

# The 21st century think tank

In a world where the very definition of a think tank is under scrutiny, ODI claims this title. Like the 5,000 think tanks worldwide – only 1,000 of them in developing countries – ODI is an independent organisation working on policy research and advocacy. In the words of *The Economist*, such institutions aspire to ‘combine intellectual depth, political influence and flair for publicity, comfortable surroundings and a streak of eccentricity’.

The critical function of a think tank is to lock together credible, independent research-based evidence with policy advice and public affairs. Staff need to be ‘policy entrepreneurs’: able to distil convincing policy messages from complex research, to use networks and build policy coalitions, to maintain long-term programmes, and to operate effectively in the highly political environment of policy-making. An international think tank such as ODI faces the additional challenge of acting globally.

There is good evidence that think tanks have been influential in shaping development policy and practice.

That is why donors have invested in them on a large scale. The Africa Capacity Building Foundation alone provided support worth over \$30 million to think tanks and networks in Africa between 2000 and 2005, and it plans to invest the same again before 2010. The Hewlett Foundation has set aside \$100 million for its think tank programme over the next 10 years. However, both of these programmes still focus on the traditional think tank organisational model – organisations hot-housing groups of smart people. But the world, development policy processes and development delivery channels are changing fast. Is this still the right model for think tanks in the 21st century?

National government policies and practices are increasingly influenced by international agreements at regional and global levels. Democratic reform and decentralisation require stronger sub-national policies. While the demand for policy research is growing, privatisation in developed countries and under-investment in higher education in many developing countries has changed the shape of the organisations providing research. The information technology revolution has made research knowledge accessible in most countries, enhancing the ability of researchers and policy advocates to share information.

So what is the best model for an effective think tank in the modern age? A recent discussion at ODI among the heads of a wide range of northern and southern think tanks concluded that there is no one model for an effective international think tank. Funding is a ubiquitous problem. Independence, credibility, partnerships and policy engagement are all essential. Clear core values are absolutely critical: or, as one participant put it ‘what can you not argue for and still be who you are?’

But the niche of the think tank as the place where clever people come up with good policy ideas can be challenged. The emerging paradigm of ‘open innovation’ offers new organisational models. Organisations might actively seek new ideas from outsiders through



## To be effective, the 21st century think tank needs the right network and the right partnerships

formal and informal knowledge networks, or by purchasing intellectual property from others. 'Think nets', for example, do not need large numbers of in-house experts, but invest in developing networks of specialists working in different research and policy spaces with access to different sources and types of knowledge. Expert knowledge is increasingly harvested from search engines, RSS feeds and blogs as well as academic papers and books. Debate on policy options increasingly takes place in web-based virtual spaces as well as in meetings and seminars. This growing virtual and impersonal world of knowledge producers and users provides fertile ground for new forms of think tanks to offer their services.

Finding structures and modes of work that retain intellectual credibility and depth and ensure policy impact in this rapidly changing context will be a real challenge for think tank directors over the next decade. They will need to assemble people with the right competencies, provide the right facilities and incentives to do the right kind of work in the right networks and partnerships, and find a business model that works.

Our work on think tanks over the next few years will explore these issues. As well as studying the interplay between research-based evidence in different policy domains and political contexts, we will examine the role of different actors, including think tanks, civil society organisations, academia and consultancies, and their relations with national and global policy actors. We will look at capacity needs and capacity-development approaches and programmes. In every case, we will stress practical action research with northern and southern partners, aiming to influence policy in practice.

ODI is committed to using the results of this work to inform and enhance efforts to strengthen think tank capacity in the south, and also to help shape ODI itself as an international think tank in the modern age. Lest, as *The Economist* went on to say, think tanks which fail to respond to the new political reality will become known for their 'pedantry, irrelevance, obscurity, poverty and conventionality'.



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