

“THE POLITICS OF INDEPENDENCE

Can government think tanks act independently? ”

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Preface

Many Scholars argue that the credibility of results and research findings generated by a think tank is directly correlated with its independence from any institution; especially governments, pressure groups or political parties. In other words, think tanks that are institutionally and financially independent or with separate legal identities from any affiliation, are perceived as more credible.

In general, the paper is an attempt to tackle the politics of independence, with special focus on think tanks. It places the previous argument under partial skepticism and argues that the notion of independence should not be only correlated with “financial independence”, which is only one aspect of the notion. For this reason, the paper presents a conceptual framework for the notion, by offering a suggested list of determinants, including but not limited to financial independence. It is worth mentioning that the list of determinants cannot be considered as mutually exclusive.

After attempting to conceptualize for the notion of independence, the paper tries to investigate whether government affiliated models of think tanks can act and operate independently or not. This investigation is further elaborated and tackled by presenting a case of a government affiliated think tank; The Egyptian Cabinet Information and Decision Support Center...

1. Governments' Perception Towards Non State Actors

1.1 *The Traditional Paradigm*

“There is nothing a government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult”. For decades, the observation of John Maynard Keynes had been held true. Governments didn't accept to be challenged by rivals. The state had been the main executer of services, and the main designer of public policies. In short, the decision making process had been entirely a “state affair”.

1.2 *The Paradigm Shift*

With public policy issues growing more complex, the need for insightful and comprehensive analysis of the issues has become vital for governments. Moreover, evidence-based policy has become a major part of many governments' approaches to policy making. This has led to a paradigm shift by governments towards being more pragmatic by allowing a critique voice from non state actors including policy advice institutions, better known as “Think Tanks”. The proliferation of think tanks in the past two decades, as centers of knowledge production and accumulation, has created a highly competitive environment, in which think tanks became the driving engines for policy making in their states. Moreover, the advent of the 24/7 media and the internet have helped raise the profile of think tanks, enabled them to reach a larger more diverse audience and disseminate their publications more cheaply¹. A number of factors contributed to the paradigm shift in governments' perception towards the role of think tanks. One factor is the close relationship

¹ James McGann, “Scholars, Dollars and Policy Advice”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2004, p.5

between knowledge and power. Governments seek to maintain power; accordingly, they will search for knowledge to maintain their power and influence over their societies. They will search for centres for knowledge production which can provide sincere evidence-based advice and innovative policy options. The “*Modernising Government White Paper*”², issued by the office of the UK cabinet, stated that government policy must be evidence-based, properly evaluated and based on best practice. Related to this factor, several governments realized the critical gap between the academic world on one side and the political realm on another side. This realization necessitated the rise of think tanks to act as “bridging organizations”.

A second factor is the international transparency and visibility of governments worldwide. Greater demand for knowledge by governments cannot be understood in isolation from the political and international context within which governments operate. This means that governments are now more visible by the world and by their own peoples. They are continuously judged according to their performance on a range of indicators. This fact tends to put more pressure on governments to adopt policies that have been proven to work elsewhere³. In light of that, governments would prefer searching for in-house advisory bodies to scan best practices from across the globe and tailor it to the needs of the countries, rather than to have such practices imposed on them in a conditional manner. This could be understood in light of the premise advocated by the economist Joseph Stiglitz which calls for “scanning globally, and reinventing locally”.

² UK Cabinet office, “Modernizing Government”, white paper, London, 1999

³ < http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Bibliographies/Research_Policy/Documents/Mulgan_2003.pdf>, last accessed 13/12/2008, 22:00 GMT

A third factor is the change in the nature of the general public which governments seek to serve. Today's citizens are far more educated, more knowledgeable, than their predecessors. As they use scientific knowledge and evidence of all kinds in their own lives, they expect the same from their governments⁴. Moreover, one may argue that if a government wants to “lie” on its citizens, it would never want to “lie” on itself.

A major feature of this paradigm shift is that it poses pressure on think tanks; as the latter are supposed to challenge the conventional wisdom, the standard operating procedures by governments and the business as usual of bureaucrats and policymakers.

2. Think Tanks Effectiveness

The rise of the influential role currently played by think tanks, as key policy actors, has created a debate about the main prerequisites or requirements for attaining an effective and a high profile think tank. Some scholars argued that the key factor is the ability of such institutions to bring knowledge and advocacy into the decision making process of their governments, other arguments advocate for their ability to create out – of the box policy options for solving complex policy problems, a third set of arguments perceive the ability of these institutions of facilitating public understanding of domestic and international policy issues as the key factor for their excellence.

The rise of the previously mentioned arguments has been coupled lately by a rise of a controversial debate on another prerequisite for defining a credible think tank; which has been the prerequisite of “independence”.

