

Indian think tanks: time to look within

What kind of policy research institutions do we need to shape the intellectual foundation on which government policy should rest?

THINKSTOCK

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Recent rankings of global think tanks by University of Pennsylvania have prompted much handwringing. How can only one Indian research organisation be ranked in the top 50? That is a silly question; almost like asking why so few Bharatnatyam dancers are found in Japan. The concept of a think tank was born and nurtured in the US and, not surprisingly, American think tanks lead the list.

I am glad, though, that the question is being asked. It allows for space to discuss the kind of institutions a country like India needs to help shape the intellectual foundation on which its public discourse and public policies rest. History documents that there has never been a dearth of ideas in India. Dadabhai Naoroji's ideas on poverty fuelled the economic ideology of the early Independence movement; B S Ambedkar's razor-sharp vision of social inequality helped shape the Constitution; P C Mahalanobis' commitment to data laid the foundation of statistical systems underlying the planning process in Independent India. Whether modern India is full of people with intellect is not the question. What is at stake is the question: do we need institutions that serve to crystallise these ideas and create synergies that go beyond brilliant but solo thinkers?

I am rather fond of maverick thinkers who rarely manage to find groupthink congenial. Even in the US, the home of top-ranking think tanks, few Nobel Prize winning economists did their seminal work in these think tanks. For that we need to look at University of Chicago, UC Berkeley and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. So if we are looking for another John Nash, James Heckman or Amartya Sen in their early days, there's no reason to worry. I doubt they would thrive in any think tank, including Brookings that heads the list of global think tanks.

In an article written more than 30 years ago, Myron Weiner noted that in India, public policy is made within a political process and implemented by bureaucrats within an administrative process that has an uneasy relationship with this world of ideas. In recent years, the growth of civil society institutions has further complicated this relationship by creating a powerful force that relies on the same ideas to confront the policy process. No wonder otherwise obscure puzzles such as stubborn mal-



nutrition in the face of rising prosperity or growing divergence between National Accounts and National Sample Survey assume so much importance. Empirical evidence to examine diverse viewpoints is often sketchy and the expertise to interpret the evidence is lacking. This is where policy research institutions have an important role to play as translators, crystallisers and provocateurs. A good policy research institute within an environment like this must learn to synthesise ideas from diverse sources, be able to talk to diverse audiences and, most importantly, must have the intellectual and institutional capacity to both provide rapid response to new policy challenges and to anticipate and prepare for these challenges.

In recent years, several commentators have noted that lack of committed core funding and an excessive reliance on specific projects funded by the government or donor agencies reduces the ability of Indian think tanks to develop these capacities. No doubt there is some truth to this. But an even greater challenge lies in identifying institutional mission and internal processes that are commensurate with this mission. In modern India, what should be the mission of a good policy research

institution?

First, it must focus on well-defined substantive areas. "Jack of all and master of none" is certainly not the way to gain excellence. Today, most policy research institutions have such broad mandates that it is hard to know what they do "not" do.

Second, it must decide if its expertise lies in original research or synthesis. As I noted earlier, path-breaking, innovative and highly risky basic research will probably always be the domain of academic institutions in which a professor pays his or her dues through teaching and is free to experiment or "play" with risky ideas without having to justify himself to funders or institute directors. But good policy research institutions conduct both original research - often involving new data collection - and synthesis of work by others. The expertise and institutional structures that go into building these two capacities tend to differ. In the first, tremendous investments in internal human capital are required, in the second, it is possible to co-opt external expertise as needed.

Third, it must decide who its audi-

ence is and for what purpose. Historically, all roads have led to Delhi with policymakers as the ultimate object of affection. But increasingly the growth of civil society institutions offers new opportunities for partnership. However, balancing partnerships with the government and civil society groups and managing the inherent contradictions has been difficult for think tanks. And civil society groups have been so starved of data and analyses that some - like SEWA and Pratham - have begun to set up their own research units. Forging constructive ways of developing these partnerships may widen the reach of policy research.

Fourth, it must decide how to interact with the private sector. Many issues that think tanks address have tremendous private-sector implications - fertiliser subsidies, telecom regulations and infrastructure development, to name a few. The increasing emphasis on public-private partnerships has added a whole new layer of complexity, bringing health and education sectors in this nexus. Retaining independence and credibility while addressing issues of

private sector importance is a major challenge.

Finally, it must decide on whether its job is to present evidence or to go a step further by taking a stand on some issues. In the US, some think tanks are self-consciously conservative (Heritage Foundation), others are liberal (Center for American Progress) while still others do not have clearly specified political leanings (The RAND Corporation). On a related note, when an opinion is expressed, whether that opinion represents institutional point of view or whether it is the opinion of a specific researcher also has tremendous significance. Where an opinion reflects the views of individual researchers, plurality of viewpoints is easier to accommodate than a setting in which all opinions carry institutional imprimatur.

Though funding constraints may limit the options and flexibility institutions have, without self-conscious decisions about some of these issues, no amount of money will build good policy research institutions that serve the needs of modern India.

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