

## **Independent think tanks and policy process in developing countries**

**A paper presented by:**

**Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid**

**Professor of Political Science, Cairo University**

**Executive director, Partners-in-Development, Cairo University**

This paper is inspired by the experience of a private think tank in Egypt, namely Partners in Development for Research, Consulting and Training. It is divided into four parts, one defining what an independent think tank is, a second explaining the rationale for the presence of think tanks in general and in developing countries in particular, a third suggesting how they operate, a fourth analyzing the difficulties they usually encounter

An independent think tank is defined as an institution engaged in the conduct and dissemination of policy relevant research and is not affiliated to the government, political parties or private sector. It is not also a local chapter of an international or foreign research institution.

What is an independent think tank? For a think tank to be useful, it must enjoy a good degree of autonomy in running its own affairs, setting its research agenda, choosing the best method of conducting research, being subject to little unwarranted restrictions in its search for relevant data, and free in analyzing such data and formulating its own findings as suggested by the data it collects.

This autonomy could be influenced by its subordination to a government, a political party or a business group, who might like both the topics it chooses, or the findings and reporting of its own research, to be to their liking, serving their own immediate interests. Although this does not have necessarily to be the case, as interests of all these actors could be very well served by honest and disinterested reading of reality, the presence of such constraints on autonomy of think tanks is quite likely particularly in countries where

democratic traditions are not well-established, or where some of these actors do not make the distinction between short term interests and long term interests. Ignoring difficulties that could be suggested by a think tank might enable a government, a political party or a private enterprise to weather storms in the short run, at the expense of facing a hurricane in the long term.

The independence of think tanks from political or financial pressures or even public opinion discontent is necessary for think tanks to perform their function of telling the truth to their constituency about the best ways to deal with particular problems. However, apart from constraints originating in the external environment of think tanks, some of the impediments to independence may come from think tanks themselves. Their managers might be eager to gain the backing of their sponsors in order to promote their own private careers or economic interests, and thus color their policy advice in such a way as to please their sponsors by telling them what they think their sponsors like to hear, irrespective of its relation to reality.

There is no easy way out of this dilemma. One way to alleviate such risks is to encourage think tank pluralism. Another way of attaining the same objective is the presence of so-called public interest think tanks. The acceptance of think tank pluralism would entail reliance by policy makers on the advice given by several think tanks, so that no cabinet, ministry, private enterprise, or a political party would be listening only to one voice, but would be used to listening to several voices, even discordant ones and would decide what to do in any particular situation after having analyzed and synthesized all pieces of advice it gets from all these think tanks. The other way is to allow the presence of private think tanks that act more like public interest advocates. Such think tanks are not tied to any particular interest group, but act on the basis of what their managers perceive as public interests. The rationale for the presence of such think tanks is that if think tank pluralism is limited to those tied to particular constituencies, they would end up presenting views

and advice that only reflects interests of their sponsors. Adding public interest think tanks would contribute to widening the range of views that policy makers receive and broaden their perspectives on any policy issue.

Thus, the independent think tanks meant in this brief essay are those private think tanks which are not subordinate to the government, political parties, private enterprises or religious institutions and who do not rely for their funding on any particular donor and act on the basis of their understanding of the public interest in their own countries.

### **How public interest think tanks operate**

One advantage that the presence of public interest banks ensures is that they are free to set their own agendas. Judging by the experience of Partners in Development in Egypt, the agenda is set by a board of trustees which brings together a group of people of varied professional backgrounds and ideological persuasions. It includes a businessman, an official of an international organization and four university professors, three of whom are economists and a fourth is a political scientists. They set the research agenda on the basis of their identification of the major concerns of development policy in their country and the relative importance of these concerns. They endeavor also to broaden the national debate on development in the country by including in the research agenda issues that have escaped the attention of policy makers. They attracted the attention of both the concerned public and policy makers to the crucial importance of the institutional dimension for the success of development, the low economic and social returns to education and shortcoming in the process of decision-making with respect to development projects in Egypt. They were definitely pioneers in launching a debate about the importance of transparency of state budget and accountability of budget officials to civil society.

The most influential in developing countries are those who either enjoy support of international financial institutions, particularly the World Bank, and the European Union, the government and probably also powerful private business groups. They tend to be committed to the neo-liberal philosophy and seem to be incapable of learning the lessons of the present world financial and economic crisis related to the danger of excessive deregulation and "privatization for its own sake". Listening to a dissident voice under such circumstances is more than welcome. While not adopting a dogmatic view on neo-liberal policy recommendations, private public interest think tanks would not be committed in principle to neo-liberalism and would be able to shed new light on the analysis of economic and social problems of developing countries.