⁴ Ibid

3. Conceptualizing Independence

The Oxford dictionary defines the term “*Independent*” by the ability to act freely and to show free thought. Institutional wise, this implies the right of institution to function according to its own normative and organizational principles without external interference. For a think tank, this refers to the degree of self-regulation with respect to matters such as methods of conducting research, recruitment policy for staff, internal workflow and the management of resources; whether generated from public or private sources. The notion of “Independence” is perceived as a core value for the effective functioning of think tanks. There had been many attempts on conceptualizing for the concept. Most of these were focusing on the financial aspect of independence, while linking this factor with credibility and prestige. In this section, the paper aims at suggesting a list of determinants including but not limited to the financial determinant. It is worth noting that such list should not be regarded as exclusive, but there might be additional factors or determinants.

The suggested conceptual framework includes 10 determinants that can be categorized under two main categories. The first category; includes suggested determinants for the *institutional* aspect of the notion of independence. The second includes suggested determinants for the *intellectual* aspect of this notion.

3.1 Determinants of Institutional aspect of Independence

3.1.1 Funding Modality

Funding is a key factor that affects think tanks’ ability to think and act freely. Think tanks’ experts argue that the critical factor behind financial independence is to diversify the sources of funding to include – in addition to the public

funding - the private sector funding, as well as the civil society one. Some think tanks rely on innovative methods for diversifying funding, such as imposing membership fees, selling their publications, as well as offering trainings and technical assistance programs. Another successful model of diversifying funding is the “endowment model”. In several cases, this model proved efficient in providing long term financial stability as well as maintaining independence of think tanks.

The endowment model suggests that the core funding for think tanks would be generated from the annual interest yielded by the endowment beneficiaries including corporations, civil society...etc⁵. Several think tanks rely on endowments for securing their funding. These include US think tanks such as Carnegie Endowment Center for International peace and Brookings, King Prajadhipok Institute at Thailand, and Center for Social and Economic Research (CASE) at Poland and others.

Despite this fact, The European model of think tanks, which is in contrast with the American one, highlights the importance of long term funding schemes, even if the funding was entirely governmental. The rationale behind that is protecting the think tank from seeking corporate funding which might affect its intellectual independence.

In relation to the scheme or modality of funding, another factor should be considered which is the allocation of the financial resources by a think tank. Certain critical benchmarks have to be met in order for think tanks funding to

⁵ OECD high level seminar, “Endowments for Think Tanks in Developing Countries: What role for Private Foundations and Official Donors?”, Paris, April 2008, accessed at <<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/57/38/40234540.pdf>>, 17/11/2008, 18:00 GMT

be efficient⁶. Moreover, accountability for the use of financial resources is a must.

3.1.2 A Clarified Mission Statement

Several think tanks declare in their mission statement that they are 'independent', 'non-profit' or 'non-partisan' to protect them against outside pressures. Despite the fact, that declaring independence in a think tank's mission statement might seem cosmetic, yet, one may argue that the mission statement is still the first step to clarify that a think tank does not have any commercial or partisan interest and seeks working for the public interest, whatever their understanding to the public interest⁷.

3.1.3 Internal Management Autonomy

The core aspect of independence is “self governance and non intervention”. An independent institution is the one capable of managing the internal workflow of the organization in an autonomous matter. This includes defining its own regulations, work processes, hierarchies, as well as its recruitment and appraisal policies. This value can also be applied on the case of think tanks.

3.1.4 An Enlarged Circle of Beneficiaries

A think tank should be perceived as a “public good”. It should have a “dual” role; advising policy makers on one hand, and educating the public on the other hand. The fact that some think tanks have close linkages with public institutions is perceived by some experts - mainly the advocates of the

⁶ James G. McGann, “Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the United States”, Routledge Research in American Politics, 2007, p.48

⁷ EPIN Think Tanks Task Force Meeting, “Ideas, Influence and Transparency – What Could Think Tanks Learn and Contribute?”, Brussels, October 2005, accessed at <http://www.epin.org/pdf/Boucher_Taskforcereport_Oct2005.pdf>, 20/12/2008, 17:00 GMT

American model of think tanks - as compromising independence and credibility. Despite, the fact that this might be true in some cases, it is widely agreed that think tanks need to have some engagement with government officials if they are to succeed in influencing policy making processes. It is the think tank duty to achieve the balance between being able to influence public policy, and not being manipulated or monopolized by public organizations. In other words, think tanks need to work on the principle of “influencing the influentials but – certainly - without being influenced by them”, because this is the *raison d’être* for their existence.

