.

The case of Peru offers an interesting example of the effect that data availability can have on policy research. In the early 2000s the Peruvian government launched SIAF, an online service that provides up-to-date information on public expenditure across the country. SIAF joined a portfolio of national surveys (livelihoods, demographic and health, employment, and so forth) that had been made public by the National Institute of Statistics. These data sources provide researchers with the inputs they need to undertake policy relevant research and analysis even in the absence of sufficient funding.

Donor/Grantee interests

Why are funders not always keen to support the development of human capital and data generation, even if these are obviously critical for the sustainability of the think tanks they support? Why do they often find it hard to recognise and respond to cultural and political expressions? The comments above should not be, by now, a surprise to anyone. The factors described above can be partly explained by the private interests of both funders and grantees. Like all other players in the policy research communities of any country they, too, have agency.

The pieces referring to think tanks are clear about this. And so are those focusing on funders. Goran Buldioski, as the head of a funding body himself, provides a clear illustration of this point. The decisions that funders make are not just technical, they are the consequence of a complex set of factors that include institutional and even personal policies, beliefs, and experiences. In the case of bilateral funders, these factors include and are dominated by domestic politics.

Pooling funders together, just as with think tanks, is not useful for this kind of analysis. ACBF and the Think Tank Fund could never be expected to respond to similar challenges in the same way. The former is a World Bank initiative and an international body with a complex governance structure; while the latter a project of George Soros' foundations, much more managerial in its functioning.

Their organisational cultures are dramatically different. Their contexts, too, are different; so are their historical development and experiences. The close, long-term and intricate linkages of their leaderships to their respective academic and policy communities further strengthen these differences.

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The same is true for the grantees supported by these funders. Their motivations are different, their staff come from different backgrounds, they work in different environments, and so forth. For instance, many of the think tanks supported by the Think Tank Fund emerged out of civil society organisations active in the struggle for independence and democratic strengthening that Eastern Europe and the Balkans underwent between 30 and 20 years ago. Many ACBF grantees on the other hand are public policy research centres set up to support established governments' economic policy capacity.

A coincidence of interests is more likely to deliver better organisational development results – as the new strategy of the Think Tank Fund proposes. But it can also have dangerous negative effects in which a close-knit community rapidly turns into a clique that keeps others from entering the sector and dramatically limits its potential – as the case from Africa and the experience in Latin America could suggest. It is therefore not enough to understand each other's interests but it is necessary to then work to promote a relationship between the two that may have positive social consequences.

This may imply that some think tanks may be better served by helping them find the most appropriate funders for them. Rather than attempting to 'fund them all' AusAID could seek to 'help them all' find the right sort of funding.

Donor-grantee relationships

Another factor of the context that is not, as usually assumed, exogenous but in fact crucially endogenous to a support process, is the nature of the donor-grantee relationship. Ajoy Datta, Goran Buldioski, Stephen Yeo, Norma Correa⁶, and Saviour Mwamba⁷ all agree that the relationship is a direct explanatory variable for the outcome of think tanks' development.

There are, not surprisingly, elements of the culture and politics that permeate these relationships. Similarly, the origin and life histories of the staff of think tanks and funders play an interesting role in the formation of these crucial relationships. Some of the most interesting suggestions from the think pieces include:

- donors are as dependent on the grantees as the grantees are on them. The case of Vietnam offers a perfect example of this. In this case, UNDP had a clear interest to protect VASS' officials from 'losing face' and continue supporting them even in the absence of an independent assessment of the intervention because VASS was the only 'game in town'. Stephen Yeo's assessment is similar. In many African countries there are only a handful of think tanks (certainly only one or two economic policy think tanks) but donors are under pressure, through their own culture and politics, to disburse funds.

Encouraging competition between think tanks for access to support could provide a solution but more important may be to encourage the incorporation of new organisations to the policy research community. Focusing on competition for funding alone may lead to risk averse practices and further dependency on a small number of funders;

- capacity building interventions have become income generating or business development efforts. Goran Buldioski's think piece argues that some think tanks are keen to accept these interventions as a way of securing a relationship with the funders and accessing additional funds for other purposes. Others, as in the case of Vietnam, take advantage of capacity building interventions to secure income for their employees' participation. These are all strategies that organisations under funding pressure seek in order to meet their missions. The Think Tank Fund's new strategy addresses this by demanding that the think tanks themselves invest in their own capacity development as a condition for further support;
- donors compete with the grantees for human resources. The labour market point above highlights this issue in greater detail but it could be noted that often the relationship between donors and their grantees is a double edged sword: for good researchers the funder, particularly if it can introduce them to new and more profitable markets, is also a highly desirable employer. So think tanks risk losing their best researchers to their own funders.

⁶ In conversation with Norma Correa in March 2013

⁷ In conversation with Savior Mwamba in February 2013

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Among the options available to address this, the following may be highlighted: supporting the development of the tertiary education sector (in parallel to support to think tanks); strengthening links to domestic and international universities; using the web and human resource professional services to expand think tanks labour market to include researchers, managers and communicators outside their own policy research communities and even countries; attracting national researchers and policy entrepreneurs currently based overseas (returnees have seen the number of Chinese think tanks soar in the last decade), and so forth;

- donors and grantees are not always keen on new players. Donors are not naturally risk averse and therefore rarely invest in new think tanks. Stephen Yeo's account of the recent history of donor involvement in Africa and Norma Correa's comments for Latin America illustrate this very clearly, particularly as this is beginning to show as a consequence of the Think Tank Initiative's intervention in the region. Think tanks themselves perceive a short-term benefit from keeping their community small, as new players would affect their influence and reduce their income. As a consequence policy research communities in many developing countries (from Latin America and Africa to Asia) keep entry costs very high and competition, including the competition of ideas, low.

Unfortunately, small communities also limit their capacity to access and develop new ideas. Efforts to increase the policy research community (even across borders) can help avoid this. Funders can encourage the formation of networks with other think tanks inside and outside the country, support new think tanks and start-ups, incorporate opinion leaders and public intellectuals to their initiative, and so forth;

- very close relationships, but not honest enough. Often the relationship is too close for the think tanks to remain independent of the funders. This can lead to interventions that do not necessarily benefit them or to the donors not being able to be objective about the think tanks' performance. In other cases the relationship is infrequent and impersonal and therefore it is difficult to develop the kind of rapport that is necessary to invest in and sustain long-term organisational development efforts. In a way, a three-party arrangement like the one present in the KSI in Indonesia or in DFID's Zambia Economic Advocacy Programme may offer a solution: funder and contractor can provide 'checks and balances' for each other.

Being honest, objective, and critical about the relationship emerges as a key lesson. And this involves being honest, objective, and critical about the culture and politics of all those involved. Support initiatives therefore need to be studied themselves –they ought to be treated as a subject of study for those involved as well as for third, objective, parties.

Emerging practical lessons: and possible implications for AusAID's KSI

The following lessons build on some of the conclusions and recommendations included in the section above. The list below is not exhaustive. It reflects the author's own priorities and opinions, as inspired by the think pieces, his experience and his own research.

On dealing with culture and politics

An important lesson emerging from the think pieces is that when dealing with culture and politics it may be best to incorporate these into the intervention rather than attempt to control or avoid them. This could translate into the following practical recommendations (as well as others):

- critical thinking: encourage the grantees to explore their own organisation and context by developing a KSI research fund focused on the knowledge sector in Indonesia, including: relationship between politics and ideas, think tanks, support and capacity development, and so forth;
- ownership: act on plans developed by the grantees themselves in the expectation that their 'theories of change' for organisational development will reflect the real challenges and opportunities that they face;

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- peer to peer support: grantee leaders are more likely to respect and accept the advice of people they recognise as their peers – or at least people with the right kind of experience. While they may not share the language and intricacies of different cultures and politics they will be able to relate to each other based on the nature of their jobs and careers. For instance, NGO or advocacy think tanks may be more easily understood by NGO or Advocacy think tank directors or former staffers in other countries than by someone with experience in consultancy or academic think tanks. Similarly, public or government research centres or units would be more appropriately served by former policymakers;
- language: if possible, work in Indonesia and for Indonesians. Not only will this reduce the transaction costs involved in translating materials and conversations but it will dramatically facilitate a more open and rich conversation between all parties. When working in the local language a lot more information can be communicated and shared that could be missed in translation; and
- monitoring by well-informed peers: when monitoring progress and, later on, influence or value in Indonesia, use peers within the policy research community to assess the think tanks. External observers who are not always privy to the nuances of the multiple paths and mechanisms of influence that exist in any given context tend to demand and rely on objective and measurable indicators. These, by their very nature, fail to recognise the full range of possible contributions think tanks can make to their society. On the other hand, a panel of local opinion makers, journalists, politicians, policymakers, philanthropists, business leaders, NGO leaders, and think tank directors and staff may be better placed to assess think tanks' progress and overall value and contribution.