The presence of public interest think tanks of this type would also enlarge the circle of those who participate in the national debate on development issues in developing countries. The larger and more influential think tanks are characterized by their elitist character. They recruit usually experts who had their graduate training in the most prestigious universities of developed countries, or those who had been working with international organizations or who assumed leading positions in the government and the private sector. Notwithstanding the valuable knowledge of all these experts, their policy recommendations might reflect more their international socialization rather than profound knowledge of the realities of daily life in their own countries. Even when they possess such knowledge, some aspects of their operational culture might limit their capacity to communicate with public opinion in their own countries. Their conferences and meetings run usually in a foreign language, mostly English. They prefer to invite to their meetings internationally known keynote speakers and hold their conferences in the best 5 star hotels in capital cities. Public interest think tanks would seem in this respect to be better rooted in the national soil. While not ignoring national experts who had foreign training, they appreciate also gifted and competent experts who graduated from national

universities. They are more interested in communicating with public opinion of their own country, using the national language in their activities. Instead of paying high honoraria to invite internationally known "stars" to their conferences, they give pride of place to local figures who excelled in innovating practical and appropriate remedies to problems of their countries.

Such public interest think tanks prefer to seek funding from multiple sources, fearing that relying on funding from one single source would make them, consciously or unconsciously, vulnerable to pressures from this source or would tempt them to set their agenda or to offer policy advice that would meet with the approval of this single donor. They would definitely like to get financial support from local donors, but if such local funding is not forthcoming, they would go to regional and international donors. However, they would be extremely reluctant to seek funding from foreign governments or from institutions which are committed to a rigid ideological vision that they try to impose on all recipient of their aid.

In order to influence the policy process, such think tanks try to involve different categories of stakeholders in their activities. They would invite not only academics to discuss their research findings, but they would invite also senior officials of the government, trade unionists, business people, leaders of political parties and members of parliament, and representatives of relevant civil society organizations. They would take the views of all these parties into consideration when they formulate their definitive policy recommendations.

#### Difficulties encountered by public interest think tanks

Independent think tanks in developing countries encounter a number of difficulties in running their own affairs. Their success depends very much on how they find ways to

deal with these difficulties. They have to try to overcome obstacles in defining the proper legal status, getting access to relevant information, resisting hurdles in conducting research , attracting attention of policy makers, raising sufficient funds for their operations and ensuring their sustainability. The difficulties are all the more greater in countries which lack well-established democratic traditions.

The first difficulty is to choose the right legal status that would ensure maximum autonomy for the think tank. In some countries, the establishment of a think tank does not require formal approval by the government. In a country like Egypt, unless the think tank is established as a private consulting office, it has to be registered with the government. Those who like to found a think tank could choose one of several types of legal entities: an NGO, known as Jam'eyyah which comes under the authority of the Ministry of Solidarity, a civil company, a for profit company and a foundation. The status of a civil company no longer exists since 2002. The status of either an NGO-Jam'eyyah or a foundation would require the approval of the Ministry of Solidarity, while that of a for profit company would require approval by the Investment Authority. None of these types of legal entities is completely free from government interference. However there are degrees of government interference. Thus both NGOs and foundations experience the most extensive interference by a government department, while civil and for profit companies are subject to less stringent rules. The interference by the Ministry of Solidarity does not stop at the seal of approval which signals the start of the think tank's life as a legal entity. But it includes also informing the ministry of the date of the meeting of their general assembly and getting its approval for getting foreign funding. In practice this does not really hinder activities of think tanks, but this formal power could become a menace when the think tank exceeds certain red lines in its critique of government policies. The case of Ibn Khaldoun Center founded by Professor Sa'd Eldin Ibrahim illustrates this type of difficulty which ranges from imprisonment of the President of the

Center as well as a number of staff members and having to defend themselves before the courts in no less than ten legal suits. Professor Ibrahim preferred to stay abroad until such legal battles are settled one way or another.

