

Think Tanks and Public Policy: Building Bridges or Creative Destruction?

A practitioner's account

*Ali Salman*¹

Abstract

This paper provides a practitioner's account of how independent think tanks generate resources, set agenda and operate in Asian context. It reviews the literature published on think tanks while responding to the criticism on the influence of think tanks. The paper includes a comparison of two case studies- public policy advocacy projects from IDEAS (Malaysia) and PRIME (Pakistan). The findings largely conform to the ODI's Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach while suggesting a modified version of the model to capture the success. The paper discusses peculiar challenges faced by think tanks in developing countries and builds up an entrepreneurship-centric explanation of influence of think tanks. It suggests an alternative lens to understand the effectiveness of think tanks. Towards the end, the paper identifies future course of action for think tanks.

The academic literature on independent think tanks working in the public policy realm is largely sceptic, if not outright dismissive, of their influence and impact on the policy outcomes. This scepticism is usually attributed to arguably absence of financial autonomy, low level of intellectual prowess, and agenda dependence vis-à-vis state and donors. Several case studies have been published which explain the workings of independent policy think tanks operating in developed and developing economies, but a common conclusion is underscored by questions over their effectiveness. Almost all such literature is developed by academic community which may or may not be sympathetic to think tanks. This essay is an insider's account of the debate on think tanks' policy influence. The author has operated in think tanks in Asia for almost fifteen years in various capacities and considers this as a reflective piece basing on the practice of think tanks while also as a review of this literature.

The structure is as follows. After the introduction, the essay provides an overview of definition and functioning of think tanks in a socio-political context. It then discusses various dimensions of think tank driven research and advocacy, and its impact and limitations. Afterwards, the essay presents two specific case studies- projects to engineer policy change- by two different independent policy think tanks in Asia². Finally, the lessons drawn from these two cases are then compared with the conclusions in preceding section to expand the discussion on the

¹ Author is Director Research IDEAS (Malaysia) and founder of PRIME Institute (Pakistan). He has previously worked at Alternate Solutions Institute and Institute of Economic Affairs. Correspondence email: ali@ideas.org.my. He is currently pursuing his doctorate in Policy Research & Practice from the University of Bath, UK.

² First case study is based on a policy change campaign led by PRIME Institute (Pakistan) and second case study is based on IDEAS (Malaysia).

effectiveness of policy oriented think tanks. The essay also offers a critique of prevalent analytical frameworks and presents an alternative lens to understand think tanks while suggesting a future course of action for think tanks.

Understanding the animal

Think tanks can be defined as “public-policy research analysis and engagement organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues, which enable policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy issues.” (McGann 2007).

In 2016, in a way, the think tank community celebrated the first century of independent policy think tanks, when the Brookings Institution completed its 100 years. It started when a leading American businessman Robert S. Brookings established Institute for Government Research, later to be merged with two other educational organizations he had set up to be called Brookings Institution. The word “think tank” was first widely used in the case of RAND Corporation after World War II, when it was contracted major consulting contracts by the US government which was pre-occupied with post-war development and construction work in Europe and beyond. Thus as the terminology also reveals, there is a strategic element in its very core. As a matter of fact, 90% of think tanks in Europe and North America were established after 1951. Another peak is observed in nineties in the post-communist Eastern Europe, when several think tanks were opened in Eastern Europe to help the countries manage transition from communist regimes to democratic and market centric regimes. 31% of think tanks in Europe and North America were established between 1981 to 1990. However, currently a decline is observed in the growth of think tanks, and new center of growth for think tanks is actually Asia, which should not be surprising given overall shifts in world’s economy. The University of Pennsylvania’s Think Tank and Civil Society Program estimates that there are around 7,000 think tanks around the world. About 28% of these think tanks are in USA, 26% in Europe, 18.4% in Asia, and 11.3% in South America (McGann 2017).

Various typologies of think tanks are in vogue. The most quoted is by McGann (2005), who classifies think tanks into the following five categories.

- Academic-diversified
- Academic-specialized
- Contract-Research Organizations/Contract Consulting
- Advocacy Think Tanks
- Policy Enterprise

As this essay is largely concerned with independent policy oriented think tanks, first two categories become irrelevant. It can be further argued that university based “think tanks” are actually academic outfits and research centers rather than think tanks in conventional sense. As far as other categories are concerned, it may not be possible to neatly classify think tanks in

these exclusive categories at least in most parts of Asia. Think tanks actually adopt a mix of resource development strategy, and they can be simultaneously contract researcher, advocacy and policy enterprise. In certain projects, these think tanks adopt the form of government advisor, in some cases, they become more of advocacy think tank thus urging the government to adopt or cancel any specific policy. Thus a permanent and constant business model for emerging think tanks may not be conceivable unless they are richly endowed or constantly supported by a constituency.

Independence of think tanks cannot be over-emphasized. If we go by the intention and action of the founder of first independent policy think tank i.e. Brookings Institution, it becomes clear that independence is central to the very nature of think tanks. Understandably, this is a major qualifier to define a think tank, as it will actually drop the number of recognized think tanks considerably. For example, in USA, almost 50% percent of think tanks are affiliated with or based at a university. However, one wonders if the “think tanks” largely run and financed by university, political party, business or a government can be truly described as a think tank? We can consider them research centers of their umbrella organizations. By this extension, they become a part of their umbrella organization, akin to a formal department or a unit of the parent organization. Perhaps there is a need to revisit the classification and definition of think tanks.