Beside that, think tanks should maintain lines of communication with other influential players including media, civil society, and the general public for creating a societal debate concerning ongoing issues. Enlarging the circle of the think tank’s beneficiaries would be an asset, for it implies that it doesn’t advocate for a certain beneficiary at the expense of the other.

3.1.5 Regulated Linkages with Donor / International Organizations

Maintaining cooperation with international organizations is crucial. It allows for the exchange of best practices. However, to avoid any influence from donor organizations on the research conducted by think tanks, some regulations can be clearly identified. One suggestion is that donors’ contributions can be targeted at strategic and long term support for think tanks. This implies that a think tank may accept donors’ support in the form of capacity building initiatives such as training programs, study visits, conferences or lectures by prestigious consultants, rather through financial contribution. This can ensure integrity and neutrality.

3.1.6 Accountability and External Auditing

The notion of independence should be understood in relation to the notion of accountability, as one of the crucial principles of good governance. There are several means that could help in this sense. One mean to ensure accountability is the “beneficiaries or client satisfaction surveys”. Other means may include diagnostic technical assistance missions by recognized experts. These can provide in-depth analysis, diagnosis and recommendations for institutional effectiveness as well as research products quality. Major advocators for this type of missions are UNDP and European Commission.

3.2 Determinants of Institutional aspect of Independence

3.2.1 Agenda Setting

Think tanks are usually in charge of setting their own research agendas internally. One of the main factors for think tank’s intellectual independence is setting its own research agenda without external interference. Research agendas should be designed in an open atmosphere and should reflect the policy problems confronting the society. It should be citizen- centered, and preferably addressing long term and chronic policy issues. For ensuring concrete independence, agenda setting could be designed in a participatory approach and could reflect, beside the views of the researchers, the diverse points of view of influential actors of the society; including but not limited to decision makers, civil society, media, private sector and the general public. In some cases, think tanks may conduct opinion polls to guarantee this participatory approach for agenda setting.

3.2.2 Academic Excellence and Quality Assurance

Academic excellence should be a core value for an efficient think tank. In other words, referring to evidence – based methodology and claiming respect to the academia research criteria is a key factor in assuring the independence of think tanks.

There are several means for attaining academic excellence, these can include the following:

- Seeking intellectual diversity: this can materialize by recruiting distinguished researchers and consultants well known for their academic merit.
- Creating necessary governance and accountability mechanisms for think tanks: which can include – but are not limited to – establishing a scientific committee bringing together a variety of specializations to ensure efficient methodology and accuracy of findings. Other mechanisms may include the creation of a board of trustees from different affiliations and backgrounds to maintain intellectual integrity and neutrality.
- Refereeing or Peer Reviewing: which is the process of subjecting a research work to a community of experts in a given (and often narrowly defined) field, who are qualified and able to perform impartial review. This process encourages researchers to meet the standard criteria of academic research of their discipline and prevents depoliticized research, the dissemination of irrelevant findings, and personal views.

3.2.3 Advisory firewall: “The Revolving Door Policy”

Assigning a community of advisors including – but not limited to – Ex. Ambassadors, officials, civilians,...etc can be regarded as a firewall against

involvement or influence from the think tank's board or top management in its research efforts. The "revolving door policy" proves successful in the American political context; where public officials move to act as think tankers after their retirement on one hand, and think tankers are often nominated for official posts on another hand. Examples, in this context, include Madeline Albright, former secretary of state, had once headed the Center for National Policy⁸. Other examples also include Richard Hass and Denis Ross.

3.2.4 Openness and Publicity for Image Building and Prestige

The reputation and prestige of the founders and the current executives of a think tank play an important role in guaranteeing an image of a serious and independent research. Some criteria can attain the reputation and prestige of a think tank. This can include publicizing the research findings of the think tank in prestigious reviewed journals and availing it to the community at large. Moreover some think tanks have their affiliated journals or magazines or even radio programs. Examples include the Cato journal – Cato Institute, and RAND journal of economics – RAND Corporation. In addition to that, other criteria may include organizing outreach events such as conferences, media appearances, seminars and workshops that engage the public and the media into an effective societal debate about policy issues, receiving prestigious awards and certificates that emphasize the high quality of the research, and finally encouraging public figures and credible authors to write and contribute in any of the think tank's publications, this can add weight and create value added for its research outputs.

⁸ < <http://www.state.gov/s/p/rem/15506.htm>>, last accessed 3/1/2009, 18:00 GMT

4. Think Tanks' Modalities: An Insight on the Notion of Independence

Although think tanks were originally introduced and developed at the United States of America, in the last two decades, think tanks have been spread across the globe due to a number of factors. One factor is the rising wake of democratization. Many countries moved towards applying the major principles of good governance thus great efforts have been exerted towards ending government monopoly on information and solutions. Another factor was that most governments realized the opportunities and challenges driven by globalization. Utilizing the globalization opportunities and coping with its challenges necessitated the presence of think tanks as policy advice institutions. A third factor is the complexity of policy problems which increased the demand for timely and concise information and analysis “in the right form at the right time”.