On donor–grantee relationships

Efforts to develop the capacity of think tanks need to follow efforts to develop or find the right (appropriate) donor-grantee relationships. All the examples that refer to donor support for capacity development efforts relate to direct interventions; that is, where donors provide the support without a managing contractor. The only case that involved a managing contractor was the last phase of the SISERA programme, mentioned in Stephen Yeo's think piece – which tried to pass the role on to a local organisation but could not find one.

Given the complexity involved in understanding donor and grantee cultures, politics, and interests – and their relationships with each other and third parties – it is not surprising that introducing a managing contractor would have presented such a problem. But this third party need not be seen as a challenge alone; it offers important opportunities, too.

This is particularly relevant for the AusAID Knowledge Sector Initiative where a separate entity has been charged with implementation. The following challenges and questions that would need to be addressed by parties involved, may arise:

- the relationship that exists between AusAID and the grantees will change; but will it be strengthened or weakened by the new arrangement? Will AusAID be seen as an ally (a confidante, and critical friend, and so forth) with whom to be open about challenges and shortfalls, or an auditor with whom to be coy and opaque?
- the donor's (AusAID in this case), the grantees', and the contractors' cultures, politics, and interests may not be easily aligned –and if they are, will any one party have to sacrifice or change the most? Who will it be?
- the contractor itself is made up of a consortium including consultancies, think tanks, and academic research centres – will their own cultures, politics, and interests align? Does this demand a strategy and indicators of its own?

A common approach to dealing with the challenges is to attempt to control the relationship between grantees and supporters (funders and contractors). But a possible negative externality from this is the formation of a clique or closed-access community that in effect limits the sources of advice, information, inspiration and support that think tanks and other knowledge sector organisations support.

Fortunately, the KSI's own arrangement, offers a possible solution. In Indonesia the arrangement involves three parties: grantees, contractors, and donor. All parties can try to avoid the formation of these cliques by acting as monitors of each other's role in the initiative; but the donor in particular is in a position capable of doing so. AusAID can monitor the relationship between the grantees and between the grantees and the contractor to ensure that this is open, introduces new actors (new grantees or new sources of expertise) when necessary, and so forth.

This three-party arrangement can also allow AusAID to be more risk-taking by encouraging the contractor to explore avenues of work that as a bilateral donor it would not be able to. For instance, in Zambia, DFID has hit a diplomatic wall in its support to a new political think tank. The Zambia Economic Advocacy Programme, however, should be able to take a bigger risk and support it nonetheless.

On the other hand, it is quite clear from the think pieces that have addressed this that the effect of the presence of a third party, the contractor, remains largely unexplored. More so, the effect that the presence of a now hands-off donor with historically better relations with the grantees and a better grasp of the local context than the contractors themselves will have on the programme is uncertain. Both would constitute important research questions to be explored by the donor as part of an ongoing learning effort.

On developing organisational capacity

On developing organisational capacity three central issues arise. The first relates to the manner in which this is managed or provided, the second to the focus or content of said capacity, and the third to the source of inspiration and expertise.

The manner in which capacity development is managed is important. Goran Buldioski's think piece presents a significant break from the past – a past accurately described by Ajoy Datta in the case of Vietnam. Goran Buldioski and The Think Tank Fund's new strategy place the lion's share of the responsibility on the future grantees. It transfers the agency to them: if they want to develop their capacities, The Think Tank Fund's strategy appears to be saying, they will have to become intelligent customers. Ownership in this new strategy is not just about 'wanting something', but it is about the grantees 'knowing what they want'. This is a welcomed development in the sector.

The direct implication of this for a program like the Knowledge Sector Initiative is that the grantees need not be 'forced' into receiving support and that this support should not be decided, designed, or delivered by the contractors as a matter of course even if their needs assessments support them.

Instead the initiative should rest on the grantees' own initiative to inquire into their own needs, identify their preferred means of support, and demand the services they require. In other words, 'empowering' cannot involve passive grantees.

The role of the contractors then may be more appropriately described as champions and enablers of the process: supporting the grantees' decision-making process as well as their own search for and management of the organisational development services offered by the market at large. This is a longer-term process that most capacity building initiatives plan for but one that the KSI project horizon certainly allows.

It implies, too, that grantees that do not make the transition from passive to active agents of their development could (should) be 'let go' to give way to more proactive ones. This needs to be monitored closely with a combination of objective (for example, the grantees conduct their own assessments, look for the right service providers, actively seek support from the contractors) and subjective indicators. The latter will be easier to gather when the grantee-donor relationship is stronger and by triangulating perceptions between the three parties involved.

The focus (content) of capacity development is also relevant. To begin with, the capacity to make strategic choices, to become an intelligent consumer, may be a prerequisite of any organisational development effort. But other personal and organisational competences must be given attention, too, including:

- political competencies: to understand the context in which policy decisions are made and implemented and apply that understanding to the definition of policy and research questions, and the development of appropriate policy recommendations. This should not be confused with political analysis tools; rather practical experience and better and more frequent interaction with the political process need to be provided;

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- funder relations: to manage the relationship of the organisations with their funders (public or private; domestic or foreign) to find and maintain the right alignment of interests;
- organisational development: to plan and manage organisational change beyond the presence of funders interested in supporting this effort; and
- governance and management: to get the basics right – even before attempting to encourage think tanks and other relevant organisations to influence policy and assess their success, it is important that their accounts are in order, basic processes are under their control, and so forth.

The direct implication for the Knowledge Sector Initiative is that efforts to develop organisational capacity must look beyond the usual research and communications skills which are often the focus of these interventions. Instead the initiative could consider, first the capacity of the organisations to develop their own capacity – as intelligent consumers - and, second their capacity to understand and manage their context and their relationship with key actors that will affect their development.

At the centre of this challenge is the development of leadership and managerial capacities among young researchers and communicators whose career paths could be better guided to take on increasingly senior management positions. This is a 'career' path often absent in think tanks where the post of director is limited to the most senior researchers rather than the most competent managers and leaders.

Finally, inspiration (and the source of expertise) for these reforms should be extended beyond the Aid or international development industry. Domestic think tanks in the US, UK and Australia can be, even with their different contexts, important sources of inspiration for Indonesian think tanks. So can be think tanks in Latin America and Eastern Europe, which have faced similar (and recent) democratic transitions, dealt and deal with institutional uncertainty, and enjoy comparable economic development stories.

On developing the enabling environment

The capacity of others to support the grantees' own capacity development efforts must not be overlooked. To develop their capacity in the long term, the grantees will need to access services (for example, on research, management and communications training, digital services, accounting and legal services, and so forth) from local and international sources, including organisation and individuals. These, however, may not yet have the necessary capacity to satisfy these needs (this can include not knowing how to reach Indonesian think tanks and non-government organisations, as well as simply not having the right level of knowledge and skills that the grantees require).

There is a role for the KSI to develop this 'supporting infrastructure' to ensure that, in the future, Indonesia does not need a KSI. In practice, AusAID can monitor progress towards this ideal situation by measuring the proportion of services provided by non-KSI parties – as well as the services that are contracted directly by the think tanks themselves.

The think pieces appear to highlight a number of ideas related to how we work with that environment and the kind of competencies we may want to develop. On their own, think tanks are never as effective as when surrounded by others: strong political parties, professional philanthropy, reputable academia, vibrant civil society, an effective civil service, experts with different views, strong and competent counterparts and competitors, and so forth.

The think pieces identify a number of specific interventions that could be considered by any effort that seeks to work with the sector as a whole:

- invest in service providers: in Indonesia and abroad to ensure that the grantees have a sustainable and competitive supply of relevant and high quality services (for example, in capacity development, management, financial, accounting, legal, and so forth) well beyond the lifetime of the KSI;
- invest in people: to offer think tanks and funders with a wider choice of researchers and policy entrepreneurs, reduce the labour cost for research centres, reduce the barriers of entry, and generate clear incentives to invest in organisational development. In practice this is likely to mean an investment in tertiary education in key professions;

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- invest in data: to offer researchers a basic input for their work as well as a way of giving existing researchers and think tanks a new function to fulfil in their countries. In most cases this will mean investing in the release of already existing data held by public and private agencies, but in other cases this could be better served by addressing key gaps such as freedom of information legislation, supporting access to data analysis software and journals and literature at affordable prices, supporting think tanks with clear transparency objectives, conditioning funding to think tanks' making all their data sets and supporting evidence available online, and so forth;
- invest in debate: to offer think tanks, particularly government policy research centres, with alternative views and recommendations on any given issue, thus providing them with the opportunity to remain as neutral as possible. This could translate into encouraging the development of competing research agendas among public and private think tanks. But it could also include investing in the programmatic capacity of political parties and the journalistic capacity of media groups; and
- invest in the local funding environment: to help think tanks diversify their funding and make it more sustainable and aligned to their countries' needs. Goran Buldioski's and Stephen Yeo's think pieces, in particular, draw attention to the potential dangers of donor-grantee relationships that could be described as 'too close for comfort'. Both recognise the importance of diversifying the funding base. But both recognise that unless this includes new funders this will not be possible. New funders, however, will not join without a concerted effort to encourage and help them to do so, including: reforming domestic legislation, piloting initiatives, supporting the professionalisation of philanthropy, and so forth.

