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THE ROLE OF THINK TANKS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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Think Tanks in Developing Countries: Towards Southern Model?

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Abstract (418 words)

The South-South Cooperation seems to enter a stronger phase of development, moving from a government-promoted, lobbies-wise model aiming at collectively influence the international political and economic order to an innovation and knowledge driven model of development linking multiple stakeholders, from private sector firms to universities and R&D institutions to civil society organizations. Among these actors, the think tanks have a special role to play, as both knowledge providers and cooperation factors.

However they are facing one major challenge that threatens their very *raison d'être*: independence; both the collective independence of their work and the personal independence of their employees' mind.

The personal independence is a particularly complex issue: the independence of a mind is subordinated to a level of education, a quality of teaching, to cultural values and personal ethics, to freedom of information and the ability to develop a critical thinking. What can enhance this freedom of mind? How can the educational system of the South face both the still continuing need for mass education and the emerging need for very high level of education? How can a scholar free himself from anger and frustration as well as from envy and imitation when looking at the North? How to grow up a child so that he/she reaches such a confidence in his/her own cultural identity that, once become a smart researcher, he/she will want to work for his/her country rather than

emigrate? How can brilliant free and open minds cope with some of the authoritative regimes of the South?

The collective independence of a think tank is linked to several factors such as hierarchy, mediation, relationship with the media, volunteer commitment, cooperation, assessment and politicization. Among them the most important is probably its financial autonomy. Being dependant from a unique source of funding makes you potentially a very obedient servant of this source, while trying to escape this constraint can put your organization at risk and threatens its very survival.

Most of these questions cannot be answered right now, but they need to be faced if the South wants to develop its own think tanks in a useful way for its development.

After a solid introduction describing the current era of transition, the first part of this paper will make clear the role of think tanks in South-South cooperation and how they should evolve in order to fulfil this role and be more efficient. From this background, the second part will be dedicated to the examination of the independence issue in the specific context of the South.

Introduction

For almost two decades, the world has been undergoing a tremendous Transition affecting all the fields of human activity¹. Most of the new world ahead is still hidden but we are presently seeing or living some changes without knowing where these transformations are leading us to.

Ageing of the world population, climate change, rarefaction of some natural resources, emergence of a global middle class, evolution of the place of women in societies, spreading secularism and religious radicalisation, end of a hierarchical type of authority, knowledge society, overwhelming information, individualism, hyperdensity of the present... these changes are among those that are shaping the future.

The world of yesterday (19^o and 20^o centuries) –especially the Western world– was rather clear. It was based on structural trends and what seemed to be then a self-evident truth or 'natural order of things': industrialization, urbanization, empires and colonization, pyramidal hierarchies and societies, and certainties.

The world of tomorrow (21^o century) is being shaped by radically different trends, which explains why it will be so different from the one we have been used to live in. The

¹ RASKIN Paul et alii, *Great Transition: The Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead*, Boston: Tellus

main economic driver is no longer goods industry but service industry and tomorrow it could be the quaternary sector, based on intellectual services². Urbanization has developed itself thanks to rural exodus and high urban birth rates; and cities have become the beating heart of globalisation. Yet demographic transition, impacts of climate change³, increasing slums, unmanageable urban flows (traffic, waste, sewage, etc.) and real estate high costs are bringing this model to an inevitable change. The pyramidal system of ruling and structuring a society has already collapsed in most of the developed countries and this change threatens to contaminate the entire world. Thus, new relationships are emerging within firms as well as families and civil society, no longer based on pure authority. Democracy, empowerment and human rights protecting specifically women and children are being reinforced and spreading worldwide. Human development is now one of the core objectives of the development⁴, not only in the

² The quaternary sector of the economy principally concerns the intellectual services: information generation, information sharing, consultation, education, and research and development. This sector evolves mostly in developed countries because it requires a highly educated workforce. (see Wikipedia)

³ GOUX-BAUDIMENT Fabienne, "Tomorrow will die", [December 2006] in Bruce TONN (Ed.). FUTURES, Vol. 41, No. 10 (December 2009)

⁴ Cf. the human development concept defined by Mahbub ul HAQ, founder of the Human Development Report (UNDP), <http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/>

developing countries but also in the developed ones where education is a growing concern: education as a competitive asset in the globalized race, but also as a need for every citizen accessing the knowledge society. An interesting dual trend is this mix of individualism –that can be understood as a need for independence instead of only a pure selfishness– and networking as a need for breaking solitude and building affinities-based communities and social or professional networks.

