



SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED FINDINGS

Linking Think Tank Performance, Decisions, and Context

A report from Results for Development Institute
and the University of Washington

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Summary of Integrated Findings

Linking Think Tank Performance, Decisions, and Context is a global research project designed to explore the relationship between political, economic, and social contexts and think tanks' strategic behavior and performance. The purpose of the study, undertaken with support of the Think Tank Initiative which is implemented by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), is to inform the general policy debate among donors, think tanks, and researchers concerning the role of context.

The report is structured as follows: we first present an integrated summary of findings from the four linked empirical investigations undertaken by the research team. This is followed by an introduction to the research project and the report. The four technical papers: literature review, case studies, think tanks survey, and focus group discussion and executive director interviews, and their technical appendices follow the introduction.

Introduction: Three Challenges

This research project addresses three main challenges. First, context is thought to affect think tank choices at all organizational decision points, from a think tank's inception, to the design and execution of its research and communication strategy, to its ability to influence policy. However, to date researchers have not clearly defined context and its relationship to think tanks' decision making and policy influence. As a result, context has remained a somewhat murky concept in the empirical literature and its relationship to other factors is not well understood. Without a more comprehensive way of thinking about context and a corresponding framework for undertaking research, think tanks and policymakers risk setting the wrong priorities and overlooking areas in which context may have acute but unrecognized impacts on think tank decision making and influence. The problem is particularly evident in low- and middle-income countries in which less research on think tanks has been carried out.

The second challenge involves discerning the optimal strategy for think tanks given the interaction of several context factors. This research area has attracted little attention. For example, a think tank's strategy for success in a low political competition context may depend on whether the government is able to implement policy effectively. The major consideration here is the impact that the interactions of more than one context factor have on the strategies that think tanks employ. We have sought to account for these interactions by choosing appropriate methods to research them.

Third, our review of the context and effectiveness literature reveals the dominance of small N historical and comparative case analysis methods and far fewer larger N studies of think tanks. Small N studies are routinely used to sharpen description, develop and test concepts, and contribute to theory-building. However, studies using these methods are specific and are difficult to generalize; accordingly, case selection needs to be carried out carefully to ensure proper matching. Large N studies offer the opportunity to make inferences across a much broader set of units, reducing the potential for bias. However, the use of blunt instruments sometimes results in data that lacks sufficient detail to explain complex relationships. The field may now benefit from quantitative studies to verify patterns observed in small N studies and unearth notable differences across a broader range of context environments. The challenge here is to test the feasibility of operationalizing context constructs and develop an adequate sample of think tanks to undertake quantitative study.

The project seeks to resolve these three challenges by contributing research on the three following questions:

What is context and how is it measured? To answer this question, we first examined previous research on context and its measurement in the literature review. We next probed these results and developed some ideas about the relative importance of context factors in our elite interviews. Last, we developed a survey instrument to test the concepts that we identified, and their hypothesized relationships to think tank choice variables.

How does context affect think tanks' decision making and policy effectiveness? To answer this question, we performed in-depth case studies using a comparative case analysis method. We selected cases on the basis of three criteria: the level of political competition, the level of a government's effectiveness (or the ability of a government to implement policy), and whether a think tank seeks to be independent of or affiliated with the government or political parties in its approach to attaining policy influence. The team undertook field research in four countries: Zimbabwe (low government effectiveness, high political competition), Bangladesh (low government effectiveness, high political competition), Vietnam (medium government effectiveness, low political competition), and Peru (medium government effectiveness, high political competition). In each country context, key stakeholder interviews were used to examine the decisions and perceived impact of two think tanks that differed in their strategic approach to policy influence.

How do think tanks evaluate and respond to context in practice? To answer this question, we conducted interviews with think tank executive directors and facilitated focus groups with research and communications staff in two countries to learn how context factors influence their projects and organizational decisions. We also collected their stories; specifically, those stories that detailed projects' successes and the coping strategies that they carried out in challenging political, economic, and social environments.

In subsequent sections, we discuss how we define, categorize and measure context. However, before doing so it is important to discuss our definition of a think tank. One of the more robust results found in the literature concerns the positive association between political and media freedoms, democratic forms of governance, and the proliferation of think tanks around the globe over the past 20 years. Despite the robustness of this finding, another branch of the literature argues that the research used to demonstrate the relationship defines think tanks too narrowly. These researchers assert that broadening the definition of a think tank to include both independent AND organizationally-affiliated think tanks challenges the finding that their proliferation coincides with the spread of democracy.