Of course, the environment is too broad for a single actor to tackle and it will demand the active participation of those people and organisations whose capacities need to be developed: philanthropists, universities, the media, political parties, and such. As a key player in Indonesia's knowledge sector, AusAID should act as a convenor of all research funders – domestic and foreign.

The enabling environment should not be confused with the external environment. Even if the analysis of culture, politics, and interest is only partly correct then these are clearly endogenous to the organisations. A key implication for the KSI in relation to the enabling environment is that, as the biggest intervention in Indonesia, it is itself, a part of the environment. The KSI, just by its existence, has an effect on the culture, politics and interests of the grantees and of the policy, research and broader civil society communities.

Its large funding potential has effects on the decisions of the grantees and of individuals whose own income expectations would be affected. The choice of contractors, too, would have signalled the grantees and others interested in providing them with services of the kind of intervention that could be expected; what they may be looking for in grantees and service providers and how to present this more effectively. Transparency is the most appropriate way forward to avoid misunderstandings.

Once the KSI is underway, too, the context will be affected. Locally hired KSI staff will most likely come from the same pool of researchers, analysts and practitioners from which the grantees look for their own staff. It would be rational then to expect that the KSI's initial employment drive will affect the grantees' own labour market and the wages they will have to pay for their experts.

Later on, the newly appointed staff will surely face ethical challenges due to their unavoidable personal and professional links to one or more of the grantees as well as to possible service providers for the KSI. This could have additional effects on the relationships between the grantees if these links are not managed properly: transparently. The KSI, too, will no doubt, affect how other research funders behave and how they approach their own grantees – either by reacting against the KSI's approach or by copying it.

Think Piece 1: From core and institutional support to organisational development grants

By Goran Buldioski⁸

For a long time, core and institutional support has been considered as the holy grail of grant making by grantees and donors alike. These days, donors that provide this type of support to think tanks are far and apart. In this think piece I present, briefly, the main components of core and institutional support to think tanks focusing on the elements that can make this type of support an effective capacity building tool. Then the piece examines different ways to provide more targeted support and thus help think tanks build their capacity faster and better.

Core and Institutional support – what is it (usually)?

Most core and institutional grants I have seen can be broken down into three ‘constituent’ components:

1. Sustainability component;
2. Development component;; and
3. Seed funding - incubator of new ideas.

The first component, sustainability, refers to funds that partially underwrite the grantees’ payroll, administrative, technical and other core expenses. In other words this is general budget support that helps the think tanks to operate.

The development component refers to the funds spent on developing the capacity of employees and improvements in the centres’ research infrastructure/methodological enhancement. In addition to issue-related competences, diligent donors will also include support for building/improving think tanks’ communication capacity, management practices, and governance.

The third component, seed funding, refers to the portion of the grant that is directly spent on policy research. Sometimes this serves as match-funding to projects where other donors require think tanks to make their own contribution. Most of the time, however, it is used for drafting analytical products or carrying out activities that others are not ready to support, but that the organisation feels very strongly about. These are usually ideas that are not yet attractive to other donors or that the grantee prefers to pilot carefully or design further before scaling it up and applying to project-based donors.

Clearly delineating these three components within a single organisation is impossible. For example, a donor may provide 50% of a senior researcher’s salary. Half of this amount could compensate the researcher’s time spent on incubating an idea while the other half could be a sustainability contribution to keep that person full-time (and usually will not be properly accounted for).

Or consider a portion of a director’s salary that think tanks routinely charge against the core and institutional support grant. In a hypothetical example one could assume that a core grant covers 20% of her/his time dedicated to management (sustainability component) and 10-20% for developing new ideas (seed/incubator component). Therefore, this distinction is more important as a tracking device only. It helps both sides to identify and trace the purpose and usage of the support awarded.

Core and Institutional support - What determines their success?⁹

There are a number of general organisation-related factors that determine if core support will be successful. These include:

- think tanks are *mission-based* as opposed to expertise-based. We, donors, are frequently mesmerised by competent experts and analysts and often think tanks play this well, by placing big names on their boards or at the head of the organisations;

⁸ The author is director of the Open Society Foundations’ Think Tank Fund. The opinions presented in this article are solely of the author and by no means represent an official standpoint on behalf of the Think Tank Fund.

⁹ A lot more can be written on this issue. I focus on the key aspects pertinent to the subject of this text.

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However, if this expertise is not complemented by a heartfelt vision about the organisation and the country or region in which it operates, the think tank in question may be nothing more than a consultancy attracting profitable projects. And while we may have nothing against consultancies, and they can play important roles in the realm of policy research, they are still a poor substitute for a real think tank;

- the level of maturity of the think tanks. This aspect is best reflected in the attention given to strategic planning and overall management. Of course, overdoing it does not bring any good results either. Drawing from the practice of the Think Tank Fund, many think tanks have so far approached the core portion of our grants as a raft to weather difficult times in project funding, rather than as a bridge or highway to further organisational development and move away from this unhelpful business model. The sustainability and maintenance of the organisation have often trumped developmental goals even when the latter would have been a smarter long-term investment. As a result, less attention has been paid to improving key components, like research quality, communications, and internal management in ways that that would ultimately help an organisation succeed in the future¹⁰; and
- finding the right balance between *'the market for policy advice'* and *'the market for funding'*. Surviving in policy environments where decision makers genuinely do not value policy-relevant research is hard. To endure, think tanks must pay a lot of attention to donors too. But some pay too much attention to funders to the detriment of other important actors¹¹.

Similarly, there are a number of key donor-related factors that determine the success of core and institutional grants. Success is more likely when a donor is able to:

- *critically assess* when to apply a *hands-off style* (with mature think tanks) or a *hands-on approach* (with those think tanks that need advice in addition to the money);
- *determine if* the support is allowing a think tank to be *sustainable* or *subsidised*. On the latter, at the Think Tank Fund we have detected that several fellow donors who award project funding have been 'free riding' on our support. Namely, they decided not to pay for any overhead or administrative expenses, only the direct costs of the research or its presentation, because we were paying for it already. In other words, they put their logos on the final products, while we, the core and institutional donors, have silently subsidised them¹²;
- *discern* between grantees that are *genuinely concerned with and work towards their betterment* and others who pay a lip service as a disguise for maintaining their expensive existence – and exist in a never ending state of capacity development.

Core and Institutional support – the relationship between the grantees and the donors holds the key

Donors who award core and institutional grants, unlike their peers who underwrite projects, have a fuller picture of the organisations they support. Given that most core support commitments last longer than two years the relationship between the donor and grantee, provided it is properly developed, can develop to be trustworthy¹³.

This allows the donor to look at the capacity building needs of the organisation as a whole and not just focus on separate individual needs as most specialised capacity builders do. However, the many donor-grantee relationships I have been able to experience warn me not to draw too rosy a picture.

¹⁰ Luckily, gone are the times when donors were eager to underwrite a full operation of a think tank and ask them to focus only on their research. Such a strategy has put many organisations in Eastern Europe at risk not to pay attention about their sustainability in long-term. And no donor is there to stay forever.

¹¹ A simple indicator of focus is checking the time spent in research activities, interacting with decision makers as opposed to talking to donors or filling out application forms.

¹² In chapter IX of his book ['Managing Think Tanks'](#) Raymond Stryuk discusses the need of calculating the total price of a product and charging the real price to clients and donors.

¹³ This is not to suggest that project donors cannot develop deep relationships with their grantees. It is simply the somewhat discrete nature of project support that is usually short that allows for shorter attention span and focus on a peculiar policy problem and not so much on the overall organisation picture. As a donor who gives both types of grants, I could experience and empathise with both types.

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There is clearly a negative side to this relationship. For example, some donors rush to bundle their funds with the advice they give or render and grantees, too often, accept the advice in fear not to lose the funds. Donors must be careful not to fall into the trap of confirmation bias and not confuse acceptance of their ideas with actual agreement.

These are only a few reasons why core and institutional fund has the potential to become a key tool for capacity building, if dealt with caution by both the donor and the grantee.

What are we the Think Tank Fund thinking about in these days?