Against this background, think tanks may differ from one region to another and from one context to another. There hasn't been a single pattern or an “international benchmark” for a model of a think tank. Despite this fact, several think tanks can be categorized and classified under one of the following widely spread models.

4.1 The American Model of Think Tanks

As previously stated, the term and function of "think tank" was first introduced in the United States of America. According to the statistics of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, USA poses 1776 think tanks from a total 5080 think

⁹ James McGann, “The Global “Go To Think Tanks”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2007, p.6

tanks worldwide¹⁰. The US model of think tanks is characterized by a highly diversified research agenda that covers a broad range of policy issues on both the domestic and international fronts. In this model, think tanks are regarded as relatively autonomous organizations with separate legal identities and financial independence from government¹¹. Accordingly, most US think tanks are *non profit* organizations that are privately supported. They enjoy the special tax status of non profit organizations¹². This feature provides an impetus for policy entrepreneurs, political leaders, private sectors and aspiring office holders to create and establish think tanks to support and advance their institution's particular ideological and political perspectives on domestic and foreign policy issues.

Although most US think tanks are not affiliated to government, think tanks are concerned with maintaining lines of communications with the US government to assure the public influence on policy makers. Most prominent US think tanks include: Heritage foundation, Rand corporation, Brookings...etc

4.2 The European Model of Think Tanks

There has been a significant rise in the role of think tanks at the European level especially after the establishment of the European community.

The main feature of the European model of think tanks is tackling a European focused research agenda. Their funding modality varies from being publically financed such as those funded by the European Commission, to privately financed think tanks through foundations and individual donations. In other

¹⁰ Ibid, p.3

¹¹ Diane Stone, "Think Tanks and Policy Advice in Countries in Transition", a paper presented at the Asian Development Bank Institute Symposium: "How to Strengthen Policy-Oriented Research and Training in Vietnam", August 2005, p. 3

¹² James G. McGann, "Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the United States", Ibid, p. 45

words, the European model allows for the existence of both types of think tanks; *public and private owned* think tanks.

This can be explained in the context that European think tanks have much smaller budgets and staff when compared to the American ones with large teams and budgets¹³. Most prominent EU think tanks include: Center for European Policy Studies, BRUGEL...etc.

4.3 The Asian Model of Think Tanks

The Asian model of think tanks is a unique one for it combines a variety of features and attributes. In this model, it is difficult to theorize a set of common features for the think tank sector, because environments vary from one state to another.

Several Asian think tanks are in close interaction with governments, or with individual political figures. It is likely to find a “*Government Built-in*” type of think tanks. This can partially be understood in light of the fact the Asian region is home of three of the four remaining communist states in the world.

However, with the variety of attributes enriching this region, one may draw some lines of differences between Asian models.

In **China**, for example, given the massive size of the population and the economy, there is a potential for a significant think tank community¹⁴. Several Chinese think tanks maintain close patron – client relations with certain political leaders¹⁵. Furthermore, most of them are *government sponsored*. In terms

¹³ < http://www.notre-europe.eu/uploads/tx_publication/Semi22-en.pdf>, last accessed 29/11/2008, 18:00 GMT

¹⁴ James G. McGann and Erick C. Johnson, “ Comparative Think Tanks, Politics and Public Policy”, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2005, p.145

¹⁵ Diane Stone and Andrew Denham, “ Think Tank Traditions: Policy Research and the Politics of Ideas”, Manchester University Press, 1998, P. 141

of funding modality, affiliation to the government can be understood, since the benefits of china's large economy are greatly diminished by the size of the population.

In **India**, as another Asian model, despite the increased poverty level and the low GDP per capita, it is impressive that India is home to so many independent think tanks. Self reliance is the core value and the driving force of India's vibrant civil society including think tanks. This result from the fact that the political landscape in India has become a more welcoming environment for NGOs including think tanks which allows the latter to be politically active.

In **Japan**, as a multi party democracy, it is expected to see a thriving think tank community. Despite this fact, there is still a close relationship between corporate and government elites which is thought to have resulted in the "Japanese miracle".

Generally speaking, a regional analysis of the think tank sector in Asia shows that Asian democracies demand more policy advice services from non governmental entities such as think tanks or university affiliated research centers. Whereas communist regimes demand policy advice from within government circles¹⁶.