Our study defines a think tank as an organization that produces research and analysis to improve public policies or to improve policies of concern to the public's wellbeing. We distinguish affiliated and independent think tanks and include both in our definition of a think tank. Affiliated think tanks have or seek formal or informal affiliation with a political party, whereas independent think tanks do not. Both affiliated and independent organizations want to produce rigorous, reliable, and useful research and policy recommendations and remain credible with their respective audiences. However, affiliated think tanks also want to be trusted by the political actors with whom they are affiliated and will often tailor their policy advice to fit those actors' political incentives and constraints. In contrast, independent think tanks often want the policy that maximizes the social welfare, and they want to serve as objective sources of information to all parties and coalitions, not just one.

Defining, Categorizing and Measuring Context

Framing how to think about think tank decisions, capacities, and context was a major conceptual challenge that we addressed in this research. We present the hypothesized relationship between think tank outcomes, characteristics and context in a generic regression format to ensure their clarity. While this framing (described below) provided guidance for the design of the study, results that emerged from the case studies, survey, interviews, and focus group discussions suggested a need for a more accessible framework that depicts the interactions we observed during the course of research. While the underlying structure remains the same, we present our refined thinking in our study framework (Figure 1.1). For the purpose of elaborating our thinking, we describe both the regression model and the framework below.

Regression Model for Defining how Context and Outcomes Relate

For all think tanks i in country s :

$$Outcome_{is} = f(characteristics_i, context_s, characteristics_i \times context_s, error_i)$$

Where $Outcome_{is}$ is any observable policy outcome; $characteristics_i$ is a vector of think tank attributes and choice variables including size, staff composition, and strategy, etc; $context_s$ is exogenous country-level political, economic, and social factors; the term $characteristics_i \times context_s$ captures the interaction of a think tank's strategy and choice with context, for example, the interaction of political competition with a think tank's strategy; and $error_{is}$ is an error term.

In the simplified, general equation above, measurable policy outcomes are shown on the left hand side. There are multiple outcomes because think tanks can influence policy in a range of ways. For example, think tanks may: influence policy discussion by framing the substantive issues and questions in the policy debate; change how policy is implemented by contributing evaluation tools and analysis; or impact how policy is adopted by contributing an optimal policy solution. It is important to capture the variation in these outcomes. It is also important to note that differences in the ability of think tanks to achieve an outcome may depend on country context, the think tank's own decisions or abilities, or both.

To reach success in any of these outcomes, think tanks need to organize their available resources in the most productive ways, and learn how to respond to context factors that are mainly, or entirely, beyond their individual control.

The terms on the right hand side of the equation describe three categories of factors likely to affect the ability of a think tank to influence policy. First, there are endogenous variables. These are choices made by the think tank, for example, the quality and size of its staff, research areas of focus, and its origins. The second category consists of exogenous variables. These factors are determined by forces beyond the think tank's sphere of influence. For example, political or party competition, the role of donors, and country level of economic development have all been observed by think tanks to impact their ability to influence policy.

The third category captures how think tank choices interact with exogenous context to affect think tank outcomes. For example, suppose we have two think tanks in a country subject to flooding from (an exogenous) rise in global sea level. Each may choose to pursue a global warming research

agenda, but differences in their individual context may affect their ability to reach success. Suppose we have two cases. In the first, the think tank pursues the research agenda because its outside funder supports research on global warming. In the second case, the think tank pursues the topic at the express request of a government Minister. The ability of each think tank to impact policy may differ depending on these circumstances. While this is an oversimplified example, it usefully demonstrates some of the complex interaction we expected to observe in think tank decisionmaking. This interaction also makes the research task more complex. This is because correlation in the terms on the right hand side leads to bias when standard regression methods (i.e. OLS) are used.

A New Framework for Conceptualizing Context

The regression framework formalizes the hypothesized relationship between think tank policy outcomes, choice variables, and external forces, and captures both the individual variation in the think tank as well as the variation in the country-level context in which it operates, and their interaction. However, it has several major limitations.

The largest limitation of the regression relates to endogeneity. Defining and ascertaining the impact of exogenous factors, those determined wholly or mainly outside of the think tank's influence, is the main focus of this study. Specifically, we want to understand the effect of context on a think tank's policy influence while making sure to control for individual differences between think tanks, such as size, staff composition, or strategy. Yet, because context is likely to be correlated with a think tank's choices and strategies, all coefficients will be biased using a standard ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Research methodologies need to account for this complexity in order to establish a causal relationship and inform donors' and think tanks' policy decisions. Although we do not present causal evidence here, the project team addressed these research complexities in three ways.