To address these challenges and emphasise the capacity building side of our support, the Think Tank Fund is considering how to sharpen its *core and institutional funding by transforming it into organisational development grants*. These grants will provide support for three specific areas:

- quality control of research products;
- communications and advocacy capacity; and
- internal institutional development and governance.

Instead of applying broadly for institutional support, applicants will be required to present a plan for overall organisational development clearly indicating in which of these three areas they require improvement and how they will implement it. We are also considering tightening the application conditions further by requesting that applicants not only demonstrate the willingness to improve, but also provide a specific plan for improvement and some record that changes in that area have started taking place. Although the grant would continue paying for personnel, technical, and administrative expenditures, it would dramatically limit the eligibility for covering for such costs by requesting they be tied to proposed changes at hand.

For instance, we would be able to pay part of the salary for a communications officer, but not for an accountant or even a senior researcher, if neither works on improving the communications capacity of the think tank. Likewise, much of the support for administrative and other technical expenses not directly linked to the organisational development strategy would no longer be allowed.

We see *several advantages to this change*:

1. Applicants will come to us with a clear sense of what may not working well and a plan for how to improve it; instead of leaving it to us to discover them, sometimes through a series of unpleasant surprises in the second or third year of our funding.
2. The level of engagement will be more mature from the very beginning. We now spend a lot of time assisting some grantees in identifying necessary changes, but often paying a high price in staff time. With a few of them we have been unpleasantly surprised when some simply did not see the need or did not set time aside for improvement. In other words, from now on we will work only with the mature and the willing: those who have not only recognised a need but have actually prepared themselves for the sacrifices that change demand.
3. It will be easier to monitor the impact of our funding by comparing the ex-ante and ex-post conditions in one or two specific areas.
4. Finally, the sharpened focus would enable us to “cut the fat” for peripheral expenditures and achieve the same mission of facilitating organisational growth with less money. The Think Tank Fund would also have the freedom to choose which institutional development component for a specific organisation it considers the most important by targeting its funding towards it.

At the same time, sharpening our focus in funding organisational development *will not come without trade-offs*:

1. Our organisational development grants will lose the sustainability component that enabled think tanks in the past to cover administrative costs.
2. The changes will eliminate the seed funding that has allowed our grantees to pursue interesting topics or experiment with innovative methods on existing research agendas.
3. Finally, think tanks will not be able to use our grants for infrastructure support, like buying or upgrading necessary equipment.

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These trade-offs will have at least two immediate ramifications: either donors operating locally will step-up and cover some of these expenditures, or local policy organisations will have to survive completely on project grants by increasing their prices per unit with fewer funds to spare on broader investment in their organisations.

Balancing the benefits and trade-offs, we hope to turn our core grants into development vehicles. This will have effects on both on the grantees and the donor. In the absence of other donors providing core and institutional support in Central and Eastern Europe, the grantees will be forced to 'adequately price' their work. This is a feasible proposition even in difficult environments for policy analysis such as the Western Balkans and the South Caucasus. Similarly, the donors' staff will have to hone their skills – they will now be both grant issuers as well as immediate advisers. The money and the advice will go hand in hand and will reinforce each other instead of the money always preceding the advice, as it was the case with the core grants.

Think Piece 2: “Fact before Think” – The Case for Data-Focused Think Tanks

By Hans Gutbrod¹⁴

Think tanks and research organisations can seize a great opportunity by focusing on data and evidence, in addition to their role of arguing for improved policies. Practical examples, from the US and beyond, illustrate a number of advantages of this “fact tank” approach, which has not always received sufficient attention in the promotion of evidence-based policymaking.

Background

As the name implies, evidence-based policies require quality data. Often taken for granted in developed countries, data is significantly less reliable where state institutions are weak, as this think piece illustrates with some examples. Independent data generation and analysis thus is a critical contribution to informing decision-makers, improving public debate, and tracking the actual implementation of policy. Drawing on the experience of running the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), which focused its work on data, this think piece gives an overview of some of the key needs and lessons.

Challenge of Evidence, for Evidence-Based Policies

Senator Patrick Moynihan is often cited as stating that “everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not to their own facts.” This saying encapsulates a key challenge for developing more constructive political discussions, especially where political culture is still evolving. Without rigorous facts, widely believed, all you are left with is opinion. Providing quality data is thus a starting point for contributing evidence to policymaking.

Recent discussions of evidence-based policymaking have often focused on integrating the results from experimental studies, but in many countries there remains a more pressing need for basic data that tells us how citizens are doing. Have their lives improved? How are they getting on? Do they have access to basic services? Are women doing as well as men? What do families struggle with, and what issues are they worried about? Do parents think their children’s lives will be better than their own?

In many countries, these basic questions, and many others, are a lot less easy to answer than they should be. The data is simply not there.

Yet such data forms the basis of measuring wellbeing, and thus of informing good policies. Citizens, journalists, researchers, and decision-makers need such data, to make informed decisions. For such data to truly inform policy-making it should be:

- comprehensive, that is, covering all the important ways in which people’s lives are developing;
- rigorous, following established standards and thus reliable and replicable;
- comparable, over time and ideally between countries;
- easily accessible, for citizens, so that not only a select few using expensive and complicated software can analyse the data;
- granular, allowing for an analysis of different groups (gender and age, but ideally also educational levels, employment status, key minority groups, social networks) and regions, and
- updated regularly, especially on the indicators that are likely to develop dynamically.

¹⁴ Hans Gutbrod recently worked at IDRC’s Think Tank Initiative. Prior to joining TTI, Hans ran the Caucasus Research Resource Centers.

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The provision of such data is typically seen as a task for state agencies, and particularly the National Statistics Departments, also described as National Statistics Service or Office. Yet for a number of reasons, these statistics departments are often hampered by deficiencies that constrain their ability to contribute quality data to public discussions and policymaking. In many countries the statistics departments are weak and dramatically under-resourced. For example, the head of one national statistics agency once told me: “I just don’t have enough funding. Sweden has more than 70 people calculating their GDP, Lithuania 45, and I have 4 people on the job, with an average salary of USD500 per month.” In other words, this country was spending less than USD30,000 a year aggregating all its GDP data.

In another country I worked in, the national census, subsidised by international donors, still only had a total budget of around USD5 million, while hoping to reach every single household. Per capita, the census cost was less than USD2, when the United States spends about USD42 per citizen. Underpaid enumerators, as everyone who has participated in an under-resourced census or survey knows, cut corners. Therefore, uncertain about the quality of their own data, the statistics departments often are reluctant about making their data easily accessible.

Moreover, the statistics departments are state institutions, operating in a complex political environment. They are unlikely to highlight data that puts the government into an unfavorable position, nor to contribute data to ongoing policy debates. As they rely on the government for funding, they have high incentives to keep a low profile.

Often, as I found when working for CRRC in Georgia, statistics departments inherit legacies that are politically difficult to change: a few years ago we established that unemployment rates, measured by international standards, was at 31%. However, official figures put unemployment at 16%. Privately, government officials conceded that our numbers were right. “We inherited the 16% from the previous government, and by the time we figured out what was going on, we couldn’t change it and suddenly double unemployment.” Many international agencies, including the World Bank, often use and sometimes even republish such flawed data, perhaps because they do not want to challenge their host government. And this is then used in countless studies.

Given these constraints, many people don’t trust official data. Even reliable data can be contaminated by this distrust, and decision-makers often go with what they believe to be true. Policies are based on hunches, rather than evidence. In public debates, different sides speak without a joint frame of reference, often from polar opposites. The government does not have a measure of its impact, and the opposition does not learn how to look at metrics, thus gets little preparation for governing. Quality data do not by themselves ensure sound decision-making, as we can observe in some of the most established democracies, but it offers all political actors a better opportunity to anchor debate constructively.

Solution: “Fact before Think”

Think tanks and independent research organisations more generally, can play a constructive role in helping to provide this evidence, as we found at CRRC in the South Caucasus.

Data provision and analysis is a unique niche for think tanks. Enjoying at least a degree of independence, think tanks are flexible, and can contribute to ongoing policy debates. Unlike universities, think tanks are not encumbered by teaching and examination rhythms, and thus can concentrate on emerging debates. Since think tank funding typically is tied to impact, think tanks have an incentive to be visible and engage meaningfully. Conversely, think tanks also have time to dig deeper than journalists, who often are pressed by tight deadlines, especially if they are not funded to do painstaking investigative work. This leaves think tanks, especially those that are good at running teams, in a unique position to provide in-depth data analysis that can generate new insights.