How do think tanks work?

Think tanks work in the spaces between the corridors of power and knowledge. Think tanks have been described as actors in the “liminal space” from anthropological perspective (McLevey, 2015). While this terminology is fascinating, it can be misleading too. Dictionary meaning of liminal is “relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process” (Merriam-Webster) akin to an in-between phase or being in a limbo. Probably the implication is that think tanks represent a state of limbo between academia and journalism or between policy analysis and policy making. In 100 years, think tanks have actually proliferated and have come to be recognized as a distinct organizational form. They will continue to be formed as long as there are individuals who find themselves little bit of journalist, little bit of policy maker and little bit of a professor and are capable to translating this liminal space into an organizational form by resource mobilization.

Think tanks can be also understood more simply as an innovation in organizational theory. They are carved out in a niche available between academia and policy makers and between media and academia. The founders of most independent think tanks are entrepreneurial- sometimes in conventional application of entrepreneurship and almost always in the sense of a risk-taker, resource mobilizer and independent. They turn some of the academic conclusions, which they find consistent with their own worldview, into projects, programmes and policy proposals and then seek support to materialize their worldview. On the other hand, they also interact with the policy makers in their own individual capacity and identify real world

problems, bring it back to the academia and match a solution, which is often available in library shelves. Think tanks are born in this iteration. On the other hand, think tank founders also realize that most of the splendid works of academic community does not reach out to a broader audience and to the so called educated lay person. They select academic works, which support their worldview, and then convert them into tools and instruments for wider public education. Quite often, think tanks help in creating greater awareness about academic conclusions reached in the professor's study, though obviously it is done to advance a specific view, and not with the intention of an objective evaluation. Think tanks can be understood to operate under "set of systemic and coherent biases³".

Think tanks operate over a continuum of public policy- from issue articulation to policy formulation to policy implementation (McGann 2007). At the articulation stage, the job of the think tank is to present a simple, cogent and convincing explanations of a policy problem to a broader set of coalition and stakeholders. At the formulation stage, think tanks participate through studies, briefings, testimonies and demonstration effects. At the policy formulation stage, think tanks become contractors, advisors and trainers.

Commenting on the academic work of think tanks, one commentator has classified all think tanks as comprised of "utilitarian epistemic cultures" (McLevey 2015). This is partially correct- all the work of a policy think tank is driven to solution of a problem or analysis of a policy, as opposed to some intrinsic motivation to acquire knowledge. Indeed, think tanks are often blamed of "repackaging existing research" rather than conducting scholarly research (Hasan 2015). However rather than accepting it as a weakness, one can portray it as a strength. Think tanks are often called second hand dealers of ideas, which take these ideas to next level.

In terms of communication, the critique, which is broad-based, is that "Policy analysis as a rhetorical project that cannot be fully understood apart from the audiences to which it is directed and the styles in which it is communicated" (Throgmorton 1991). However, this critique is self-defeating. Policy analysis is meant to be a specialized form of communication only meant for relevant policy audience including relevant members of the public. In fact, as a critic observes, "these institutes place greater premium on link to the media, building networks within policy communities and tailoring their products to the needs of decision makers and opinion leaders. (Hasan 2015)" Thus it is only natural that these think tanks allocate substantial resources to marketing their work, a feature which sets them apart from the academic community.

Srivastava has argued that that on account of dependence on donors, "a positive research environment [in think tanks] is not obtained (2015)." As far as the research environment is concerned, it may be difficult to disagree with her. Think tanks anywhere, but particularly in Asia, are not typically known for original research. But again, universities do offer much better research environment without any direct pressure from funders. Thus to compare think tanks with the universities in terms of research environment is not helpful. Think tanks are not

³ I am grateful to my colleague Najaf Yawar Khan to use this phrase to define the work of a think tank.

primarily formed as research houses- they are formed to propagate a set of policy solutions or critiques of available policy options or indeed both.

Agenda Setting

A big and much debated question is always who sets the agenda of think tanks. The implied answer is that it is not think tanks themselves but their donors and in many cases governments. It has been argued that one negative consequence of unsustainable funding is that “Lack of long run, general institutional support tends to distort the mission and research agenda of many think tanks; limits the depth of analysis and innovation within think tanks; [and] increases the influence of donors on research design and outcomes (McGann, 2005). This comment is a representative of the general criticism which independent think tanks often receive.

In post-communist Eastern Europe, the role of think tanks in opening up societies and economies has been often hailed. However a think tank critic reached a different conclusion: “In post-Communist countries new ideas did not come from think tanks, they were simply hosted there after being exported to Central and Eastern Europe by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and other Western foundations (Krastev, 2001).” This kind of criticism is widely used but is based on a slightly skewed understanding of the animal itself. Think tanks are run by intellectuals- whom Frederick Hayek called “secondhand dealers in ideas” (Hayek, 1960).” This definition assumes that the think tanks founders are not mostly originators of these ideas. They buy these ideas, find the right soil and plant them under the right conditions.