As a matter of consequence, the traditional way of creating knowledge fails to grasp this emerging yet uncertain world. It will fail even more to understand how to move within it. Traditional sciences have been challenged in depth by the increasing complexity⁵ to which they are answering by developing multidisciplinary. In the same way, intelligence –as a way of understanding what is going on– is also being drastically challenged. To cope with the uncertainties ahead, to be able to identify these deep undergoing transformations and their systemic impacts, intelligence needs to be prepared or reformatted by a completely different approach of the dynamic reality of the world. It has to be rooted not only in multidisciplinary but also in critical thinking and foresight. This is the reason why the current systems where intelligence is built are in crisis: School, University, Research and Development (R&D), think tanks. The world has never been

⁵ MONTUORI Alfonso (ed), "Edgar MORIN and the Challenge of Complexity", World Futures: The Journal of General Evolution, Routledge, Volume 60, Numbers 5-6 / July-September 2004.

so deprived of up-to-date intelligence while it is entering a new era characterized by the domination of both a global knowledge society and an information-based economy.

An early mutation of the think tanks illustrates this major transition⁶. The first generation of think tanks, originated in the USA, was based on a 19^o century-type model: they were in charge of delivering non-partisan civil and military policy advices; neutrality and high scientific quality were their attributes, supported by large staffs and research budgets. They drew their legitimacy to advice governments from their collective expertise and advanced intelligence. The RAND Corporation is a good example of it.

The second generation of think tanks, emerging after the 70s, is oriented towards advocacy rather than expertise. Many smaller think tanks have appeared to express various ideological opinions, with no significant research budget or permanent teams; they are organized as clubs, on a volunteer basis. Their legitimacy comes from their adequation with a large public opinion, hence a growing confusion between think tanks and NGOs⁷. These are often based on self-promotion (to ensure their legitimacy) and

⁶ See a detailed history and definition of the think tanks in François-Bernard HUYGUE, "Qu'est-ce qu'un think tank?", 2007, http://www.huyghe.fr/actu_446.htm

⁷ Non Gouvernemental Organisations; cf. EDWARDS Michael, HULME David, WALLACE Tina, "NGOs in a global future: marrying local delivery to worldwide leverage", background paper for

use influence, especially with media. Out of America, few countries have enacted laws regulating the think tanks. The consequence is that any group can claim itself as being a "think tank", creating a blurry landscape in this field.

From this overall situation of the transition we are living in, we can easily understand that the main challenge today is to find new ways of behaviour and action that would improve and develop both collective and personal intelligence.

This challenge is even more urgent in the developing countries, because most of them are entering this new world with the obsolete ideas, concepts and practices of the North. What has been efficient in another world (time, culture or continent) could not only be vain but even damageable today. Developing countries have therefore to face the worst stake: simultaneously reduce poverty and develop the highest intellectual elites. This is where the South-South cooperation is heading for.

Think tanks in South-South cooperation

Historically, South-South cooperation was promoted by the governments as a model to exhibit 'South-solidarity' for collectively influencing the international political and economic order. This traditional model has now evolved into a more dynamic one, by

the Third International NGO Conference, hosted by the University of Birmingham from January 10th to 13th 1999 (available: <http://www.gdrc.org/ngo/g-future.html>)

linking multiple stakeholders, including the private sector firms, universities, R&D institutions and civil society organizations. The United Nations General Assembly in 2003, formally opted for using the term 'South-South' (instead of ECDC/TCDC) in describing cooperation among developing countries. According to UNIDO "Although the progress is being seen, the potential of maximizing gains through leveraging of capacities, networking of institutions and making timely technological interventions still remains largely untapped."⁸

The South-South cooperation is not intended as a substitute to the North-South cooperation. Developing countries still wish to benefit from the North know-how transfer, especially in terms of methods and technologies. However they have common challenges they do not share with the North such as high population pressure, poverty, hunger, diseases... And they feel they need to develop together a southerner core policy research about these challenges, exchanging failure and success stories and best practices, implementing projects in partnership, in order to develop a specific expertise, to create a more solid appropriation by the stakeholders and perhaps to have access to a less expensive knowledge than the expertise provided by the North.

South-South cooperation is not only about global cooperation, it is also about regional integration. "Regional integration is a process in which states enter into a regional

⁸ source: UNIDO (<http://www.unido.org/index.php?id=877>)

association in order to increase regional cooperation and diffuse regional tensions. Past efforts at regional integration have often focused on removing barriers to free trade in the region, increasing the free movement of people, labour, goods, and capital across national borders, reducing the possibility of regional armed and adopting cohesive regional stances on policy issues, such as the environment"⁹. Think tanks can prove to be a useful factor of regional integration in terms of developing "cohesive regional stances on policy issues". This is particularly obvious in three types of activity.