4.4 A holistic View for the Notion of Independence

To analyze and build on what was introduced in terms of different models of think tanks, their relations with governments and their financial independence; one can realize that there had been contextual factors behind the different models of think tanks. Such contextual factors included the political sphere, the

¹⁶ James G.McGann and Erick C. Johnson, Ibid, p. 188

availability of sustainable funding, the type of research agenda, and the historical background....etc

These factors shaped the unique model of each community. However in all cases, the three widely spread models produced sound policy advice institutions and think tanks that are well known for their effective contribution to the public policy support for their respective governments; regardless being government affiliated think tanks or a private ones.

In this context, one could conclude that the credibility and prestige of the various models of think tanks cannot be only dependent on being institutionally or financially affiliated with governments. Generally speaking this could be a very sound factor, but cannot be considered the only one. Another crucial factor is about the ability of such institutions to provide *home grown policy solutions* relevant to the special context and the policy problems of their communities.

5. The Think Tanks' Marketplace at the Developing Countries: Challenges for Independence

Prior to 1970, think tanks were predominantly a Euro-American phenomenon. The proliferation of think tanks in the developing world and especially the Arab region has been a new phenomenon.

Reasons behind the late rise of think tanks in these countries were derived from the fact that such countries suffered from the spread of bureaucracies, lack of transparency and openness, centralization of policy making and concentration of power which often resulted in retaining monopoly on policy advice.

In light of that, the term "Think Tank" hasn't been well rooted in most of the developing world and especially within the Arab region. What always existed were research centers that were originally created for purely academic purposes

that contributed to policy advice on an ad-hoc basis and on individual rather than institutional basis.

5.1 Factors explaining weak Presence and Influence of Think Tanks

There are several factors that could explain the weak presence and influence of think tanks in developing countries.

These include the following:

- The prevalence of corruption, poor control of public funds, lack of accountability and abuses of human rights created an environment which has been hostile to efficient performing think tanks¹⁷. Moreover, one may argue that most developing countries had been subject to colonial periods in their lifetimes which impeded think tanks from growing.
- R&D and capacity building efforts in such countries have always remained underfunded¹⁸. This was a result of the low demand on policy research in such countries. The type of funding that exists could be considered as unsecured because it is usually paid per project or on short term periods. This has altered the focus and diminished the capacity of many think tanks to operate efficiently. Moreover, lack of commitment to long term funding have seriously impaired the role of think tanks as agents of change and innovation.
- Generally speaking, think tanks face the problem of attracting competent researchers. This problem is more witnessed in the case of developing countries because of funding difficulties and lower salaries. Research

¹⁷United Nations Economic and Social Commission URL: <<http://www.unescap.org>>, last accessed 15/11/2008, 10:00 GMT

¹⁸ United Nations Conference Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Expert meeting report: “Globalization of R&D and Developing Countries”, Geneva, January 2005, accessed at <<http://www.unctad.org>>, on 22/11/2008, 13:00 GMT

calibers would prefer going to the private sector or migration rather than working for public institutes. This resulted in a ‘brain drain’ or ‘human capital flight’ in these countries.

In light of the previous features, the existence of think tanks can be considered as something rare in such countries. Moreover, in case of their existence as policy advice tools, they would be either research centers for academic purposes not policy advice ones, or policy advice centers with limited or poor funding and thus with limited or unrealized influence on policy formulation.

As a result of this context, and because most governments in such countries are witnessing democratic transitions, it would be necessary to have think tanks that can exercise the “advocacy job” for their governments.

From a pragmatic point of view, developing and sustaining a financially independent think tank in such environment would be challenging, due to the previously mentioned constraints. In such case, a gradual approach could be beneficial. One suggestion is that - as an entry point – governments in developing countries can act as an “incubators” for think tanks at the early stage of their development. At a later stage, and with the spread and the rise of influence of such think tanks in their countries, they can later exist independently as “standalone” entities.

5.2 The Rationale for “Government Affiliated” Think Tanks in developing countries

The need for sincere policy advice to bridge the advocacy gap in developing countries could be the driving force behind the mandate of acting as a government think tank. The other crucial factor is the challenge of securing long term sustainable funding. This challenge hindered the appearance of think

tanks and policy institutes in developing countries that focus on policy solutions rather than academic research. This happened because the tendency was; then, to over-focus on prescription of policy problems, and undermine description and foresight efforts for such problems, since the latter require sustainable sources of funding.

In order to grow into a mature and well established entity, think tanks in developing countries are in need for sustainable funding which may be drawn from governments at the early stage of their development. Several reasons can explain this fact. Firstly, there would be an expected increase in staffing arrangements including payment of fixed salaries, employees-related taxes, and provision of support for staff training and professional development...etc. Secondly, substantial fixed costs related to facilities will eventually arise including rent, utilities, equipment and infrastructure. Thirdly, there would be an increase in the business development costs such as time allocated for research, data collection, data processing and analysis¹⁹. Fourthly, many think tanks depend on donations for their funding. The major challenge is that think tanks will be expected to advocate donors' specific agendas and priorities; this will negatively affect their independence and credibility.