This issue of agenda setting is more sensitive in the think tanks operating outside North America and Europe, as funding source is also external to the society. A reviewer of South Asian think tanks has this to say: “The legacy of the emergence of think tanks-in South Asia, especially their financial support from government (and international agencies), continues to impinge on their autonomy, especially in terms of the way the research agenda is structured” (Srivastava, 2011). In Pakistan, the situation appears gloomy, as the think tanks are “conditioned by both the visions of the state and global frameworks, which are so deep-rooted that researchers are not able to produce alternative visions (Saigol, 2005 cited in Srivastava 2015).

When it comes to agenda dependency, the critics do not limit themselves to external funders for implanting their own intellectual agenda on think tanks in developing countries. They actually include the founders of local think tanks too in that list and actually consider them foreign implants, foreign agents and in fact extension of colonization. In a study based on focus group discussions across India, the authors conclude this: “

“...[In] Indian think tanks (which) are active to influence the language and school of thought for benefit of special groups or nations especially in economic development, defence and security, foreign relations, health and medicine. The freedom of thought, expression and communion are compromised in the educated funding model. *The intellectual colonization of few hundred people is taking the grass root voices away from the real policy need at the states and national level (emphasis added).*” (Singh, Sharma, and Jha 2014)

As the case studies in this essay will hopefully reveal, it is overly simplistic to suggest that think tanks are not autonomous in research agenda setting. Firstly, the agenda is fairly consistent with the worldview of the founder of a think tank, which serves as the first filter before embarking upon a particular project. Thus it is incorrect to assume that the founders compromise on freedom of thought or expression for funding. Independent think tanks actually abstain from participation in projects which do not conform to their worldview, which can be a problem in its own right. Secondly, it is irrational to assume that the donors will not draw any benefit from their funding. These benefits can be just a legitimate spending and hence continuation of the donor agency or it can be association with a cause with which the donors would want to associate themselves. However these benefits to donors inflict no harm on the independence of donors. On the other hand, the academic environment of universities is far more stifling than many independent research institutions. Lack of administrative and financial autonomy, teaching load and political interference can make the life of a university based researcher much less rewarding.

Making or Faking Influence

“Power in Washington cannot be measured precisely, yet think tanks surely have a good deal of it . . .”

(David Ricci cited in Weidenbaum 2010)

Like other funded civil society organizations, think tanks are also accountable, not only to their stakeholders, but to their sponsors. Apart from the financial accountability, think tank work is often measured in terms of policy influence and media impact. Think tanks have strong in-built tendency of attribution of policy change to their efforts largely because of their strong positions and to increase the prospects of deepening donor support. This tendency of attribution of success is also a subject of critics of think tanks. The discussion usually revolves around output-measured activities like publication of a book or organizing a seminar; and outcomes- the actual policy change, which can be attributable mostly to a think tank efforts.

Weidenbaum argues that it typically takes ten years in a policy change and besides think tanks, several other stakeholders also influence the process (2010). He admits the influence of think tanks on the policy making but remains cautious of direct attribution. A similar commentary on think tanks specifically working in South Asia suggests that think tanks remain visible in policy debate but their “direct impact on policy outcomes remains limited” (Rashid 2013).

Think tanks do have an aura of authenticity, which give the opinions of their staff and fellows an edge over other experts. Media tends to side with think tanks much more than a university professor, regardless of relative degree of expertise. This is not just a marketing ploy- newspapers are not known for carrying publicity for free- but is a reflection of different dynamic. How a think tank assimilates and communicates knowledge is fundamentally different from how an academic will do it. Think tanks staff are known to more active in the real world of policy as well as media, which gives them a better control over the pulse. “Indeed”, as

Lubienski (2015) argues, “think tanks may hold greater value in lending the appearance of institutional and intellectual heft to an issue”.

Impact measurement is important however criteria of measurement must be grounded in reality. To evaluate the performance of a think tank based on the policy changes it can bring seems rather unfair when the resources available with the state and a think tank are compared. It is the state which yields power through its ministries and departments whereas think tanks create a policy dialogue around specific policy problems or issues. In fact, “It is through these conversations that think tanks shape process, with influence distributed across various members of the policy community.” (McNutt & Marchildon 2009).

The influence of think tanks should not be measured only in terms of end results, but in terms of the environment it creates as well. It certainly helps by enriching the debate around a particular policy problem. As one sympathetic commentator puts it, “The result is a very lively competition of ideas and methodology in the public policy arena—far greater than most critics realize. Perhaps that intellectual sense of competition, rather than any impact on individual policy decisions, is the most fundamental and durable contribution that the major think tanks have made to American public policy over the years. (Weidenbaum 2010).”

An important strategy which think tanks adopt is to influence public debate around an issue as they understand its importance to realize influence on the policy change process (Abelson 1999). Thus they would engage in a sophisticated stakeholder analysis by identifying members and groups of the public which are affected by the issue or specific policy and would then select an appropriate method to reach out that group. They do it in the hope that these groups will have an important influence in how politicians would take a decision and thus chose to influence their opinions instead of working directly with the politicians.