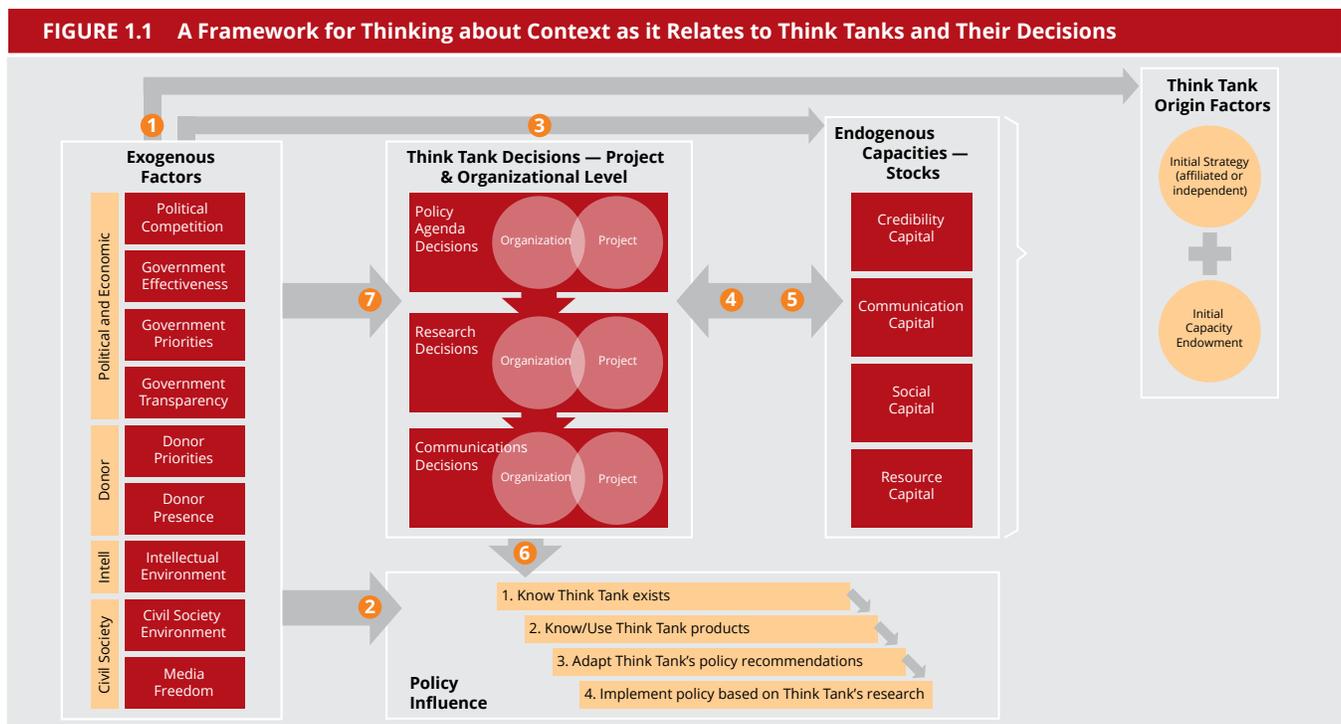
First, we reviewed the literature with this framing concept in mind and developed a system by which to categorize endogenous and exogenous factors to ensure clarity in the proposed definitions and relationships. Second, following our

case analysis method, we selected two think tanks in each country, which enabled us to hold constant the levels of two important context dimensions, namely political competition and government effectiveness, while allowing the think tank strategy to vary across the two organizations analyzed. This approach enabled us to contribute new insights concerning the interactions of strategy, context, and think tanks' policy influence. We followed a similar method when we selected Indonesia and Rwanda as countries in which to conduct focus group discussions and executive director interviews. However, this time, we held constant the level of civil society development as we examined self-reported effects of context on decision making.

Third, we developed the survey instrument with the objective of generating a quantitative data set to enable us to study context across a wide range of country settings. As a sampling frame for think tanks does not exist, testing was limited to a convenience sample of 380 think tanks drawn from a wide range of countries. A 25 percent survey response rate and item non-response on more than a few questions ruled out the feasibility of conducting regression analysis due to sample

size constraints. While the survey results demonstrate the feasibility of operationalizing think tanks' outcomes, contexts, and capacities, they also indicate some of the real limitations of quantitative study at this stage of the field's development. This discussion certainly will inform the development of future methods to address some of the issues that we faced in this project.

The second limitation of the regression framework is that its generalized structure doesn't adequately capture some of the detailed relationships found in the research. As such, we felt that it was important to elaborate on this basic model by developing the framework presented in Figure 1.1, where we map out the relationship between endogenous choices of the think tank (origins, decisions, and capacities) to exogenous context factors and outcomes based on our analysis of the evidence presented in the report. This framework retains the structure above, but has been made more accessible to reach a wider audience of think tank donors, practitioners, and scholars. This is the framework that we use to guide the remainder of the report.



The framework (shown in Figure 1.1) builds on previous research and contributes new thinking about context and its relationship to think tank decision making and strategy.