Founders of Partners in Development chose the status of a for profit company. They were advised that this status ensures the least interference in their work by government authorities, except those of taxation and labor inspection. Partners in Development as a private company are legally bound only to pay taxes and to hire an auditor to report annually to the taxation authority about its finances. The founders who constitute the Board of Trustees of PID receive no compensation whatsoever for their activities .Only members of the administrative staff and commissioned researchers are paid for their work

The second difficulty is to get access to information. In a country like Egypt, a considerable amount of information and data is available in the public domain. However some crucial sources of official data are available only to a limited number of top officials and members of parliament particularly those related to the state of crime in the country and levels of corruption. Despite the fact that such data are contained in annual reports, namely the Report of Public Security and Report of the Administrative Control Agency, such reports are not accessible to research centers and think tanks in the country.

Certain types of data have to be generated by think tanks themselves. Research on popular attitudes requires conduct of polls to find a relatively solid way of assessing attitudes of public opinion towards several issues. But it might not be easy to conduct such polls in Egypt or to engage in survey research in general as approval of a certain government authority is required in order to conduct such research. This is the case in a number of Arab countries including Egypt. In Egypt, unless the think tank is part of a university or a government research center, it will have to obtain the approval of the Central Authority for Public Mobilization and Statistics for the conduct of survey

research. Unless the survey deals with political matters, the approval would be given. However it will take time in some cases the payment of a fee to get this approval. It did happen in the recent past that approval was not given.

Funding of activities of these independent public interest think tanks proved to be a major hurdle that many of them do not succeed in overcoming. Although several developing countries have well-established traditions of voluntary private funding of different types of associations, working in fields of charity, education and health, , willingness to support public interest think tanks has not yet struck deep roots in many of these countries. Most of these think tanks in Egypt rely almost exclusively on foreign funding. Although foreign funding could compensate for the lack of private local funding, it comes also with many problems. One major problem is the public's negative perception of foreign funding for think tanks, seen as a way of serving a foreign agenda. This perception is not entirely unfounded as foreign donors have definitely their preferences and would like to support research activities that fall within their ideological vision of what a good society should be. One could easily get an idea about these preferences by accessing the site of aid donors and reading their own statements of their objectives. Generous foreign funding is available to those who like to work on problems of democracy promotion, economic liberalization and gender issues. While admitting the crucial importance of all these questions; they definitely do not include all relevant issues in developing countries. Those who like to work on issues of collective self-reliance or conditions of peasants for example would have a hard time trying to find foreign funding for these activities. But even when foreign funding is available, access to the promised funding does require government approval, which is not always certain. Even with government approval, there is no guarantee that it would not be used by "nationalist" groups later as a possible charge against those who had obtained the foreign funding.

Getting policy –makers to be familiar with the work of think tanks even in the areas of their formal competence might prove to be the most complex and challenging of all the hurdles encountered by think tanks. Much depends on the willingness of those policy makers to realize that they really need their services and that they could benefit not only by an outsiders' perspective but also by scientific advice to start with. The process of decision-making in developing countries and even in some developed countries is not always a perfect example of a rational decision-making process informed by reliable data, solid studies, and discussion of alternatives and opting for the policy alternative that maximizes benefits and minimizes cost. A decision could be taken simply because it is politically convenient for the decision maker and he would expect think tanks to offer the studies that demonstrate that such decision was indeed the wisest. Or no studies would be required at all since the decision has been already made. On the other hand, think tanks should strive to attain credibility in their work so that it is seen by policy makers as disinterested, motivated solely by concern for public interest. But even the credibility in itself is not enough for think tanks to attract attention of policy makers. Certain communication skills are required as well as establishing good relations with the media. Some think tanks might prefer an indirect way of getting to policy makers by attempting first to attract the interest and support of public opinion. When they succeed in turning an issue to become a matter of public debate, this is bound to get policy makers to take their point of view into consideration.

Finally, managers of these public interest think tanks should strive to ensure their sustainability in the short and long term. This problem is particularly acute for these think tanks which were not founded by an institutional sponsor being a government, a political party or private enterprise. In the short term, they should succeed in making their staff realize that working under such conditions is indeed a challenging and a promising career. In the long term, they should find ways to ensure that their institutions

would outlive them, and that when they retire or disappear, there will be a younger generation –in place- willing to assume such responsibilities.

### Conclusion

All these challenges explain why such public interest private think tanks are rarely found in developing countries. However, this short essay has argued that their presence is indeed necessary in order to contribute to the rationality of decision-making process in these countries. Governments, civil society and private sector in developing countries should support such think tanks if they exist in their own countries and should strive with intellectuals of these countries to help establishing them where they do not exist.