In his review of Chinese think tanks, Xufeng Zhu (2011) argues that “to build influence, think tanks need to use their expertise to create an impression both on decision-makers and other actors in the policy-making system. Generally speaking, they tend to serve simultaneously as advisors to the government, academics in universities and research institutes, and policy advocates in the public sphere.” He actually stresses on connections and ties with the administration even more than the expert knowledge of think tank leaders. (Zhu 2011)

The impact of think tanks can be debated, but their influence is a foregone conclusion. The influence is visible in changes in public opinion, media mentions, reactions from political leaders, invitations from government and a general aura about authenticity. When the tipping point of a policy change finally arrives, it will be claimed as a success by many. What is vital is the power of a think tank to explain the change, and if warranted, narrate it in the context of intellectual position it has created and nurtured over years.

Does Environment Matter?

Policy think tanks started their journey in US where they have flourished. From one think tank to around 2,000 think tanks in 100 years in US alone. They also found supportive environment

in Britain and parts of Europe before being recognized in Asia, South America and Africa. As a critic has observed, perhaps not wrongly, that:

“It is the consistently American environment of policymaking marked by fragmentation and the separation of executive and legislative power, the distrust for federal bureaucracy, the weak party system, the philanthropic tradition and finally, the tax regime, which made policy research institutes... into autonomous, influential players. Anglo-Saxon culture, founded upon the power of rational argument, provides the proper context for understanding the power of twentieth century independent policy research institutes in the US and Britain.

(Krastev 2001).”

Naturally the question arises about the role and importance in societies, which are not known for the likes of socio-political institutions mentioned here. How do independent think tanks survive in absence of a philanthropic tradition which is not supportive of intellectual contests? How do they perform where the political parties have much stronger influence on policy making? It can be asserted that this is at least true for the countries of selected case studies i.e. Pakistan and Malaysia. I argue that much more than anything else, a distinctively characteristic entrepreneurship forms the basis of such think tanks in these societies. It is the entrepreneurial capital, and not the intellectual capital per se, which explains the survival and growth of think tanks in these societies.

Before turning to the case studies, a brief explanation is in order. As this essay is a practitioner’s and insider’s account, it makes sense for choosing only examples where author has been directly involved or otherwise direct access to information reliably available. This explains the choice of projects from PRIME Institute (Pakistan) and IDEAS (Malaysia). However, a trickier question is how these two examples were chosen amongst dozens of possible examples within these think tanks. Firstly, the cases were chosen on the basis of their duration which in this case was chosen as minimum of one year. Secondly, the cases should be able to provide information about how policy makers have reacted to specific policy proposals. Thirdly, the cases should be amenable to a reliable attribution of success to the initiatives themselves. Lastly, cases should be rich enough to draw certain lessons which can be applicable more generally in the debate on influence of think tanks on the public policy.

These criteria are in part based on three fundamental questions that Dumez has framed while reviewing case study as a methodology and a method. These questions are: What is my case a case of (theoretical and empirical categorizations)? What is the stuff that my case is made of? What does my case do? (Dumez 2015).

Case Study: IDEAS (Malaysia)⁴

IDEAS is Malaysia's first think-tank dedicated to promoting market-based solutions to public policy challenges. It is an independent not-for-profit organisation established in 2010 by Wan Saiful Wan Jan, who had earlier worked in British think tanks. Its mission is to improve the level of understanding and acceptance of public policies based on the principles of rule of law, limited government, free markets and free individuals. Its activities include: Research, publication of reports and books, seminars, discussions and short courses, briefings for federal and state politicians and policy-makers from across the political divide and media engagements.

Source: IDEAS Website (www.ideas.org.my)

This section will document the involvement of Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) in public procurement procedures related reforms in Malaysia. IDEAS published a paper "Key failings in the Malaysian public procurement system and how they can be addressed by greater transparency" by Professor David Seth Jones (Jones 2013). He identified the key failings which lead to the problem of overspending as: (i) inadequate procurement planning and poor drafting of specifications; (ii) insufficient use of open competitive tendering; and (iii) lack of monitoring and evaluation. One related proposal floated was to publish details about public procurement projects awarded through direct negotiations on a website.

IDEAS organized six roundtable conferences on public procurement which deliberated on these issues which were well attended by stakeholders including representatives from the Ministry of Finance in 2013-14. It also published two more papers: Transparency in European public procurement: Benefits and Lessons for Malaysia (Stolfi & Murniati 2014) and "Generating best value for taxpayers' money: How to improve transparency and accountability in Malaysia's public contracting system" (Murniati 2014).

As the foregoing discussion on think tanks has revealed, media mentions, increased public awareness or government participation is defined as a success. However, the real success lies in desired change in a public policy. As a result of the campaign, the government accepted at least one of the demands: it started publishing the details of public procurement projects awarded through direct negotiations on its website- a practice that the Ministry of Finance has maintained since then.

We construct a timeline to show chronology of events that led to this success. In July, 2013, IDEAS finalized the project with the British High Commission in Malaysia. On 27th August, 2013, first roundtable was organized bringing stakeholders together. On 1st October, 2013, first paper was released *Key failings in the Malaysian public procurement system and how they can be addressed by greater transparency*. On 8th October a second roundtable was organized followed by two more roundtables on 31st October 2013 and 21st November 2013. On 2nd December 2013, the Ministry of Finance announced that it will publish information about contracts awarded

⁴ Author acknowledges the support and assistance from Tricia Yeoh (COO, IDEAS), Sri Murniati (Fellow, IDEAS) and Nyoomi Kamani (Intern, IDEAS) for helpful discussions and data collection for this case.

through direct negotiation on its website. On 15th January, 2014, second paper “Transparency in European public procurement: benefits and lessons for Malaysia” was released. It was followed by two more roundtables on 18th February 2014 and 27th March 2014. Finally, third paper “Generating best value for taxpayers’ money: How to improve transparency and accountability in Malaysia’s public contracting system” was released on 2nd July 2014.

