

A photograph of two people walking away from the camera across a vast, green, hilly landscape under a cloudy sky. The person in the foreground is wearing a bright yellow t-shirt and a red baseball cap. The person further ahead is wearing a grey and white jacket. The text 'WE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY' is printed on the back of the yellow shirt.

**WE FIGHT AGAINST
POVERTY**

PRODUCING HOME GROWN SOLUTIONS

**THINK TANKS AND KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS
IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

BY AJOY DATTA AND JOHN YOUNG

Mainstream
international
development
discourse
has long

heralded the importance
of *home grown solutions*
and *national ownership* of
development policies. Ownership
has been seen as the missing
link between the significant
development aid inflows from
the North and poverty reduction
outcomes in the South. You only
have to look to international
agreements such the 2002
Monterrey Consensus or the
2005 Paris Declaration for
evidence of this.

HOWEVER, this goes counter to the fact
that much of development knowledge—the
theories, policies, and practices of
economic and social development—is
dominated by the North, mainly by in-
ternational institutions that are largely
controlled by the North, and by donor

agencies which exercise considerable
influence on Southern governments,
particularly the poorer ones. Other fac-
tors such as conditionalities, resource
imbalances, and historically-rooted
prejudices together contribute to *devel-
opment knowledge asymmetries*.

SHAPING THE KNOWLEDGE AGENDA

INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS and plan-
ning instruments such as the World
Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Pa-
pers (PRSPs) often fail to question the
parameters within which national plans
are prepared. Home grown solutions
can only be produced from knowledge
and policies that are locally generated
and context specific. Southern knowl-
edge centers (or think tanks) then have
a crucial role to play in promoting eco-
nomic and social development in the
global South, particularly in the poorer
economies.¹ For instance, the African
Centre for Economic Transformation
(ACET) was established in 2007 to pro-
vide policy analysis and advice to Afri-
can governments. It is unique in that it
champions an African perspective, har-
nesses African talent from within the
continent and from its diaspora, and
draws on a network of international
experts and preeminent African profes-
sionals.²

In the last 10 years, there has been
a huge increase in think tanks in de-
veloping countries that are working
on developing country issues. Accord-
ing to McGann's 2010 Global Go-To
Think Tank Report there are nearly
6,500 Think Tanks around the world,
of which roughly 2,000 are in develop-
ing countries.³ A considerable litera-
ture exists on the assessment of think

tanks. Much of this is based on a US
and European concept stemming from
organizations like The Rand Corpora-
tion that were set up in the 1940s and
50s. Certain organizations in the U.K.
performed similar functions, such as
the Institute for Defence and Security
Studies (RUSI) founded in 1831, and
the Fabian Society which dates from
1884. Think tanks conduct research and
advocacy on social, industrial or busi-
ness policy, political strategy, or science,
technology, and military issues.⁴ Some
are nonprofit organizations; others
are funded by governments, advocacy
groups, or businesses, or derive revenue
from consulting work or research re-
lated to their projects.⁵

But recent research at the Overseas
Development Institute (ODI) is chal-
lenging these assumptions, arguing that
think tanks are by no means a novel
phenomenon.⁶ They have been around
in various forms throughout the world
for a long time—including the academ-
ic societies of the 1790s in Peru, state-
owned technocratic research centers
in South Korea dating from the 1950s,
and groups of academics in university
research centres across several countries
in postindependence Sub-Saharan Af-
rica. And while providing policy advice
is perhaps their main purpose, think
tanks have other objectives too, for in-
stance, legitimizing government or par-
ty policies, providing a space for debate,
nurturing future policy makers, and
channelling funds to political parties.
These functions are performed by many
different types of organizations: groups
of researchers, policy research centers
associated with academic institutions,
and research-focused nongovernmental
organizations (NGOs), as well as party
and state-affiliated institutes.^{7,8}

BRIDGING BOUNDARIES

IN AN INCREASINGLY interconnected world, Northern and Southern think tanks are joining forces in partnerships and networks to generate and use knowledge more systematically to address national, regional, and global challenges.⁹ Networks of think tanks can provide an extremely effective mechanism for learning and innovation, and enable collaboration beyond the usual institutional, cultural, and functional boundaries of an organization.^{10,11} Research by the RAPID programme at ODI on how networks actually add value to the work of individual members has identified a number of common features including:

- community building or coordination,
- filtering information and knowledge,
- amplifying common or shared values and messages,
- facilitating learning (research-based or otherwise) among the members,
- investing and providing resources, skills and assistance, and
- convening different stakeholders and constituencies.¹²

Global knowledge networks or partnerships are an increasingly important feature of the international development architecture ranging from large diverse networks tackling a wide range of issues like the World Bank Global Knowledge Partnership, to small networks of individuals and organizations working on particular topics.¹³ Most include Northern and Southern organizations undertaking joint analytical work and engaging policy debates both nationally and internationally. The Northern organizations often also play

a supporting and capacity-development role to help their Southern counterparts to develop the capacity to engage with national and global research and decision-making processes.¹⁴

The Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC)¹⁵ is a good example of a knowledge network that spans both the North and the South. It is a global partnership of universities, researchers, and nongovernmental organizations in Bangladesh, India, South Africa, Uganda, and five West African countries. In the U.K., the CPRC includes the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), the Universities of Manchester and Sussex, Development Initiatives, and HelpAge International.