Specifically, we map relationships between the four main exogenous context factors and the four main endogenous capacities of think tanks identified in the literature using numbered arrows. We additionally show that context impacts think tank origin factors, and think tank decision making. In sum, the framework depicts seven relationships of interest to researchers, think tanks and donors who want to develop their understanding of the complex role context plays. While our study does not present evidence on every one of these relationships, we present some evidence on four, focusing mainly on the effects of exogenous context. We discuss the other three relationships at various points throughout the study, but their direct analysis was beyond the project’s scope.

We present the framework above, and again in more detail in the introduction to the full report. Our discussion here describes the key relationships of interest (Figure 1.1) and links them to the research questions, evidence and data (Table 1.1).

The numbered arrows in the framework depict seven relationships of interest: 1) the impact of exogenous context on initial think tank strategy and endowment of capacity, 2) the direct impact of exogenous factors on policy influence, 3) the direct impact of exogenous factors (unique to each country) on think tank endogenous capacities, 4) and 5) the interaction between think tank capacities with project and organizational decisions (a two-way relationship), 6) the cumulative effect of project and organizational decisions on think tank policy influence, and 7) the effect of exogenous context on think tank staff and leadership decisions.

The remainder of this summary focuses on some of the key crosscutting results related to exogenous context, endogenous capacities, think tanks’ decisions and strategies, and areas for further research.

The Relative Importance of the Political Context for Think Tanks

Beyond defining the key components of context and how they relate to think tank decisions and strategy, we additionally

TABLE 1.1 How the Research Questions Map to the Evidence and Data Presented in the Report

Research Question	Evidence and Discussion Presented	Information Source
What is context and how is it measured?	• Evidence of the effect of exogenous context on think tanks’ capacities (relationship 3)	• Think Tank survey
	• Discussion of the interaction between think tanks’ capacities and choices (relationships 4 & 5). Note, these relationships were not a central focus of the study	• Literature, focus groups and executive director interviews
How does context affect think tanks’ decision making and policy effectiveness?	• Evidence of the combined effects of context on think tank strategy and policy influence (relationships 1 & 2). • Discussion of think tank decisions on policy influence (relationship 6)	• Case studies
How do think tanks evaluate and respond to context in practice?	• Evidence of the effect of exogenous context on think tanks’ decisions (relationship 7) • Evidence of the interaction between think tanks’ capacities and choices (relationships 4 & 5) • Discussion of the effects of decisions on policy outcomes (relationship 6)	• Focus groups, and executive director interviews • Literature review, focus groups, and executive director interviews • Focus groups, and executive director interviews

contribute new information about the relative importance of exogenous factors to think tanks.

The four primary exogenous context factors found in our review of the academic and grey literature addressing think tanks in developing countries were: political and economic factors, donor factors, civil society factors, and intellectual climate. Our review of the literature and our analysis of survey data from 94 think tanks as well as the results from our executive director interviews and focus groups all suggest that political context is of the highest importance to think tanks. Political context is by far the most widely discussed factor in our interviews and focus groups and was the subject of more than half of the articles that we reviewed. The importance of the donor environment, civil society, and a country's intellectual climate are slightly more difficult to rank, but our survey, interview and focus group results suggest donor environment and civil society context likely come second and third followed by intellectual climate factors.

Consistent with its importance in the literature, in the interviews and focus groups that we held in Indonesia and Rwanda, political context nearly always was the first context factor mentioned by staff and directors in the open discussions of context. Moreover, evidence that we gathered further supports that political context is a prominent influence in all stages of work in both countries, despite substantial differences in their respective levels of civil society development. From policy to research and communications decisions, political factors are perceived to be of primary importance both for organizational-level decisions and for project-level decisions as well.

Evidence from our survey suggests that a majority of think tank leaders view either national government or national political leaders to be their key audiences. When think tank directors in 48 countries were asked: "Who do you see as the most important audiences for your work?" approximately 43 percent ranked 'national civil servants/national policymakers,' and nearly 20 percent ranked 'national politicians or political parties,' as the single most important audience. In contrast, only 12 percent reported that 'average citizens' are the most important audiences. In the survey, other audiences, including NGOs, the media, international donors, and local

politicians or parties, were infrequently reported as being the first-priority audiences.

In short, information from a variety of data sources suggests that of the exogenous context factors, the broad category of political factors is perceived to exert the strongest influence on think tanks.

Political Context Subcomponents

Political context encompasses a wide range of sub-factors, including country-level factors related to the government's ability to govern, the characteristics of the government, political parties and competition, concentration of political power, the country's political history, and the attitudes of policymakers towards research (i.e., their demand for research and the attributes of policymakers themselves).

Political Competition and Government Effectiveness

As already introduced, political context receives the most attention in the literature. Our study focused attention on two specific subfactors, political competition and government effectiveness, because of their potential importance for think tank strategy.