As this timeline reveals, less than two weeks after the 4th Roundtable, whereby the main topic of discussion was about Direct Negotiation, the Ministry of Finance (MoF) announced that directly negotiated contracts would be published on the MyProcurement web portal (<http://myprocurement.treasury.gov.my/>), a practice it has followed since then. This step certainly helped in improving transparency. Besides that, the Head of Procurement found the roundtables organised by IDEAS so important that he had attended at least three sessions himself and the other times, he had sent representatives to attend these discussions. Even Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU) of the Prime Minister’s Office found these roundtables very useful as it provided them a safe space to voice out their thoughts to all the relevant stakeholders. IDEAS managed to bring people from all walks of life including government officials, relevant NGOs, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and even the Auditor General who had never had the opportunity to openly have a talk with the Head of Procurement. Furthermore, IDEAS was then after invited to the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) and TTP closed door discussions. This further increased the credibility of IDEAS. Besides that, an exchange program took place whereby, certain relevant government officials were sent to the UK for training. This led to further expanding the social capital of IDEAS.

Other than publication about directly negotiated contracts of information on the website of the Ministry of Finance, this project did not lead to other more fundamental changes in the procurement system which continues to be marred with nepotism.

Lessons learned

- 1) Research plays a crucial role by providing evidence and data to right stakeholders in a form that is accessible.
- 2) Researchers and project managers need to be prepared to negotiate with the other party in order to achieve some form of success together.
- 3) Buy-in from as many stakeholders as possible (or at least identifying the main ones and then targeting those) and as early on in the project as possible is crucial.
- 4) Maintaining regular contact with stakeholders throughout the project is also important - in this case IDEAS team had a good relationship with the MoF in the early part of the project, though it could not be sustained later.
- 5) Government is not homogeneous and there are different interests and incentives in different ministries and agencies. Researchers/think tanks need to understand what drives these different motivations and learn how to incentivise them accordingly.

Case Study-2- PRIME (Pakistan)

PRIME Institute is a public policy research organisation, a think tank, dedicated to the ideals of liberty, and limited government, free markets and development. Its mission is to increase understanding of public policy based on these principles. It claims to be “fiercely independent, and non-partisan”, with distinguished scholars from across Pakistan. Its primary focus is to analyse the domestic and international policies of the Federal Government. It organises summits, dialogues, and lectures which are open to the public. It has published monographs, periodical reports, and books. The events and publications have evolved around a wide range of economic issues such as free trade, informal economy, housing policy, social protection, export development, national debt and power sector. PRIME was founded by Ali Salman in 2013.

Source: PRIME Institute Website (www.primeinstitute.org)

In April 2015, PRIME Institute, an independent free market think tank based in Islamabad, launched a campaign to encourage the Government of Pakistan for accession to Information Technology Agreement- a WTO’s plurilateral agreement requiring complete elimination of tariffs and non-tariff barriers on IT products. Currently 73 countries, which account for 97 percent of world trade in information technology (IT) products, are members of this Agreement. After almost two years, this campaign has achieved some milestones which is marked by formal acceptance of policy recommendations by the line ministries and concurrence of the relevant business associations bringing the ball in the court of the Prime Minister.

A brief timeline, spanned over two years is as follows. In March 2015, a casual discussion between the head of PRIME and Pakistan’s former ambassador to WTO⁵ led to PRIME’s decision to take up this issue. On 22nd April 2015, PRIME gave a presentation to Federal Minister for Information Technology on the implications of Pakistan’s accession to this Agreement. The real opportunity was created from her positive response and keen interest to follow. Following the positive response from the Ministry, the Institute published a working paper titled, “Information Technology Agreement: Why Pakistan should accede” (Hasan & Ahmad, 2015). During subsequent months, PRIME reached out to business associations and other experts on one-to-one basis to solicit their support. This would help later in demonstrating a consensus.

On October 7, 2015 PRIME Institute organised a public seminar, “Boundaries in a Cyber World: Personal Freedom and State Imperatives” to develop a consensus on Pakistan’s accession to ITA with support from Friedrich Naumann Foundation. There were 53 participants in the event including government officials, representatives from private sector, social activists, media persons, representatives from diplomatic community and academia. The seminar helped in

⁵ Dr. Manzoor Ahmad served as Pakistan’s ambassador to WTO for two consecutive terms during 2002-2008. He is now President (Honorary) of PRIME Institute.

arriving at a consensual position over the subject of accession leading to favourable recommendations.

PRIME's efforts received a major boost when Pakistan's Mission to WTO joined this campaign. They not only fully endorsed the proposal but also provided convincing arguments about the role of ITA in promoting e-commerce in the country and closing the digital gap with the rest of the world.

Later on, Pakistan's Ministry of Information Technology officially accepted PRIME Institute's recommendations and forwarded a summary to the Ministry of Commerce to accede to ITA while acknowledging the paper and efforts undertaken by the think tank. The Ministry of Commerce after reviewing it, not only accepted the recommendation but also recommended to include ITA-II, that includes high end medical equipment. Finally, another summary was moved for a cabinet wide deliberation. However, there was no action for almost six months.