These direct and indirect costs are vital inputs to the long-term sustainability of a think tank.

In light of the previously mentioned factors, and with the paradigm shift in governments' perception towards think tanks, the model of government affiliated think tanks began to develop and proliferate, especially in developing countries, where sustainable funding is obsolete.

¹⁹ Raymond J. Struyk, "Managing Think Tanks", The Urban Institute, 2006, p. 228

6. The Information and Decision Support Center: The Government Think

Tank: *Financial Vis a Vis Intellectual Independence*

Egypt is amongst the developing countries that faces an “advocacy gap” in the decision making process. The role of think tanks is not visible in the Egyptian Society. The most dominant institutes are academic research oriented, mostly affiliated to universities.

According to the **NIRA World Directory** of think tanks - which provides a systematic introduction to the world's prominent and innovative public policy research institutes – Egypt has three public policy research institutes that can be better described as “Think Tanks”. These include: Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, the Egyptian Center for Economic Studies, and The Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC)²⁰.

In light of that, this section will be tackling IDSC as a case study of a think tank that is institutionally and financially affiliated with the Egyptian Government, however argues that despite this fact, there are many factors that can ensure its intellectual independence, which is considered the most crucial factor to create credibility and proper functioning.

6.1 IDSC in a Nutshell

Despite being directly affiliated to the H.E the Prime Minister, indeed, Egypt has embarked upon a process of reforms leading to more openness and free expression. The rationale for IDSC’s existence is to bridge the “advocacy gap” that existed in the Egyptian policy making process, by trying to bring knowledge and evidence based policy options into the decision making process.

²⁰ NIRA’s World Directory of Think Tanks, accessed at <<http://www.nira.or.jp/network/abroad/nwdtt/link/IDX2/index2.html#Egypt>>, last accessed 29/11/2008, 17:00 GMT

Using a multi-disciplinary research approach, IDSC aims at supporting the Egyptian decision maker in adopting its ambitious reform plan. Moreover, IDSC doesn't aim at serving the cabinet of ministers as the only beneficiary, but extends to serve other societal beneficiaries as well; including research centers, civil society, private sector, media and the general public and international organizations.

6.2 Applying the Suggested Conceptual Framework of Independence

According, to the suggested list determining factors of independence, which had been introduced at an earlier stage of the paper, one may try to classify the status of IDSC in terms of the issue of independence.

Concerning the determinants of *institutional* independence, the results can be illustrated as follows:

1. Funding Modality

IDSC is primarily funded by the government. The funding modality is targeted at long term strategic research that allows for both prescriptive and descriptive analysis. In addition, it assures the sustainability of the institution.

Furthermore, it is crucial to link funding modality with the issue of accountability. IDSC doesn't receive its funding on an annual basis but rather on a quarterly one, to ensure sound and efficient allocation of funds in conformity with the identified research agenda. Besides that, IDSC is financially held accountable before The Egyptian Central Auditing Organization (CAO)– an independent entity – mandated to monitor and audit on the public and private sectors in Egypt. In case of any violations, unrestricted punitive actions may be taken by the CAO.

2. Clarified Mission Statement

Although IDSC's mission statement does not imply words like 'non-profit' or 'non-partisan', but it explains that the mission of IDSC is to improve the socio-economic well being of the Egyptian society. This clarifies that IDSC doesn't have any commercial interests. Moreover, acting as a government think tank will imply that honest and sincere advice should be provided by IDSC to the government. The paradigm shift has made the Egyptian government more willing and more accepting to an outside voice of critique. The research findings generated by IDSC proves that its mission doesn't aim at justifying the government policies, but more importantly assessing these policies and reflecting the masses' opinion on such policies.

3. Internal Management Autonomy

IDSC enjoys entire autonomy in its operations. Its board of management designs organizational procedures and regulations that are respected by the organization members. It adopts an open recruitment and hiring system purely based on academic merit. Moreover, IDSC encourages innovation within the organization. Staff are encouraged and supported to develop and manage creative projects that create value at the institutional, national and international levels, without any external restrictions or limitations.

4. An Enlarged Circle of Beneficiaries

IDSC serves a broad range of beneficiaries including the cabinet of ministers, the civil society, the private sector, research centers, and academia. IDSC is in a *horizontal* position within the decision support cycle. Its role is not to compete with different organizations, but rather to support them in their endeavor. In

addition to that, IDSC maintains effective lines of communication with the media especially the independent one, to the extent that the indicators provided by IDSC are published on a daily basis in one of the influential independent newspapers in Egypt; “El Masry el Youm”.