With regards to generating the data, there are a number of approaches. At CRRC, we decided early on to generate the data ourselves, primarily through surveys. This gave us full confidence in the quality of implementation, and also an opportunity to develop our own expertise in the nuances of survey implementation. (One example: through cognitive interviews, we realised that the Georgian word for household, *shinameurnoba*, often was understood as referring to people of working age and livestock, but not to children.) This “vertical integration” was attractive financially and helped cover overheads. It ensured we could deliver flexibly, since we could rely on our own fieldwork team. Also, the expertise in handling complex data subsequently took us into other fields, such as media monitoring during high-stakes elections, or even the provision of SMS-based reporting systems to enhance community security in volatile regions.

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Contracting data generation out is another approach. The Pew Research Centers, our role model and the world's premier "fact tank", hires highly respected survey firms with broad international reach. This allows Pew to concentrate on its core business of conceptualising research, analysing, and then communicating findings through a range of attractive channels. Pew's huge visibility and high public standing show that their approach has an extraordinary level of Impact, even in a field as crowded and competitive as that of DC think tanks. In their innovative analysis, David Roodman and Julia Clarke ranked Pew 2nd by its per-dollar reach, among all US think tanks.

Secondary data analysis is also an option, since there is so much information out there. One Indian think tank that contributed significant chunks to the government's national planning reported that the data they received from various ministries was sketchy. While the think tank said that synthesising that data was challenging, it provided "a great opportunity for us to showcase our analytical skills", and generated clarity on issues where previously there had been contradiction.

Similarly, a colleague running a small consulting outfit had his team compare district-level World Bank data on poverty with governmental data on targeted social assistance. The comparison showed significant discrepancies, challenging the government and the World Bank to check their approaches to gathering data. In all of these cases, good data contributes to policymaking, by offering a better understanding of what is going on. As Richard Rose, a leading survey expert, has said, "counting people makes them count".

In Zambia, the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection manages a monthly Basic Needs Basket survey across the country that is published in an easy to read 1-page format. The data fills an information gap but also generates opportunities for public debate.

Providing data also gave CRRC's work considerable reach. The data was quoted widely, in the national and international media and also by leading national politicians. Quality data allowed us to unpack concepts that otherwise remained abstract: following Richard Rose's suggestion, we introduced survey questions that measure destitution, to get an understanding of poverty that is more nuanced, and more telling, than official definitions.

Using such measures of destitution, we could illustrate, for example, that by 2011 Azerbaijan's rush of oil wealth had left many citizens behind: 90% of the population said they did not have enough money to afford buying durables, such as a fridge or a washing machine; 38% stated they could afford food, but not new clothes, and; 22% said they didn't even have enough money for food. By contrast, the World Bank put poverty in Azerbaijan at 15.8 %. Its official online definition: "National poverty rate is the percentage of the population living below the national poverty line. National estimates are based on population-weighted subgroup estimates from household surveys."

Arguably, however, it is more illuminating to hear that 19% of Azerbaijanis say that over the previous six months they repeatedly borrowed money to pay for food, with another 31% borrowing money at least once. Agile data collection by independent organisations thus is an extremely valuable complement to official sources, especially since the World Bank in 2013 still draws on 2008 data.

Evidence is the first step towards better policy, and it is also an easier step for a think tank that does not have Brookings' lineup of 300+ scholars, or its USD 90+ million annual budget. But when the funding for municipal garbage collection became a controversial question in Tbilisi, we could say with confidence that more than 80% citizens were highly concerned about linking municipal garbage fees to monthly electricity bills. This was a contribution to informing the debate, even though we had never looked into all the alternative ways of funding municipal services.

Conversely, it has sometimes been disappointing to see how little some think tanks draw on data when making arguments about policy, instead relying on broad generalisations. Such work does little to further the credibility of research, and should not continue to receive generous donor support, since it clogs debate.

In an excellent piece a few years ago, Goran Buldioski argued "think instead of tanks", stressing the need for local think tanks to identify their niche. One could suggest, similarly "fact before think". It is a clunky phrase, but it highlights a huge opportunity.

This entails, of course, a thorough understanding that facts are construed in different ways, as well as showing how different groups see some of the important issues. The way people frame issues, after all, determines to what extent they engage and comply with policies.

Emerging lessons: Opportunity for Think Tanks and Donors

A number of lessons stand out, based on this experience:

1. Too often think tank professionals (and donors) rush toward wanting a sophisticated solution, when the policy problem itself is insufficiently understood. Quality data is the first step towards an evidence-based approach, and independent research organisations play a critical and constructive role in providing this evidence, in ways that other institutions cannot.
2. The internet offers exceptional opportunities for making data accessible to citizens, as well as journalists. Online data analysis now is comparatively easy to provide and maintain. Such tools vastly enhance transparency and accountability, and the possibility for an evidence-based debate.
3. Independent data generation and analysis creates accountability for the Government as well as the statistics departments, and an opportunity for citizens to review the accuracy of information they pay for. It thus complements other efforts, such as the Open Government Partnership, or the great set of tools put forward by mySociety.
4. Role models in the US, and beyond, illustrate the huge potential for think tanks that position themselves as fact tanks. There is a real opportunity for entrepreneurial institutions, as well as donors seeking to make a transformative investment.
5. To improve research capacity, one has to get researchers to work together in teams, and move away from the still-popular notion of the Grand Intellectual, in the mould of Émile Zola. Data-gathering fosters such teamwork, since it is a complex production process that requires input from diverse specialists, and rigorous quality control. (My colleague Koba Turmanidze's great maxim for internal vigilance: "if the preliminary results look *really* interesting, they probably are wrong.") Survey work helps to build great – and fun – teams that later can go on to tackle other challenges of generating critical evidence.
6. Building such institutions should follow successful practices of investing into and fostering startups, and not rely on "getting money out the door" grant-making instruments.

In sum, an emphasis on data is needed, and it works: think tanks and donors can seize a transformative opportunity by focusing on data. This can make people's lives better by contributing to truly improved debate, policy and implementation.

Think Piece 3: Developing capacities in complex environments - experiences from Vietnam

By Ajoy Datta¹⁵

Background

This think piece focuses on lessons from the implementation of a relatively large (USD500,000) project funded by the UNDP between 2009 and 2011, to provide capacity development services to the Vietnamese Academy of Social Science (VASS). VASS is a large government research organisation in Vietnam (modelled on CASS in China), which reports directly to the Prime Minister (as opposed to specific Ministers) and is home to over 30 policy and academic-focussed research institutes. It is hierarchical and political, where the president is part of the Party's Central Committee. Historically the academy has been seen as legitimising government policy although some policy institutes have increasingly done work to shape policy.

Approach taken

The project comprised three components: 1) project management; 2) research communication and 3) the application of capacity developed in both of these components to manage a large research project. I was part of the ODI-RAPID consulting team which was involved in the second component, research communication. The terms of reference for the research communications component ticked all the boxes of such a project by addressing internal communication, policy-focussed external communication (through policy and press briefings) and stakeholder engagement, all through a range of activities such as training, study tours to the UK, workshops to exchange learning and good practices, the production of toolkits and the most innovative part: action learning through coaching and mentoring of researchers throughout the process.

The project was intended to run in four stages: an initial stage to learn about the context through research and surveys to help design interventions; piloting interventions on a small scale through an action-learning approach; rolling out what worked on a wider scale and finally; a formal evaluation.

The approach outlined assumed (at least implicitly) that a linear connection existed between the various aspects of the capacity development initiative: the provision of inputs such as technical assistance and workshops would lead to the delivery of outputs such as trained researchers and the production of toolkits. These inputs and outputs were expected to lead to better performance (for example more attractive research, which would lead to more policymakers accessing and reading the organisation's research) and ultimately impact (policymakers would use the organisation's research to improve policies and the lives of the country's population).

What actually happened?

Managed by an external project management unit (PMU), albeit situated within and with its staff recruited from, the academy (and reporting directly to the president), the project followed through with some of the intended activities whilst making significant changes to others. The ODI-RAPID team was based outside Vietnam and delivered its inputs through frequent (almost monthly, week long) missions. The initial learning stage comprised a quantitative survey followed by a week-long qualitative assessment of the organisation's communications practices. In addition, senior staff from the research organisation made a study tour to the UK.

The action-learning component was dropped in favour of a series of 'work and write' shops, in which five fairly junior researchers from ten research centres were trained to 'translate' long research reports in short formats such as 4 page policy briefs and 2 page executive summaries. A toolkit was designed to aid these researchers and those who had not undergone training. Researchers who were seen as particularly keen and committed during the work and write shops were asked to be champions for this new approach to communicating research.

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Initial impressions (drawing on an internally conducted 'light-touch' review) were that the project had little impact on what seemed like a large bureaucratic organisation. Crucially, too, the PMU decided to drop the formal evaluation, so you could argue that we will never really know what effects if any the project had.