First, the use of scientifically grounded think tanks may help to improve the efficiency of public policies as several think tanks have already demonstrated, for example:

- by collecting and producing accurate data on the country (Information and Decision Support Center / IDSC, Egypt)
- by reaching a high level of understanding of the national challenges (Royal Institute for Strategic Studies / IRES, Morocco)
- by building a capacity to create, improve and disseminate knowledge related to new situations (Special Council Support Fund For Mutual Assistance / FEICOM, Cameroon).

⁹ source: Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regional_integration)

Secondly a think tank is a perfect place for partnership. Not only a national partnership that would involve universities, governmental agencies and R&D teams, but above all international or regional partnerships bringing together the same kinds of entities from different countries. Such partnerships allow exchanges of experiences and knowledge, it also increases the chances to find advanced solutions to common issues. It also allows the strengthening of the relationships between several intellectual communities at a regional scale, thus learning to know each other, and sometimes overcoming cultural prejudices.

Finally, an international network of think tanks may help to coordinate policy research in order to facilitate a regional integration. It would do so either by reaching together a critical level in one crucial research area (mutualisation) or by increasing the number of fields of competence to work simultaneously on various issues (distribution).

However, the current generation of think tanks –as defined supra– is not the most efficient to achieve such goals. Does this mean that developing countries should go back to the first generation model of think tanks? No, it would rather mean that they have to create the next generation of think tanks, the third one.

The main characteristics of these new think tanks would be the following:

- submitted to world-accepted regulation and ethics;
- funded by new mechanisms ensuring their independence;

- defined as providing non-partisan policy advice to public decision-makers, through small research teams working in partnership;
- and clearly distinct from NGOs (advocacy organizations based on a large membership).

Therefore, in the perspective of developing and reinforcing the South-South cooperation as a way to improve public policies and facilitate regional integration, the think tanks can and must play a specific role. Yet their efficiency is closely tied to their capacity to evolve up to a new stage. National governments of the South should not only be reformers but transformers, and act accordingly.

Toward a Southern model of think tanks?

Creating a sustainable and scientifically grounded model of think tanks is not enough to make them credible. This is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Because the most fundamental challenge for a think tank is the quality of its intellectual production. This is true for both Northern and Southern think tanks.

However, the conditions of this quality are not the same in all countries. In the North, they are often linked to the relationship with media or political parties, and to the degradation of knowledge due to the "*culture de l'urgence*": doing everything too quickly, having no time to control information, accepting 'facility' as a daily way of personal management, being fragilized by a too high pressure on 'doing' and no time left for

'thinking'. In the South, these conditions are related to several other factors, such as access to data (or the existence of data itself) or brain drain that leaves too few very highly educated and extremely competent persons in the country. But the core issue there concerns independence¹⁰; both the collective independence of the think tank as an institution, and the personal independence of its thinkers.

The independence of a thinker –or in other words, his/her freedom of mind– is the very basic condition of the quality of his/her work. How to get it and keep it? Why is it more specific to Southern countries?

Being independent means that you are autonomous: you can elaborate your own choices and make decisions for yourself. When you are a thinker, you have to face the same

¹⁰ "'Independent' does not indicate that an organization receives no funding from the government, since most research organizations in developing countries need some government funding to survive. While independence can mean different things in different settings, there are several factors that seem to be critical to maintaining independence as a policy research organization: 1) rigorous and impartial research; 2) lack of financial dependence on one source of funds; 3) nonpartisan and politically neutral; 4) commitment to publishing research findings in the public domain; and 5) ability to set an independent research agenda. In exceptional cases, institutions may be linked to a university, but will need to demonstrate their ability to set an independent research agenda and to manage funds directly." source: International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada (http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-125430-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)

issue: elaborate your own hypothesis and decide which you will follow and why, what solutions would be the best and why. You have to be free from influences, even if total freedom is an illusion, at least you should have the right to question yourself and be critical with others. Sometimes this right is not denied as such, but you have been prevented to do so by your education or even your culture. This is the reason why a good thinker is usually someone who has travelled abroad, been taught in different languages, manipulating thus different concepts, has had access to worldviews that could be taboo in his/her own culture. Such an enlargement of the thought is a necessary condition to get enough intellectual independence in order to become a valuable asset for a think tank.