Previous research shows that the number of political parties or factions and the extent of competition between them drives demand for the evidence-based public policy analysis in which think tanks specialize. The level of political competition, parties, or factions in a given country may change policymakers' appetites for open dissent and demand for novel ideas, and may impact the strategies that think tanks use to present data and evidence. For example, while think tanks in Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States routinely engage in open dissent, this approach is much less welcome in closed, authoritarian regimes. Studies of think tanks in environments with high political competition evidence that think tanks search for openings in the political system to exploit, engage in dialogue with parties, and compete with other think tanks for influence. A direct line to policymakers gives traction, but even so, as political competition increases observers note it often becomes increasingly more difficult for think tanks to demonstrate their individual policy influence.

In less open political environments, there is suggestive and anecdotal evidence that independent think tanks adjust their stated goals and outcome measurements to avoid engaging with corrupt policymakers. For example, an Armenian think tank interviewed for this study reported that its strategy for collecting and disseminating data both fills voids in the availability of public data and helps it maintain independence from a corrupt political regime without directly challenging or openly criticizing the regime. A think tank donor corroborated this point and cited numerous additional ways in which he had observed think tanks defining alternative policy outcomes for themselves in lieu of engaging with corrupt policymakers.

A survey of policy community members in 19 countries found that a higher level of government effectiveness makes it more difficult for policymakers to discern the impact of an individual policy research organization. Although not without caveats, the research suggests that government effectiveness might work in conjunction with political competition to make think tanks' strategies more or less effective.

While factors such as political competition and government effectiveness are dynamic, the research suggests think tanks may respond to the current state of these and other factors by making strategic choices about their organization's objectives and larger strategy.

How Political Competition and Government Effectiveness Affect Think Tank Strategy

Our field research in Peru, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, and Vietnam strongly suggested that political competition and government effectiveness fundamentally influence think tanks' effectiveness, i.e., their ability to influence policy. Think tanks' success in achieving policy influence was evaluated along a four-tier cascade from the most basic level of influence (policymakers know the think tank exists) to the most comprehensive (policymakers adopt the think tank's policy). Reaching each successive tier in the cascade depends both on the choices that think tanks make and on the exogenous context factors beyond their control. While government effectiveness affects how far think tanks advance along the "cascade of influence," political competition affects whether an affiliation with a political party or independence is a more effective strategy.

A government's effectiveness, specifically, how well a government is able to implement policy, impacts whether think tanks influence the implementation of governmental policies or whether they instead must influence only the policy dialogue. Further, even if think tanks influence a government's policy positions, if a government does little effective policy implementation, the think tank's influence will have little material result.

Further, we find evidence of a dominant strategy among the think tanks observed operating in high and low political competition and government effectiveness contexts. For example, in politically competitive environments, think tanks benefit from staying impartial and above the political fray and offering themselves as sources of trusted analysis and advice no matter who is in power. In countries in which a party is uncontested, however, think tanks benefit from building trusted long-term relationships with the political actors in power, and from incorporating these actors' particular political constraints and incentives into their analyses.

These conclusions are strongly supported by similar patterns that we observed across the pairs of cases in our case matrix. Our study found evidence in Zimbabwe and Vietnam, both low political competition environments, that the strategy of being affiliated with the government or a governing political party provided organizations with more access to the policymaking process. Organizations with this affiliation evidenced more regular and significant success in getting their research incorporated into public policy and implemented. In this way, affiliation supports access to policymaking in countries in which policymaking processes are either so limited or so internalized within the government that think tanks have limited opportunities for influence. Yet at the same time, low political competition states also tend to be environments that limit the range and success of think tanks' strategies overall.

Even though our evidence points to the existence of a dominant strategy, we also find examples of successful think tanks going against the grain by applying creative methods. In these instances, think tanks resort to leveraging other aspects of context, for example the donor environment, and

civil society mechanisms or instruments of the intellectual environment to gain policy influence.

Donor Context

While governments are the most commonly cited audiences for think tanks according to our work, there are myriad other actors involved in the process of evidence-based policy research. Think tanks would not exist without independent financing and many rely on financial support from international donors. Indeed, our interview, focus group and survey results all suggest that the donor context is likely the second-most important factor behind political context.

Empirical studies evidence a positive relationship between the spread and growth of think tanks in developing countries and the expanding amount of donor funding available to support the development of civil societies in middle- and low-income countries. A few donor organizations have made think tanks the focus of major philanthropic initiatives in recent years. For example, in 2009, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, collectively committed a total of \$90 million to support independent policy think tanks in developing countries through the Think Tank Initiative.¹ These funds were subsequently added to, with contributions from the UK Department for International Development, The Netherlands Directorate General for International Cooperation, and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation. Other major funders of developing-country think tanks include the Think Tank Fund of the Open Society Foundations, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the US Agency for International Development. Yet, the donor environment consists of more than just those groups funding think tanks directly. In addition to distributing foreign aid, bilateral and multilateral agencies carry out a great number of research and policy studies in developing countries under contract to policy research institutions. In developing countries, domestic donors and funders also support local think tanks, but these sources of funding are limited in most countries.