On project management, the relationship between the consulting team and the client started amicably but by the end became fairly strained. On one occasion, the consulting team sought direction from the funder, but this did not lead to any sustainable resolution. There may have been several issues at play here, but key among them was the confusion there was within the consulting team as to the role it was supposed to play in the project. The team had initially thought it would be partners with the client, having a say in decision-making with regard to the selection and nature of interventions. However, as the project wore on, it became clear the client expected the team to do what was asked of it.

Why such little 'impact'? Bringing context into the organisation and the project

Was this the most appropriate set of interventions? To make an informed judgement, let's think about the context in which VASS researchers worked.

Culture: Communication in VASS (and other Vietnamese research institutes) is largely undertaken through a hierarchical, top down approach. Junior researchers in government research organisations (the main participants in the project) tended to have little or no power in deciding how research was (managed and) communicated. These decisions lay with research managers or directors. Unfortunately, they were not involved in the project, largely because the workshops were seen as more appropriate for junior and not for (busy) more senior staff.

Influence: When it comes to actually communicating research to policymakers, formal knowledge products have a limited role. Rather, it is the directors of the institutes and the heads of departments who interact with policy processes through private meetings, commenting on draft legal documents, attending technical seminars/workshops and/or appearing in the press and on television. As Martin Rama says in his paper on the transition in Vietnam, influence is a result of research leaders with strong personalities - often seen as 'bullet' proof mediators - who convince the most senior officials in the communist party, with whom they had a strong relationship, of the merit of new ideas. For important reforms, the mere technical soundness or attractive packaging of technical inputs was not enough.

Learning: As Enrique and I have said in previous posts, workshops on their own cannot facilitate longer term transformation. Change can only happen outside workshops when people have the space to test and reflect on the tools, methods and approaches shared within workshops. However, we cannot get away from the fact that workshops help to consume and redistribute large amounts of (donor) funding very quickly and produce quantifiable and demonstrable results: people gathered, speeches delivered, production of meeting proceedings, as well as other traces such as newspaper articles, mentions in annual reports and banners and posters – always helpful for reports to donors. That said, taking an action learning approach - which would have required observing researchers at work and engaging with them in a relatively intensive dialogue- could have been impossible considering none of the consulting team could speak Vietnamese.

With regards to the study tour to the UK, participants, who had the power to instigate far reaching changes within the research organisation, found it a great learning experience but faced serious impediments for applying the new ideas. The most crucial factor was probably the huge difference in the institutional set-up between the UK and that of Vietnam. It is not surprising then that the Vietnamese government has tended to look to its neighbours when looking to learn from other countries. As such, although there is much kudos attached to making links with Western counterparts, Vietnamese researchers, like policymakers, were probably better off learning from their East and/or Southeast Asian neighbours with whom they share several historical, political and cultural attributes.

Changing behaviours: Promoting changes in internal communication within and amongst institutes in Vietnam is a very challenging endeavour. In a context where researchers are often chasing donor contracts to top up meagre salaries (see below) coupled with often excessive bureaucracy within institutes and the need for less senior researchers to secure various permissions to secure funding from donors, researchers often try to minimise formal links between an externally funded project and the research institution in order to maintain a greater degree of control over it.

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As a result, researchers can become individualistic in their work and when they do find consultancy work, they tend to keep their activities secret from each other. If private and informal personal relations are quite common amongst researchers from different institutes, formal horizontal networks, once established, tend not to remain active for very long.

Moreover, as Enrique once said, in some cases the assumption is that if research is poor, then management and communication are needed to make them better. But it may well be that research capacity is poor and no amount of management can improve them. This is often the case at VASS. Limited funding and lack of modernisation amongst some research institutes was a significant problem, which resulted in inadequate methodological capacities and weak analytical abilities among many researchers. But this was exacerbated by an incentive structure that encourages researchers to scramble for short-term consultancy work from donors and government to ensure they could sustain decent middle class lifestyle. The personal career success of directors often depends on their ability to secure projects and money from donors, and not necessarily their ability to stimulate the production of new knowledge.

In this context, these kinds of capacity development projects are often seen as an opportunity to top up poor official salaries and help make their research more attractive to donors (particularly crucial in a context where government has threatened to reduce funding to a research institute) rather than improve their abilities to promote better informed policies.

Evaluating the project: not everyone is interested: The formal evaluation may have been dropped by the PMU for various reasons. A lot is at stake when conducting an evaluation: future funding, staffing levels, accountability for the use of resources, career development decisions and professional reputations all depend on positive evaluations. There may be fear of exposing unintended outcomes and unachieved goals to wider scrutiny. But if resources were considerable, why then did the donor not put pressure on the research organisation to at least conduct an evaluation as it said it would do?

The space afforded to the client may have been less to do with wanting to promote ownership and the effectiveness of capacity development interventions and more to do with 'bigger picture' political economy issues. Many donor agencies are often under great pressure to disburse allocated budgets before the end of the financial year, and the careers of many individuals depend on this. Moreover, given Vietnam's high growth rates and on-going transition, there is also a distinct desire to ensure continued association with what is seen as a success story, which might explain why there are in the region of 50 donor agencies and why in 2010 Vietnam was the world's seventh largest ODA recipient. Donors have thus been careful to avoid public criticism of government officials and steered clear of what might be considered 'unreasonable' critiques of government approaches and programmes. They have often turned a 'blind eye' to instances when money is spent in ways that were not intended by donors in order to ensure good relations with and some influence over the Vietnamese leadership, who have been known for taking a strong lead in disciplining donors. Therefore, whether the organisation actually wanted to embark on a capacity development process at all could be questioned.

Lessons for the Indonesia Knowledge Sector Programme

- Promoting capacity development should be from within the community: developing capacities sustainably needs an appreciation of many domains of knowledge and many disciplines as well as a good understanding of the local context as well as language. Donors should therefore ensure local in-country capacity development providers are part of the team and that they have a range of skills and significant hands-on experience.
- Developing capacities sustainably, especially in Vietnam has to be a long term endeavour: Building up trust with the local client, getting insights to the inner workings of an organisation, developing the skills and abilities of individuals and the rules governing organisations can take several years and perhaps decades and requires careful monitoring of shifts in the political context.
- Capacity development as a deliberate process is an inherently political one and if change processes are not owned and led by those whose capacity is being developed, they are unlikely to happen (or, if they do, to be sustainable). Political pressure for change –preferably from domestic actors– is key.

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- Consultants can be enablers: helping actors with sufficient power and influence within the client organisation to understand what is happening in their organisation, develop a vision of what they want it to be in future and a strategy to help them to get there. In places like Vietnam where foreigners and outsiders are kept at arm's length, consultants may want to take an advisor role where they respond to questions and requests from the client ensuring advice given and products produced are of the highest quality, but more on this below.
- Clarity of roles is crucial: negotiating exactly what the consultant is responsible for (for example, outputs or outcomes) using *Champion's consulting grid* can help all parties to clarify what types of relationship are needed for particular tasks and what approach to managing the project they should take, and allow for structured discussion of the internal political issues.
- Continuous or at least regular monitoring and learning become critical activities to help consultants together with the client capture both anticipated and unanticipated changes (if any), confirm, improve or reconfigure the project team's understanding of how change is likely to come about and respond appropriately. However, for the project team to be reflexive learners, the client's, funder's and especially the consultant's organisations need to facilitate this through its own learning culture and systems.
- Core funding isn't progressive in all contexts. Providing core funding to institutes will require a high degree of donor collaboration (so as not to double fund certain institutes), may reinforce high levels of particularism amongst research institutes (due in part to competition for resources) and only promote more intensive relationships of mutual indebtedness (in contexts where relations are strong), rather than provide researchers more space to produce higher quality research.
- Capacity development needs to focus not just on the capacities of researchers, policymakers and other actors to produce technical results, but also on what it takes to build more effective and dynamic relationships between them. Therefore, in addition to traditional methods such as workshops and study tours, interventions need to consider more advanced approaches such as action-learning which might feature coaching and mentoring, (informal) knowledge networking and multi-stakeholder platforms.
- Donors and grantees need to be ready to take risks –and make mistakes: getting donors and clients to agree to more innovative and less well known interventions will be difficult given high levels of risk aversion. It is clear that there is no quick fix to developing capacities, which requires high levels of energy, patience and flexibility. Thus, consultants and funders alike will need to be realistic about what can be achieved; but not necessarily conservative.