In April 2016, to re-activate the issue, Executive Director of PRIME wrote a letter to the Prime Minister Office requesting the intervention of Prime Minister's office for accession to ITA. This request was positively received, and the Prime Minister established a high powered committee to examine Pakistan's accession to the Information Technology Agreement. Secretaries from Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of IT, Ministry of Industries and Revenue Division including Dr. Manzoor Ahmad, President (Hon.) PRIME Institute are notified as members of this committee. On 2nd November 2016, the committee held its first meeting in which all the members, except Federal Board of Revenue, supported Pakistan's accession to ITA. Dr. Manzoor Ahmad pleaded the case for accession. If the Government of Pakistan decides to accede to the ITA in the near future, it would be mainly due to the efforts of PRIME. However, the major opposition still exists from the revenue collection authorities, which is holding its turf of more revenue collection.

The campaign by PRIME can be understood as a genuine attempt to reform public policy. The main opponent is the revenue collection authority, which is narrowly focused on the loss of customs revenue in the short run while ignoring the positive economic outcomes in the medium to long term. It is also a war of arguments that is yet to be concluded.

Lessons

1. Initiating advocacy from the top- as opposed to starting from the grass roots- may set direction clear and can help in building critical partnership with the relevant ministry at an early stage.
2. The policy expert and the think tank should be perceived as a support agency for the government in its quest for information and analysis of the issue given lack of capacity in the government departments.

3. The personal rapport of policy expert in the line ministry and support from the top are critical for opening doors.
4. Research matters as it must answers the questions raised by opponents of a policy position using credible data.
5. The role of an independent think tank as an interlocutor between government and private sector to push ahead reforms is vital.
6. Consensus over position should be orchestrated before public events.

PRIME & IDEAS- A Comparison of Public Policy Advocacy Projects

It may be revealing to compare the two cases and to find out commonalities and differences. For this, one can refer to the foregoing discussion, which had brought forward these issues: autonomy of think tanks in agenda setting, financial sustainability and intellectual prowess. In addition, I use ODI's Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA)⁶ and also suggest possible additions in the Asian context.

	IDEAS	PRIME
Issue Identification /Agenda Setting	Formal: Think Tank & Funder	Informal: Casual conversation between Founder & Policy Expert
Nature of issue	Reforms in governance- main issue was corruption	Adoption of a new policy- main issue was free trade
Donor's Selection	Start of the project	During the project, after the Minister's nod
Approach	Bottom-up	Top-down
No. of policy papers	3	1
No. of public events	6	1
Media Engagement	Extensive, through op-eds	Extensive, through op-eds
Post-project relationship	Weak	Strong

⁶ ODI (2009)

Impact	Led to a limited change in the regulation, but no major structural change in procurement systems.	Led to formal concurrence by the line ministries, but federal cabinet approval awaited.
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PRIME & IDEAS Comparative Approach to Public Policy Advocacy

How agenda was defined?

As this essay has shown, one of the most common concerns on the work of policy think tanks is lack of autonomy on the agenda setting, which is presumably influenced by donors. For the procurement project mentioned above, IDEAS received support from the British High Commission under its "Prosperity Fund". According to Yeoh (2017), their interest was to ensure primarily that the public procurement processes in Malaysia should be rules-based and transparent as this would ultimately help their own British companies to gain better knowledge and access to contracts. Of course it was understood that there will be nothing in this project specifically benefiting British companies but the main point was to ensure a level-playing field for all companies intending to submit bids for public procurement contracts⁷. Thus it can be argued that agenda setting for independent think tanks is not a completely independent process, but it often yields a common good, which is beneficial for all parties. It is like a free market contract, in which two parties enter into a transaction for their own interests, that leads to a common or social interest.

In the case of PRIME, the agenda was defined in a casual discussion between the founder and Pakistan’s former ambassador at WTO, who had previously worked on ITA. The founder concluded that developing a case for Pakistan’s accession to ITA will neither be a very confrontational position nor an insignificant one. The premise was this hope that given pro-market inclinations of the government, they will listen to the case favourably. On the other hand, it was realized that Pakistan will actually gain tremendously after accession while it does not have anything to lose.

How resources were mobilized?

PRIME mobilized resources from two different international foundations-Atlas Network and Friedrich Naumann Foundation- to support research and advocacy for this campaign, though in each case, this specific project was not in the list of pre-approved annual plans. Donors were approached actually after the positive response from the Minister. This underscores the earlier argument that independent think tanks fiercely maintain their position and also shows that the

⁷ Email correspondence with Tricia Yeoh (COO, IDEAS), received on 12th May 2017.

donors can be flexible too. IDEAS reached an early agreement with the British High Commission to fund this project under its “Prosperity Fund” which led to implementation of the project reaching out to government and relevant experts and other stakeholders.

ROMA and ROMA Plus

ODI’s ROMA is a framework for the policy entrepreneur and is a useful guide for developing engagement strategies for evidence-based policy-making. This approach comprises these important steps:

1. Map political context
2. Identify key stakeholders
3. Identify desired behaviour changes
4. Develop a strategy
5. Analyse internal capacity to effect change
6. Establish monitoring and learning frameworks



Figure 1: The RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA)

Source: ODI (2009)

One can argue that retrospectively speaking, the cases presented here do conform to this approach as presence of all individual elements can be verified. The mapping of political context was done to identify points of support and resistance to desirable policy change. Stakeholder analysis was undertaken; and a strategy was also prepared and implemented. Also, lack of in-house research capacity was compensated by engaging with very senior external experts.