Moreover, IDSC acts efficiently as a mentor and consultancy organization for other countries in the Arab region, namely Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Palestine, and Oman. It provides these countries - upon their request - with expertise and insights on developing similar think tanks for supporting their respective governments.

5. Regulated Linkages with Donor / International Organizations

IDSC enjoys partnerships with distinguished international organizations. The support provided by such organizations is usually granted in the form of capacity building and technical assistance missions to avoid influence on the research agenda. A major project in this context had been a technical assistance mission supported by the European Commission. The mission provided a European expert team that conducted an in-depth institutional diagnosis for IDSC, and provided a set of recommendations concerning enhancing its role as an internationally recognized think tank. The support provided by international organizations assures the accomplishment of many projects and activities and allows for the exchange of international best practices. Main international organizations include UNDP, FORD foundation, CIDA, UNICEF, EU Commission, Spanish cooperation, KOICA, JICA, INWENT Capacity Buildingetc.

6. Accountability and External Auditing

Despite the fact that IDSC is a government affiliated think tank, IDSC is held accountable at both the financial and the intellectual levels.

On the financial level, and as previously mentioned, IDSC is financially held accountable before The Egyptian Central Auditing Organization.

On the other hand, the existence of boards of trustees to some of IDSC projects, in addition to relying on refereeing mechanisms for its research products guarantees its intellectual accountability. Moreover, to ensure conformity and exposure to international best practices, IDSC received a technical assistance mission supported by the European Commission to conduct in-depth diagnosis for the institution. The mission brought together a European expert team that provided a set of recommendations towards enhancing the institutional capacities of IDSC as an effective think tank.

Concerning the determinants of *intellectual* independence, results may be illustrated as follows:

1. Agenda Setting

IDSC, independently, sets its policy research agenda on both a supply and demand basis. During the second quarter of each year, IDSC develops its annual work plan with the objective of addressing the priorities of all segments of the Egyptian society. As such, IDSC develops a questionnaire which surveys civil society organizations, intellectuals, think tanks, university professors and political activists to solicit their opinions and proposals regarding public topics and policy issues that needs to be tackled. In this sense, IDSC regards its research agenda as a “public good” and takes into account the trends, priorities, and visions of different strata of the society during its development.

2. Academic Excellence and Quality Assurance

In order to assure objectivity of the research findings and avoid biased results, IDSC relies on different quantitative and qualitative methods for conducting research such as short to medium term studies, policy briefs, indicators, foresight studies,...etc. The aim is not to confuse decision maker, but rather to provide him with insights and sound data to adopt rational decisions.

There are a number of means adopted by IDSC to ensure quality and academic excellence. These include the following:

- Maintaining intellectual diversity: IDSC provides a platform for different intellectuals from a variety of scientific, political and academic specializations to be able to present best alternatives to the decision makers. Moreover, IDSC's hiring policy relies on the academic and scientific merit of both scholars and consultants. These include full timers, part timers and free lancers. By this way, the research outputs don't aim at advancing the government point of view, but rather maintaining evidence- based and scientific findings.
- Developing institutional mechanisms for ensuring scientific excellence: IDSC encourages the establishment of "Boards of Trustees" to many of its projects or departments. These bring together experts and specialists in the field to ensure objectivity and abidance to scientific ethics. Entities comprising board of trustees include IDSC Public Opinion Poll center, and The Social Contract Center.
- Adopting periodical peer reviewing processes: there is a continuous tradition of professional debate concerning IDSC's research products. A continuous

peer review system is applied within the organization by appointing external distinguished referees.

- Assessing and mirroring public opinion reflections on public policies: IDSC incorporates the first poll center in the region using telephone lines. The center is responsible for studying trends of Egyptian public opinion towards domestic and international affairs. The establishment of the poll center came as a result of the strong belief that reflecting the public opinion in the decision making process is the core of achieving evidence – based and independent findings. One of the main assets of the center is conducting periodical assessment polls on the performance of the cabinet. Moreover, polling includes assessing the public opinion towards public policies. Samples of conducted polls included the citizens’ opinion concerning the adoption of in-kind subsidies versus cash subsidies, citizens’ opinion on the delivery of transportation services by the government as well as other polls in this context.
- Producing evidence- based and participatory findings: History proves that IDSC issued several studies, surveys and indicators that did not favor government officials but rather mirrored the reality and reflected a participatory approach in decision support. Samples of the latest ones included the following:

The Egyptian Values Survey:

The survey came in line with the widely acknowledged World Values Survey (WVS) that investigates political and socio cultural change worldwide. The Egyptian survey came up with results that showed a gap between some of the public policies adopted by the Egyptian government and the values and

perceptions of the Egyptian citizens. Examples of the findings reveal that although the government of Egypt has been lately promoting for privatization efforts to cope with the competitive global world, results came that the Egyptian citizens were in favor of public ownership rather than private ones. Moreover, results proved that Egyptians were in favor of more state intervention. IDSC presented the findings of this survey to decision makers in Egypt in an attempt to highlight the importance of considering the perception of the citizens while formulating public policies. This survey created an ongoing societal debate, which is one of the key success factors for the role of a think tank.