Think Piece 4: Economic Policy Research Institutes in Sub-Saharan Africa

By Stephen Yeo¹⁶

Background

The macroeconomic impact of the oil shocks of the late 1970, combined with slow macroeconomic adjustment and large imbalances gave rise to a massive recycling of surpluses from OPEC countries to Latin America and Africa via the US and European banking systems. The resulting accumulations of public debt in Latin America and Africa proved to be unsustainable, and so were followed by “structural adjustment”: The IMF and World Bank programs centred on what subsequently became known as the Washington Consensus – “sound money and free trade”. The popular image of how these programs were designed involved a delegation of technicians from Washington, who arrived at the Ministry of Finance, briefcases and laptops in hand, and told the Minister and Permanent Secretary what was happening in their country and what needed to be done. The Minister and the Permanent Secretary were essentially on their own, with few, if any, well-trained staff in their Ministry, and even fewer well-trained economists in universities or think tanks to advise them. In the end, many of these programs either did not seem to work well, or were reversed very quickly.

At some point during the second half of the 1980s a consensus began to emerge: “Policy is better if it is made locally”. Donors in North America and Europe responded with programs to build capacity in economics, especially in Africa (Latin America had more human capital and seemed to be better able to retain it). Here some of the key actors were the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, IDRC in Canada, and (to a lesser extent) USAID. Three specific initiatives are worth mentioning: the African Economic Research Consortium, the Secretariat for the Institutional Support for Economic Research in Africa, and the African Capacity Building Foundation.

The African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) was launched in 1988, growing out of an earlier IDRC initiative in East Africa designed to improve macroeconomic management. It was led by Jeffrey Fine (a former IDRC Programme Officer), and Benno Ndulu, a Tanzanian academic who subsequently worked for the World Bank and is now Governor of the Central Bank. They established AERC as a network of individual researchers, with a strong focus on research training at the individual (not institutional) level. The network is still expanding and active today, and commands support from a wide range of donors and foundations. It focuses on MA and PhD programmes run in collaboration with African universities, and biannual training workshops for established researchers. University-based researchers were the target audience for most of AERC’s initiatives: not surprisingly, given the effective collapse of African universities in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Secretariat for the Institutional Support for Economic Research in Africa (SISERA) had a very different focus. Like AERC, it was launched in 1997 and initially supported by IDRC (Dierry Seck, its first Executive Director, was a former IDRC Programme Officer).¹⁷ Unlike AERC it focused on building capacity in institutions, not individual researchers by providing a combination of medium-term core funding and technical assistance to policy research institutes across Africa (many of whom had been established and supported by ACBF, as noted below). USAID and the EU later joined IDRC in supporting SISERA. Unlike AERC, which has expanded steadily since the 1980s, SISERA’s activities were wound down in 2006 after IDRC decided to devolve SISERA to an African institution but was unable to find a suitable institution to host SISERA.

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¹⁷ For a series of reflections on the SISERA experience, see Elias T Ayuk and Mohamed Ali Marouani (eds.), *The Policy Paradox in Africa: Strengthening Links Between Economic Research and Policymaking*. IDRC and Africa World Press, 2007.

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The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) was launched in 1991 as a multi-donor initiative led by the World Bank. Its mission (not surprisingly) was capacity building in Africa, but its focus was on capacity within government, and it funded training programs and established training institutions (“civil service colleges”) for the public sector. In addition, during the 1990s it began to set up think tanks in many African countries. These were typically rather “technocratic” research institutes, set up as part of a partnership with the Ministry of Finance or the Ministry of Planning to provide economic analysis to government. These think tanks were typically independent of the government, but had senior civil servants on their boards. ACBF provided untied, core funding to these think tanks in four-year tranches. The intention was that the think tanks there would be three or four funding tranches, at which point the think tank would be (in some unspecified sense) self-sustaining. In practice, ACBF has found it difficult to end its support even after the fourth tranche, and instead has set a path of gradually diminishing support as time goes on.

This cohort of African think tanks, many of them launched by ACBF and then supported by SISERA, faced serious challenges as a result of the demise of SISERA and the gradual tailing-off of support from ACBF. The arrival of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI), launched in 2008, was very opportune.¹⁸ The model it adopted was similar to SISERA: a combination of technical assistance and medium-term, untied or core support awarded on a competitive basis to existing think tanks.

One peculiarity of TTI (from an African perspective at least) is that it operates in East and West Africa, but not Southern Africa. To a certain extent the gap has been filled by bilateral donors such as DFID, with its recently launched Economic Advocacy Programme (EAP), designed to strengthen think tanks and the policy dialogue process in Zambia; and USAID with its Strategic Economic Research and Analysis (SERA) Programme in Zimbabwe. The programme, which runs from 2011 to 2015, aims to improve the country’s economic policy environment by strengthening the government’s capacity to analyse, adapt, and implement evidence-based policy options, the capacity and responsiveness of think tanks, research institutions, and civil society organisations that provide the research that supports policymaking and policymakers, and improving the quality and availability of data and statistics. SERA is building capacity in ZIMSTAT, the national statistical agency, and ZEPARU, the Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Unit. ZEPARU is an ACBF creation dating from 2004, and SERA is providing it with targeted technical assistance, although not with the sort of core funding offered by TTI.

The Dilemma

Even after all these investments donors in Africa face the same dilemma: how to help ensure organisational effectiveness while still respecting the autonomy of these institutions and allowing them to develop as credible players in the policy arena? Where does the pressure for effectiveness and good performance come from, if not from the key financial supporters? After all, he who pays the piper calls the tune

Donors have tried to adopt an arm’s length approach (through various institutional mechanisms) but there has been a price – many of these think tanks are ineffective since there is no pressure on them to be effective policy actors.

Compounding the Dilemma

There are a number of factors that contribute to this make the challenge even more difficult to solve. Many of these are in fact consequences of the actions of both funders and grantees alike.

Funding: Lack of funding is not the only problem for think tanks, and perhaps not even the most important problem, though short funding cycles do make life difficult.

Human Resource: Lack of well qualified researchers is a problem, but more because of their cost rather than their availability per se. Well qualified PhDs in economics tend to emigrate (for example, to Washington to work for the World Bank or the IMF; to Tunis to work for the African Development Bank) and, if they stay, they tend to work for consulting firms or as independent consultants.

¹⁸ See:

http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Programs/Social_and_Economic_Policy/Think_Tank_Initiative/Pages/default.aspx

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In effect they are mostly working for the international financial institutions or donors, as these organisations are the principal source of demand for skilled analysts – and therefore they set the wage rate in this labour market. So the problem for think tanks is that most of their costs are labour costs (for skilled analysts) but they are competing for this labour in what is in effect an international market, where rates are much higher than in more local markets. And this means that they have difficulty supporting themselves from purely local sources of funding (government, the private sector) because their costs are relatively high.

This has one important implication: in order to pay these wage rates, think tanks need funding from the same organisations who set them. And, as a consequence, a high level of dependence on donor funding is very hard to avoid and it is difficult to diversify funding portfolios.

Lack of competition: Many countries in SSA are very, very, small indeed – Malawi, Lesotho. Even in medium size countries it is unusual to find more than one economics think tank. Only in the large countries (Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa) is there a multiplicity of economics think tanks, but even in these countries there are not that many.

The implication is that a typical think tank has no competitors, that is, no other think tanks in the same line of business. Therefore, there is no competitive pressure on them or their leaders to perform well or better themselves. Even if they wanted to, this is difficult as it is hard to find another think tank to benchmark performance.

Donors (for example, the Think Tank Initiative) compound this problem through their reluctance to fund new think tank start-ups. In industrial organisation terms, there are high barriers to entry in this sector, and as a result, very little entry of new firms, which are often the key source of innovation and better performance.

Leadership: As a consequence of the factors described above few think tanks can count on focused, dynamic, and entrepreneurial leadership. As the executive director of a think tank, one is typically very isolated; and if there are no other think tanks in town, it is not even easy to benchmark one's performance against similar institutions, since this involves looking at other countries, where the policy environment may be very different.

There is not any peer pressure to perform, either, since there no pressure from competitors and donors are reluctant to exert pressure lest they be seen to be calling the tune. And any such pressure as they do exert typically comes when funding is up for renewal (and may not be renewed); which is unhelpful.

The overall result is very often ineffective organisations with little or no discernible impact or influence on policy; and no real incentives to change.

Some lessons

The experience of economics think tanks in Africa suggests, I would argue, that the issue is not whether funders influence the think tanks they support (this is inevitable), but rather the tendency of think tanks to rely on only a small number of – and in many cases only one – donor/s. This is not only a very risky strategy for a think tank, but it allows a funder to have too much influence over the think tank, whether or not the donor wants to exercise this influence.

This suggests that the wisest strategy for think tanks is to diversify their funding sources so that they do not rely on only one or two donors. But in order to pursue a strategy of diversification, there need to be alternative sources of funding available to African think tanks.

Who funds these think tanks at present? Clearly donors, both multilateral (ACBF) and bilateral (DFID and USAID) play an important role, as does the World Bank and the African Development Bank. But this funding maintains the wages artificially and unsustainably high.