I would like to present two additional factors, which can explain the partial success achieved by both think tanks:

- 1) *Who* matters as much as what and;
- 2) *How* matters as much as why!

Experience in Pakistan shows that engagement of the country's former ambassador to WTO as the lead policy champion and his acceptability by the minister and her key staff was very instrumental. Dr. Ahmad belonged to the erstwhile civil service of Pakistan and he was accepted as being from the ranks. Without such a person leading the campaign, the governments usually do not open up to independent think tanks. Secondly, the whole case of Pakistan's accession to ITA and Malaysia's Ministry of Finance openness to more transparency was influenced by research which showed how the respective governments will benefit from the change. Thirdly, the ability of a think tank to reach out diverse stakeholders matter as much as the quality of research itself. This was exhibited in both case studies clearly.

The ODI's ROMA is a classic example of rational and scientific approach towards managing change. In Asian societies, such an approach may be a necessary but insufficient condition. Here socialization, networking, and mutual respect matters a lot. This may not be irrational in its own way, however an emphasis of personalized approach cannot be overemphasized in Asian cases. In fact, the rational ROMA model needs a personalized touch in Asia! The ROMA model can be expanded to include rapport of the policy champion and hence a case of ROMA Plus can be made.

Another possibly missing step in ROMA model is opportunity identification and capitalization. This is characteristically entrepreneurial trait. When PRIME head first heard about ITA, he thought that this is an area on which government will offer less resistance and the organizational own social capital will be helpful without having to rely on donor money exclusively. Similarly IDEAS CEO conceived this project as potentially beneficial for all parties concerned, which was vital for convening diverse set of stakeholders later.

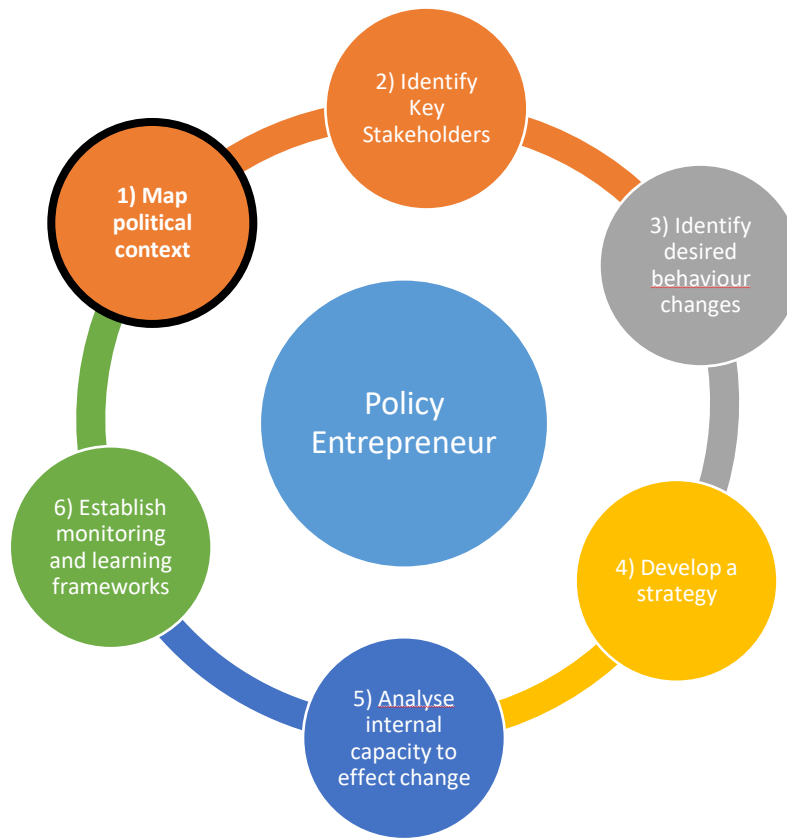


Figure 2: The Adjusted RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA Plus)

Source: Author

Future of Think Tanks

“Ideas matter; but ideas also need to be made to matter. The new social technology of networks is one important mode of making ideas matter.”

(Stone 2015)

The classical 20th century model of think tanks has come of age now. It thrived on a rather simple arrangement- develop policy proposals backed up by academic work and walk to the power corridors while carefully choreographing the advocacy. However with the technological disruption, blogs, Facebook, Instagram and now even Whatsapp videos are competing for the decision maker’s time. Policy entrepreneur that once defined how think tanks operate need to change the strategy too.

Diane Stone (2015) has argued that, “the contemporary ecology of knowledge brokering has changed in that an organization – as a physical or centralized locus of expertise and information – is no longer as necessary as it was last century. The think tank increasingly faces competition from new types of research and analysis organizations as well as new platforms and media for public affairs communication.”

Thus clearly, think tanks need to embrace the realities of new world, where information is readily and cheaply available. While this can be used as an advantage, it can be a threat too. In the post-truth age, well-crafted messages and papers issued by think tanks can easily be subsumed by the flood of ill-informed opinion pieces riding on the wave of populism.