This challenge is not only a personal one; it is also a common challenge for Southern countries as such. Too often, these countries suffer from a national education system only focused on mass education; they have no means to develop a high-level education system, as in developed countries. This is why most of their brilliant students move to America or Europe where they can have access to a better system. Unfortunately, too few students come back to their country; either because they have been offered jobs abroad the conditions of which do not exist in their own country; or because they don't want to cope with an authoritarian regime or a repressive society after they have discovered freedom in democratic countries, especially the freedom to stand against the mainstream. The development of high-level think tanks in the Southern countries could be an opportunity to slow down this brain drain.

Regarding the think tank as an institution, its independence is an even more difficult issue.

The first and most evident constraint weighing on independence is the funding source. The public powers fund most of the 1st generation-type think tanks, which are consequently submitted to some censure, like the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) for example.

In this model, the national hierarchy can exert strong various pressures on the think tanks' independence, even if this one has a private status. One of the most underground pressure is to impose a "politically correct" way of thinking by introducing traditional or obeying thinkers in a given think tank. This is particularly easy in the nepotism-based or authoritarian systems where people can be appointed with no or insufficient required competences but with a strong loyalty to the system. An interesting but not always sufficient countermeasure is the creation of a "jury of recruitment" whose members are chosen by the managers of the think tank, not by its administrative or political sponsors. Political parties are also very keen on placing one of their members in such think tanks thus being able to influence the national policy recommendations. And their members are much more difficult to identify by a recruiter or even a jury. This politicization of the think tanks is not the least of the constraints restricting their independence.

Most of the time international cooperation is a good formula to ease these pressures. However, it can also create biases thus turning out to be a threat for objective work.

This is particularly true in the North-South cooperation through two opposite attitudes. One may be called the 'Myth of the White God', the other 'the Demonization of the North'.

The Myth of the White God, usually developed in countries where colonisation has been considered as beneficial, drives developing countries thinkers to adopt any Northern model as the best one. Most of the time, they do not even question the fact that these models (laws, economic regulation, technological development, administrative organisation) could not be adapted or adaptable to their local situation. These models have worked in specific parts of the world as the result of a combination of specific conditions: culture, diachronic and synchronic history, common social knowledge and state of advancement. Should one of these conditions be changed and the result is no longer warranted. This inclination to blindly follow the very same way of development as the North often prevents the South from innovating and finding its own better way to develop itself, without reproducing the errors of the North.

Demonization of the North is the exact opposite. It would often come from difficult relationships with Northern experts being contemptuous of their Southerner colleagues, illustrating thus the colonialist images of the 'good Westerner trying to civilize the Salvages'. In some former colonized countries, crystallisation of the cultural identity has been made possible only by the collective rejection of the North; some religions have also contributed to a blind reject of it because they felt endangered by the Western way

of thinking. Demonization of the North has not only sociological rationales but also psychological motivations, such as envy and frustration.

One extreme is not better than the other. If the South wants to break the vicious circle of the dominant-dominated relationship between the North and the South, there is no better solution than developing a cultural identity, grounded in deeply-rooted local values and wisdom, and mixing self-awareness and respect/tolerance of the Other. The youngest elite of the North seems to have already begun this cultural revolution; yet, to be effective, the Southern elite should quickly do the same as both movements should be matched up.

Within this situation, the South think tanks can obviously play a significant role in banishing these extreme positions and comforting and spreading a well-balanced attitude towards the North models and contributions. It would be an evident sign of their intellectual independence.

Conclusion

The challenges nested in the world ahead, demand the best of the human species intellectual capabilities. Being part of the knowledge-producing system along with universities and R&D centres, the think tanks are often neglected. And yet they are potentially one of the best fitted places to develop such a forward-looking intelligence.

However their current form is not sustainable and they need to evolve towards what could be a third generation of think tanks with private status, with both secure and various funding, dedicated regulations and, above all, independent, objective high quality researchers.

Developing countries' think tanks have no more time to become modern: they must leapfrog into post-modernity, the age of complexity, information economy and knowledge society.

They can be helped by dedicated initiatives such as the 'Think Tank Initiative' implemented by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC)¹¹.

However, the most determinant criteria will be their own capability to think independently from submission or hate, from foreign models and theories, from local or cultural influent mainstreams.

¹¹ "This is a new, multi-donor program dedicated to strengthening independent policy research institutions – or “think tanks” – in developing countries, enabling them to better provide sound research that both informs and influences policy." source: http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-125430-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

Like sustainable development, the intelligence needed for the 21^o century lays on three pillars: foresight, multidisciplinary (synthesis) and universal wisdom. In this perspective, developing countries could lead the way...

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