National governments are also an important source of funding: in particular their support (either in cash or in kind) is a prerequisite for ACBF support. But diversification in this direction may be problematic. Government funding tends to be very unpredictable, being dependent on the vagaries of the national budget process. More important, though is the problem of independence: a think tank heavily reliant on support from its own government is unlikely to endanger this funding through outspoken criticism of government policy and so may be discouraged from playing a potentially valuable role in opening up policy debates by putting alternative policies on the table for public discussion.

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So diversification, if it is to take place, will probably have to take other directions. Think tanks in OECD countries have found it possible to tap two other sources –the private sector and philanthropists– and this is the direction African think tanks will need to take too.

Neither is likely to yield quick results. The private sector in Africa comprises a very large number of small informal enterprises, who are very unlikely to fund policy research (except possibly through their apex or representative bodies). Large “local” enterprises of any size tend to be scarce in many African countries. There are multinationals, of course, but these tend to be concentrated in resource intensive extractive industries, and have their own, very specific, policy agenda. In addition, their interactions with the local economy and polity may be the subject of fierce public controversy and debate. Funding from these enterprises may bring with it perceptions of undue influence and bias that damage the think tank’s credibility.

As a result, support from the private sector may be acceptable as additions to an already diversified portfolio, but may create serious difficulties otherwise. Local philanthropy is in many ways a more promising avenue, but organised philanthropy has only just emerged as a significant force in Africa as a new cohort of “high net worth” individuals emerges across the continent. One well-known example is the Mo Ibrahim Foundation; another is the African Grantmakers Network (AGN), a network of established and emerging African philanthropic institutions.¹⁹ The emergence of serious, professional grant giving in Africa probably offers the best opportunity for think tanks to diversify their sources of funding over the longer term – but this may demand serious changes to the organisations’ strategies and lead to changes in the local labour markets.

¹⁹<http://www.africangrantmakersnetwork.org/>

Think Piece 5: Independent research within government: the art of being and not being political –at the same time

by a Policy Analyst working in the Select Committee Office in the UK Parliament

Select Committees work in a political context but stake their reputation on offering non-partisan recommendations to Government. This piece considers the implications of that requirement for the way that Committees of the UK Parliament use and communicate evidence, and for how Committee staff operate.

Background

I work in a team of around 11 policy analysts, each attached to a parliamentary select committee or sub-Committee. Each committee is also staffed by a clerk, who is responsible for giving procedural advice to the committee's chair and members, and by a committee assistant, responsible for administrative support. The committees are also serviced by a communications team of three people. This set-up compares with the staffing arrangements in the constituency and parliamentary offices of members of parliament, who might employ up to ten people across their offices, with the one or two political advisers who work to shadow ministers in the House of Commons, and with the much larger policy teams working in government departments.

House of Lords select committees tend to have a different focus from House of Commons committees. Most Commons committees shadow the work of government departments, while Lords committees try to take a cross-departmental approach to public policy scrutiny. Commons committees tend to have a larger policy and media staff than Lords committees, meaning that they are often able to take a more reactive, short-term view of current issues that often have significant media interest. The aim of Lords committees is to capitalise on the expertise of an appointed House to enable more in-depth analysis of longer-term issues, perhaps arriving at conclusions that the Lords' elected counterparts in the Commons would find difficult to advocate.

The article below details my experiences of working as an independent non-partisan advisor in this highly politicised environment, including my thoughts on the role and uses of evidence-based policy-making in this context. It offers some suggestions about how these experiences might help other practitioners of evidence-based policy-making.

The challenges or opportunities faced

Because the Committee Office services members from different political backgrounds, a fundamental aspect of our work is to ensure that our advice remains independent and neutral. Yet this advice is offered in a political context. Making an argument about how policy might be changed is in itself a political act. To ensure neutrality and unbiased advice, it is important for analysts to keep abreast of party political or ideological arguments about relevant aspects of public policy. This means that people who are employed by the office tend to be already interested in politics. Committee reports are supposed to meet with consensual approval from committee members, across party lines; committee staff therefore find it helpful to talk to committee members in order to understand their views on specific committee proposals. A helpful chairman or chairwoman can assist with this process by negotiating between the policy staff and members.

This desire for consensus also has an effect on how evidence is used in committee reports. Having also worked in a more partisan political environment, I have noticed how committee reports are much more explicitly evidence-based than other forms of political and policy research. There is a much stronger requirement to reflect adequately the range of opinions that the evidence-gathering process uncovers. One result of the consensual decision-making process is that recommendations made by committees can sometimes be quite broad, though this is not always the case. The cross-departmental nature of Lords committee inquiries also tends towards general recommendations.

The only part of the evidence-gathering and report writing process that committees do not publish are the private deliberations about the structure of evidence sessions, and about the final report. This, and the fact that the reports fully reference the evidence received by the committee, enable stakeholders to understand how a report's conclusions are arrived at, and what influences might have been brought to bear on the final recommendations.

The attempted solutions or actions

The requirement that committee reports be rigorously evidence-based leads to a strong emphasis on introducing inputs from experts, whether through oral witness sessions or by employing specialist advisers as consultants. The convening power of the Houses of Parliament means that committees do not find it difficult to attract the key experts in the fields that are being researched.

The ability to cultivate successful interpersonal relationships with the chair and committee members is central to the work of committee staff, for the reasons outlined earlier. Some training is available for developing constructive relations. The most effective relationships balance a proactive chair with an engaged policy analyst and successful coordination by the clerk, who will be aware of the potential political, press and legal ramifications of the committee's work. Though the clerk signs off on any decisions that impinge on these considerations, each member of staff will be aware of the political boundaries of their role and the role of the committee.

The policy analysts themselves have a range of expertise, though broadly they work as generalists or experts. The generalists may eventually fall into a pattern of policy focuses – for example, they might work on primarily domestic issues, or work on medium or long-term issues. The key skill is the ability to be selective about what to read, and what it is important to know about.

Emerging lessons

Evidence-based policy-making is a term much-discussed by select committee staff. Having worked in the aid industry, I think there the term has been further explored. This is perhaps because of the strong focus on the need to demonstrate impact in development interventions. Select committee reports will automatically achieve one type of impact – the Government is obliged to make a formal response to them – and they often have an impact on Government policy.

Paradoxically, because policy impact is the explicit role of a select committee, there seems to be less need to measure and demonstrate that impact. Committee reports are able to make such impact because they are cross-party and non-partisan, and are therefore more likely to have their recommendations acknowledged by the Government than, for example, the opposition party's policy prescriptions.

The evidence-gathering process works well in terms of developing networks and coalitions with important opinion-formers around an issue. This both ensures that the evidence referred to is as balanced as possible, and helps to encourage their engagement and support once the report is published. Think tanks and research institutions might consider involving a broad range of stakeholders in the research stage of a project in order both to ensure that a wide range of views is represented, and also to prepare the ground for the acceptance in the policy-making communities of any recommendations that an institution might make.

The select committee's explicit focus on balance, and their attempt to make the evidence-gathering process as all-encompassing as possible means that select committee reports are much more evidence-based than most documents produced in a political context. But this is not to deny that the reports are designed to have influence in a political context. Select committee reports are unlikely to make recommendations that are politically implausible for the Government. Context, and understanding that context, is key. The result is that while the reports are as evidence-based as they can possibly be, they still reflect the consensus opinion of a select committee, and are explicitly designed to influence Government – as such, they are not equivalent to academic research projects.

It is easier to assess the influence of a committee that exists across parliamentary sessions than one that is set up only for one session, though even in the case of the former type of committee there seems to be less focus on measuring this impact than there is in the aid industry. This is perhaps because committees have more influence on policy than most organisations external to Government, which means that they are also realistic about their ability to influence. For me, this suggests that measuring influence is in itself a political process as expectations for influence change depending on the likelihood that any influence will be achieved.

The combination of the reputation of Parliament and its committee system, the ability to gather the highest-profile witnesses, and the level of interest in the subjects that committees cover, means that committees have the capacity to get ideas and information on the agenda, which the media and the public might otherwise have ignored. In this way, committees can play a strong role in setting policy agendas and identifying and framing public policy problems.

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Committees are in this way able to lend their credibility to issues that they decide are important. NGOs and stakeholder groups therefore spend a lot of effort trying to get their voices heard by committees.

Stakeholders would benefit from realising that committees require both political balance and credibility from their witnesses in order to write effective reports. No matter what part of the political spectrum a witness comes from, their evidence is likely to be more influential if it is well-reasoned and itself draws on a sound evidence base. A lesson for the development community might be that this is best achieved in an intellectual environment in which a diversity of expertise and experience can be drawn upon. London is a world centre of political, policy and academic research and hence committees can do very effective work there. But where there are only a few research centres, researchers, experts and practitioners to call on things may not be that easy.