Consistent with the literature, our results show that donor influence produces mostly mixed results for developing country think tanks. For example, while donors provide needed funding, they have been known to select Western consultants to carry out analytical work, substituting away from local capacity. Researchers also have observed that a donor's financial support shifts research attention to the donor's priorities, which can sometimes lead to a research agenda that has questionable relevance to the country's policy context and culture.

Our analysis of the survey data generally validated these observations from the academic literature; however we use simple pairwise correlations to examine relationships and therefore we interpret these results with some caution due to the absence of additional controls. We examined correlations in the amount of Net Official Development Assistance (Net ODA) per capita on think tanks' resources and found that think tanks in countries receiving less per capita Net ODA tend to report larger budgets overall. We also found that higher per capita donor flows were not significantly associated with more staff resources, namely, the number of full time staff or the percentage of research staff. This suggestive evidence supports the crowd-out effect: more aid does not translate into a greater demand for research staff. Last, we observed no relationship between the level of per-capita ODA and the amount of unrestricted funding that think tanks report, or their abilities to define topics in line with their research agendas. This suggests that more ODA does not necessarily confer upon think tanks more control over their resources, which would correspond to an increase in control over research topics.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing think tanks described in the literature is the need for them to secure sustainable funding from a range of sources in order to retain independence from the encroaching interests of any one stakeholder, while being able to consistently produce high quality research. Our survey found no evidence that net ODA per capita impacts a think tanks' reported number of donors, which suggests that increased amounts of development assistance do not lead think tanks to diversify their funding base.

¹ See Hewlett Foundation Newsroom announcement: "Partners Pledge US\$30 Million to Strengthen African Think Tanks", <http://www.hewlett.org/newsroom/press-release/partners-pledge-us30-million-strengthen-african-think-tanks>. Accessed 15 June 2014

Although there is wide discussion postulating that think tanks should diversify their portfolio of donors, the literature documents the difficulties of them doing so in both low- and high-activity donor environments. The case analysis results showed that most of the think tanks in the four case study countries rely on international foundations and development agencies for their funding. This was particularly pronounced in Zimbabwe and Bangladesh, the two cases with particularly low levels of government effectiveness. In countries with very low levels of government effectiveness, both affiliated and independent think tanks must rely to some degree on external funding at either the regional and/or international level. For example, in Zimbabwe, because there is a conspicuous lack of indigenous funding for think tanks of all types, both independent and affiliated think tanks turn to international donors. However, this has sometimes led think tanks to gain more influence outside of their countries than inside.

Indeed, the case study research here also demonstrated that both affiliated and independent think tanks work with international organizations to boost the credibility and prestige of their organizations and to gain access to more prestigious social networks with greater connections to influential domestic policymakers. As an example of this creative approach, while international organizations offer independent think tanks in Vietnam funding opportunities, affiliated think tanks also see these opportunities as means by which to expand their policy influence and media access. Working with an outside organization can provide individual researchers that work at the government-affiliated think tanks in Vietnam with another forum in which to publish their findings. This can be important to individual researchers, some of whom say that they feel that their work gets lost in the ministerial bureaucracies.

Yet the reputational benefits of donor relationships extend in both directions, particularly in low-political competition countries. For example, think tanks that contract with international development organizations like the World Bank gain more prominence both in the international community and in their own countries. International development

organizations also benefit because they gain access to the networks of and deep domestic knowledge available in these think tanks. For example, in Vietnam, international organizations work with affiliated think tanks to boost the international organization's domestic policy influence. International organizations solicit consulting projects from independent think tanks when they want more rigorous academic-quality research.

Intellectual Climate and Civil Society

Looking beyond the donor environment, the academic literature suggests that a country's intellectual climate and civil society facilitate think tanks' access to academic researchers and ideas and to open debate channels with policymakers. Independent universities contribute to a vibrant intellectual environment and the skilled researchers and data produced by academic programs are necessary inputs to think tanks' successes.