The Corruption Perception Index:

In line with the widely acknowledged Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, IDSC developed one of the shocking reports about the perception of corruption practices by the Egyptian citizens. The index investigated the level of administrative corruption among the different governmental institutions and denounced the behavior of some government entities.

Egypt's Vision 2030:

IDSC's Center for Future Studies has been working on formulating a future holistic vision for Egypt by the year 2030. "Egypt's Vision 2030" is perceived as a societal and participatory vision; including the government, civil society, the private sector and the public. The vision depends on the idea of the concerted participation of all society categories in realizing their ultimate national goal; the renaissance of Egypt.

Social Contract:

IDSC's Social Contract Center (SCC), through its participatory operational approach, is mandated to advocate a paradigm shift in the citizens – government relations in an effort to empower and engage the Egyptian society and improve the social participation in the decision making process.

In conclusion, the main driving force behind research conducted by IDSC is purely scientific and evidence based ends.

3. Advisory firewall: “The Revolving Door Policy”

IDSC brings together elite of senior professors, ex. ambassadors and retired official figures into its advisory board. These contribute in bridging the academic realm with the practical one. Moreover, they act as a firewall between the institutions's governing board and its operations.

4. Openness and Publicity for Image Building and Prestige

IDSC gained plaudits nationally and internationally. Many of IDSC's findings and recommendations were adopted by the government. Moreover, IDSC's mission advocated for the right of information access for each citizen and the attainment of the “information justice concept”. It allowed for the disclosure of its information for all society members through its information portal which was awarded as the best portal in Egypt. In addition to that, due to its recognition as a center of excellence in its specialization, several IDSC researchers publish their findings in distinguished peer reviewed journals.

Further more, IDSC was awarded with numerous international, regional and national awards, both on the institutional level, or on the management level.

Due to this reputation, IDSC enjoys strategic relations with worldwide think tanks, and international organizations. The effective outreach strategy adopted by IDSC utilizes a variety of tools; media appearances, conferences and discussion groups that bring together a variety of affiliations and viewpoints with the purpose of creating a societal debate on policy issues.

CONCLUSION

The paper aimed at discussing the politics of independence. The main concern was to discuss the possibility that government affiliated think tanks can act independently.

In doing so, the paper was skeptical about the premise that the notion of independence is entirely correlated to institutional or financial independence. It revealed two facets for the notion; institutional and intellectual facets.

The paper suggested a conceptual framework for each facet by offering a set of determinants that are not exclusive. For the institutional facet, one may categorize the main determinants that constitute this facet as follows: funding modality, clarified mission statement, internal management autonomy, an enlarged circle of beneficiaries, regulated relations with donors and accountability. By these determinants, the paper argues that institutional independence facet goes far beyond financial independence or funding modality to include other critical factors as well. Moreover, the paper suggested another set of determinants for the intellectual facet of the notion which can include: independent agenda setting, academic excellence and quality assurance, maintaining an advisory firewall, in addition to acting openly and publicizing the research findings.

Applying the suggested conceptual framework on a government affiliated think tank; The Information and decision Support Center (IDSC); showed that despite the fact of being part of the government structure and primarily funded through its budget, yet it has been held accountable on both the financial as well as the institutional and management levels. Additionally, it managed to fulfill the suggested criteria of intellectual independence, which helped in creating its image as a center of excellence not only at the national level but at the regional and international levels as well.

The paper also highlighted different models of think tanks' modalities while focusing on the notion of independence. These included the American, European and Asian models. Findings revealed that there hadn't been an "international benchmark" on the issue of independence, but rather proved that financial and institutional independence should be perceived within the specific context and environment surrounding think tanks, especially if applied on the case of developing countries that are in their transition process. In their case, the paper suggested that, due to the economic downturn and financial limitations, think tanks can be incubated by their governments at their early stage of development. At a later stage, and when the organization grows mature and well established then they can separate from governments and act as standalone entities.

Finally, one may argue that the stereotype of undermining the credibility of any government affiliated think tank is an unjust assessment especially when understood in relation with the contextual factors in which the think tank operates. Intellectual independence and academic excellence should be the main appraisal criteria for credibility regardless of affiliation.

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