As a special message in the 10th century, 2017 edition of 2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report, commenting on *Why Donald Trump Won the Election and Does it Mean The End To Think Tanks and Policy Advice as we Know it?* James McGann (2017) has the following useful piece of advice for think tanks.

“We live in turbulent times that demand rigorous and innovative perspectives on issues and trends; think tanks contribute evidence and quality information to help tame policy tsunamis sweeping the globe... To preserve their future, think tanks will need to adopt *entrepreneurial* and tech-savvy communication strategies while continuing to produce rigorous, policy relevant analysis. With a 21st-century approach, think tanks will survive and thrive for years to come (*emphasis added*).”

Think tanks have always grown as part of some sort of network. However the demands on these relationship skills have become much more taxing now. This also calls for revisiting the organizational design of think tanks. More emphasis should be made to acquire in-house technological skills besides sharpening research tools and more time and additional resources needs to be spent in building networks.

Changing the Lens

“As such, think tanks succeed because they fulfil a requirement for policy entrepreneurship at specific junctures that offer policy windows. (Wells 2011)”

The analytical lens which is usually used to evaluate the role of think tanks in the public policy realm is based on political science, public administration, and sociology. The implicit frame of reference is thus very wide. For the “knowledge” and “public education” produced by think tanks, the comparator institution is a university. For the “policy change” championed by think tanks, the comparator is state or the parliament. For changing the “public opinion”, the comparator is a newspaper. As compared with any of these established institutions, think tanks typically pale in size, budget and remit. Yet, think tanks are able to not only challenge the domain of universities, state and media but in fact they are able to create their own niche by riding on these very institutions. Successful think tanks are typically run by a very sophisticated degree of resource mobilization. This is not the usual trait of a professor, politician or a

journalist. This is a typical feature of entrepreneurship- or policy entrepreneurship to be precise. Thus think tanks, big or small, should be viewed by the lens of entrepreneurship theory. Like effective entrepreneurs, the founders of think tanks engage in the process of creative destruction and in the process carve out niche in the “liminal space” for themselves.

It may not be just a coincidence that first policy think tanks both in US and Britain, two countries which have remained at the forefront of independent think tanks, were actually founded by entrepreneurs! Robert Brookings had established himself as a leading businessman before he established Institute for Government Research in 1916, a precursor of the iconic Brookings Institution, established in 1926. Across Atlantic, in 1955, British entrepreneur Anthony Fisher, who introduced commercial chicken farming in UK’s market founded Institute of Economic Affairs. Thus two founding think tanks were established by leading entrepreneurs, and thus the business model of think tanks thrived on a highly efficient and pragmatic resource mobilization strategy.

If the entrepreneurship lens to study think tanks is accepted, then the discussion will likely to be shifted from questions on policy change and impact to organizational dynamics and a share in the ‘market of influence’. The first question will be on the financial sustainability of the business model. Dependence on grants will not then be considered a problem- it will be *the* business model. However dependence on grants from parties external to the environment in which think tanks operate will be a constraint. This introduces a high degree of uncertainty in how think tanks work. The independent policy think tanks in Asia provide example of this phenomenon. Most of them are dependent, for a greater chunk of their budget, on external flows. Paradoxically, this creates double and possibly conflicting accountability levels- on one level, think tanks are answerable to the donors for the use of money; on another level, think tanks are answerable to their respect Boards and local stakeholders, which typically do not pay. Most of American and British think tanks do not face this dilemma- they are answerable to their donors who also experience the same problems championed by the think tanks.

The other related question about think tanks, from an entrepreneurial perspective, will be their markets or their share in the market of influence. How effectively do they reach out to their own defined target segments? As a matter of fact, the job of a think tank should be considered done, when they ensure the delivery of right message to the right audience. If they are eyeing at a change in the trade policy of a country, for instance, the articulated change presented to the Secretary or Minister of Commerce should define the end of a think tank mission. Given their organizational limitations, a think tank can only achieve that much. Whether an actual policy change happens, and whether it is reversed or not, is not in the hands of think tank only. The decision makers themselves face pressure from multiple sources- from the Prime Minister or President to their voters and the media. In this context, the think tanks are really miniscule but what they are usually able to achieve is often significantly out of proportion to their size. This is usually the handiwork of a classical entrepreneur- who seizes an opportunity and brings

together parts of a puzzle and creates a total which is much bigger than the sum of the individual parts.

Conclusion

This has been called 'Age of Networks' (Ramo 2016). The organizations providing platforms to other organizations have gained unmatched and unthinkable growth. Fastest growth companies are Facebook, Google, Alibaba, Uber, Amazon and Airbnb. They ride on pre-existing physical infrastructure, create a web of endless possibilities and choices, and deliver high degree of value. Think tanks which can create high relationship, through their convening power, and not restrict themselves to their own research and advocacy, can actually go an extra mile, when it comes to results. This web of relationship cannot be virtual in this case. There should be a physical degree of interaction, which has to continue over time and grow in different dimensions. This demands that the central role behind an independent think tank ought to be played out by an entrepreneur- who are deft at resource mobilization. But they also pose the risk of creative destruction of traditional institutions they ride on. This web of relationship and ability of creative destruction can be considered entrepreneurial capital of a think tank. Ideas matter, but ideas also need to be made to matter.

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