Our case research supported this result, specifically in relation to the media. In countries in which the media are free and vibrant, think tanks can use the media in creative ways to try to augment their policy influence. For example, in Peru, the political and cultural environment favors independent think tanks. We found that a think tank affiliated with the corporate sector, not the government, uses the media to advocate for its policy goals and put issues on the national policymaking agenda. While several interviewees described a space in the media in which audiences could hear from technocrats and hear about academic studies, the affiliated organization described itself as having an aggressive strategy with the media in order to shape public dialogue particularly through television, newspapers, and the radio. More so than the independent think tank, the Peruvian affiliated think tank's audience is the public. The organization is a small outfit with less than 15 employees, which is much smaller than the prominent independent think tanks in Peru. However, through its "somewhat reactive" emphasis on debating and critiquing government policy via the media, the organization has been able to have an outsized influence on public policy.

Wide Variation in Think Tank Capacity

While the primary focus of this project is the impact of exogenous factors, we repeatedly encountered a set of endogenous capacities in the literature, survey, interviews, and focus group discussions that are important to the decisions and influence of think tanks. Endogenous capacities include those factors the values of which are determined by the think tank, such as the quality and quantity of research staff, research topics, and resource allocation to functions within the organization.

Our survey results indicate that think tanks vary widely in terms of their credibility, communications, social and resource capital. For example, with respect to credibility capital, we find that while research staff are reported to make up 54 percent of full time staff among think tanks on average, the survey found that the percentage of research staff varied widely from a low of 0 percent to a high of 100 percent. On average, more than 16 percent of full time research staff had attained a PhD, with wide variation, the smallest percentage was at 0² and the largest share reported as 50 percent. However, think tanks of all sizes reported that they prioritized research and staff quality over other ways of establishing their credibility. For example, 40 of 58 respondent think tanks reported that the quality of the research produced was the single-most important factor contributing to the maintenance of organizational credibility, while research staff credibility was the second-highest ranked factor. The majority of think tanks reported having institutionalized quality control processes, such as peer review of data, methods, and publications.

We found that think tanks also vary in terms of their communication capacity. To be effective, think tanks must be able to communicate their high-quality research using a variety of methods and channels; we found evidence from the survey that think tanks are doing this. Think tanks reported using and evaluating themselves on between 10 and 11 different communications outcomes. While most of the think tanks in the sample continue to use traditional forms

of think tank communication, including roundtables, reports, and publications, a few are experimenting with newer communication forms such as tweets.

In similar fashion, we find think tanks vary widely in terms of the number and scope of informal partnerships they develop with other think tanks, domestic and international donors, political parties, and so on. Think tanks in our sample also differed considerably with respect to their self-reported annual budget size and overall staff resources. Thus our small sample suggests a substantial amount of think tank heterogeneity along all four think tank capacities we measured.

Think Tank Decisions

The wide variation we observe in think tank capacity led us to question whether exogenous context plays any role in explaining observed differences. To explore this relationship, we focused on research and communications decisions made by executive directors and research and communications staff. We examined in a sample of Indonesian and Rwandan think tanks the extent to which staff and executive directors reported that their project and organizational decision-making depended on context.

How Adaptive are Think Tanks to Context?

Based on our analysis, we found that in general think tanks adapt their organizational and project level decisions to context on a fairly regular basis.

Think tanks reported that they frequently adapt their policy agendas to governments' policy priorities. For example, Indonesia's rapid process of democratization and decentralization that began in 1998 led think tanks' executive directors and project teams to significantly change their decisions about areas of work. After decentralization, a number of project teams described performing research on local government budgets and transparency, an idea that was

² Note, only one think tank responded to the survey indicating zero research staff (this particular think tank reported one staff member in the 'survey' category). For the purposes of the Think Tank Survey, responding institutions that self-identify as think tanks are taken as such, independent of the number of research staff they report.

practically unimaginable just a few years prior. In Rwanda, think tanks' executive directors reported that a major strategy involves aligning their research priorities with those published by the government. As government priorities change, so do think tanks' policy agendas.

The research agenda is the decision making step that appears to be least dependent on context; however, there was some evidence that government transparency and, specifically, access to information plays an important role. Further, respondents pointed out explicitly that donors did not play a role in think tanks' decisions regarding research methods, research capacity, and human capital, including decisions such as staff hiring and training.

Evidence from the literature supported our finding that successful think tanks actively build their research and communications credibility over time by selecting topics in which they are likely to have an impact. In addition, think tanks build individual and institutional social ties to increase the flow of information from the think tank to policymakers and back again. Evidence from the focus group discussions and executive director interviews in Indonesia and Rwanda suggested that communications decisions at the organization and project levels are directly related to the audiences that the think tanks seek to influence, especially government and policymakers.

Getting the attention of policymakers is a challenge for all think tanks. The most prevalent methods of getting their attention include communicating through the media, targeting specific ministries, and seeking windows of opportunity. We also found evidence of think tanks' informal communications with government officials, such as senior think tank staff actively meeting with Ministry officials, parliamentarians, or legislators, and individuals in the Executive or President's office.

Finally with regard to policy influence, both exogenous and endogenous factors played a significant role for those directors and project teams seeking to push for changes in policy based on their research. In focus group discussions and executive director interviews alike, government priorities and social capital were cited as significant factors. Executive directors shared a number of successful projects that resulted in changes in policy, and in all cases the directors stated

that the success was due in part to the fact that the policy question or recommendation focused on an area of interest to key government officials. In most cases, directors also explained that positive relationships with key policymakers helped to make their projects successful.

Affiliation, Independence, and Organizational Social Ties

In addition to shorter term and medium term think tank decisions concerning their policy and research agendas, and communications methods, organizations make defining strategic choices at their inception. Our case studies examined a think tank's fundamental and major strategic decision regarding whether it should be independent or affiliate with a government or a particular political party.

The case research suggests that think tanks adopt different dominant strategies based particularly on the level of political competition, with think tanks benefiting more from affiliation in a low political competition setting. However, the research also provided examples in each country of think tanks going against the dominant strategy. These think tanks leveraged international organizations, donors, and the media to achieve policy influence. For example, we learned of an affiliated and academically oriented think tank in Bangladesh that seeks to shape domestic policy by publishing in foreign languages and in well-regarded domestic and international academic journals. Because of its close affiliation with the government, it does not want to be openly critical. Its academic publications satisfy both dynamics: The government views them as academic products rather than potentially inflammatory critiques of its policy, while the think tank gains credibility by demonstrating that it meets international research standards.

The adaptability shown in these strategies is important because our evidence points to the difficulty that a think tank would experience in changing from an affiliated to an independent institution or vice versa. Much of a think tank's identity and strategy is based on its relationship to government, a particular political party, or an ideology. To change affiliation likely would upend a think tank's sources of funding or complicate its relationships with donors.

Context and the Endogenous Capacities of Think Tanks

Utilizing survey results, a test of the relationships that we hypothesized between exogenous context and endogenous capacities revealed limited, significant associations. We observed a few significant associations with the level of economic development and no significant association between the amount of political competition or government effectiveness and the endogenous capacities of think tanks examined in this study.

We found no evidence in the analysis of a significant association between a country's Voice and Accountability indicator (an indicator of democratization) and the size of a think tank's communications staff, the most important audience it targets, the number of communications channels it measures itself against, or the ways in which it attempts to obtain the attention of policymakers. We hypothesized that the diversity of communications channels would widen in more democratic contexts, but this was not shown to be the case in our sample of think tanks.

Additionally, we found no significant association between country Voice and Accountability rank and measures of think tank social capital. We found that Voice and Accountability rank was not associated with the number of institutions from which think tanks report recruiting new staff members; it also was not associated with the proportion of Board members that presently serve or formerly served in the government, the number of formal institutional ties, informal ties to other organizations, or number of instances in which think tanks' staff gave testimony to a member of the Executive or President's office, a Ministry official, or a parliamentarian. Thus, we found very little evidence to suggest that the social ties a think tank develops vary in accordance with the country's level of democratization and political competition.

Consistent with our hypothesis, a country's context—namely, its global rank on Voice and Accountability, per capita GDP, per capita ODA, and Government Effectiveness — does not appear to bear a relationship to other indicators of the think tank's credibility. Specifically, we observed no significant associations between any of the exogenous context factors that we tested and the top-ranked credibility factor reported,

the percentage of staff with a PhD, the percentage of research staff, and the presence of quality control methods such as peer review of data, methods, and reports.

We note that our survey results should be interpreted with caution as the data is limited in several ways. First, there is no known sampling frame from which to draw a random sample of think tanks. We used a convenience sample as a result, which limits the generalizability of any findings derived from the analysis. Second, the lists used to generate the sample came from think tank donors, a non-governmental organization that partners with many developing-country think tanks, and internet searches of think tank forums, conferences, and events. Although it is impossible to confirm, the sample is likely to include a higher proportion of think tanks from developing and low-income countries and to include think tanks that have developed ties with external donors or that participate in international think tank events and conferences. It is important to keep these elements in mind when interpreting our results. In addition, the survey response rate was about 25 percent of all think tanks contacted, and far fewer of those that responded completed the survey. As such, item non-response is a concern on several questions.

Final Thoughts

Even given the caveats previously noted, the results from the survey are somewhat surprising considering the frequency with which the think tank executive directors and researchers we interviewed report adapting their decision making to accommodate context. The results are also surprising in light of our case study findings which demonstrate a clear impact of political competition and government effectiveness on think tank strategy. These surprising results suggest context may impact short- and medium-term decisions and long-term decisions, such as a think tank's strategy, in fundamentally different ways. However, this is a question that remains open for other researchers to explore for we have insufficient evidence to make a determination.



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