CPRC works at the national, regional, and global levels. Building on research undertaken by its Ugandan partners, Development Research and Training (DRT) and the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC), and on the findings of a conference of chronic poverty researchers from around the world held in Kampala in September 2008,¹⁶ the CPRC was invited by the Government of Uganda to design a cash transfer pilot scheme to address the needs of the chronically poor in Uganda. At the international level, the CPRC has been pushing for action around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) particularly MDG1: the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. In its first Chronic Poverty Report (2004-2005), the network estimated the numbers of people living in chronic poverty to be between 320 and 443 million people. The network went further with its second report in 2008, outlining five poverty “traps”:

- poor work opportunities,
- spatial disadvantage, such as living in slums,
- insecurity and poor health, and

- limited citizenship.

The report proposed the following policy responses:

- public services for the hard to reach,
- building individual and collective assets,
- antidiscrimination and gender empowerment, and
- strategic urbanisation and migration.¹⁷

As a result, the CPRC has informed thinking among major international donors and agencies such as the European Union, Save the Children, and UNICEF.¹⁸

The Climate and Development Knowledge Network is a larger-scale global alliance of private and nongovernmental organizations working to support decision makers in designing and delivering climate compatible development by combining demand-led research, and advisory and knowledge-sharing services in support of locally owned and managed policy processes.¹⁹ Just one year old, the network has commissioned research on the impact of climate change on energy, urbanization, food security, and livelihoods in South East Asia; advised the African Development Bank on the climate-related implications of the UN’s advisory group report on finance, and is supporting the development of a national climate change strategy in Rwanda. While too early to measure impact on livelihoods, the network’s support is highly regarded. According to UN Climate Change Conference (COP 16) delegates: “Pakistan was better prepared at COP 16 due to CDKN and LEAD—they had prepared five policy briefs and eight background notes for the COP 17 delegates that significantly augmented Pakistan’s negotiation capacity.”²⁰

BUILDING CAPACITY TOGETHER

WHAT CAN DONORS and international agencies do to promote more “home grown solutions”? Most importantly, they must recognize that diversity is an inherent characteristic of the global community; that national context must be the point of departure for diagnosis and prescription; and that development must be driven by local effort and initiative. Development cooperation should therefore support the incremental development of local capacities in the South in areas such as development research.²¹ Such support should be long term and multilayered, helping think tanks and their networks to plan for the long term and respond to complex and changing organizational and environmental contexts. Capacity-building initiatives should be locally designed and monitored to ensure their sustainability and they should address power relations—capacity building should be a two-way process where funders and Northern organizations have as much to learn as their Southern counterparts.²² □

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Endnotes

¹ See “Power, Knowledge and Home Grown Solutions.” February 2008. Norman Girvan. Forum on the Future of Aid. Blog <http://www.futureofaid.net/node/395>.

² See African Center for Economic

Transformation. <http://acetforafrica.org/site/about>.

³ McGann, James G. 2011. THE GLOBAL “GO-TO THINK TANKS” 2010: The Leading Public Policy Research Organizations in the World. United Nations University. http://www.gotothinktank.com/wp-content/uploads/2010GlobalGoToReport_ThinkTankIndex_UNEDITION_15_.pdf.

⁴ *The American Heritage Dictionary*. “Think Tank.” 2000. Merriam Webster’s Dictionary. “Think Tank.” <http://think-tank.co.tv>.

⁵ Diane Stone. 2006. “Think Tanks and Policy Analysis.” In Frank Fischer, Gerald J. Miller, and Mara S. Sidney eds., *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis: Theory, Methods, and Politics*. New York: Marcel Dekker Inc. pp. 149-157.

⁶ See “Not All Think Tanks are Created Equal.” October 2008. Enrique Mendizabal. Overseas Development Institute (ODI) Blog. <http://blogs.odi.org.uk/blogs/main/archive/2008/10/15/5670.aspx>.

⁷ See Mendizabal, E. and K. Sample. 2009. *Díme a Quien Escuchas y Te Diré Que Haces: Think tanks y Partidos Políticos en América Latina*. IDEA International and ODI: Lima.

⁸ Nachiappan, Karthik, Enrique Mendizabal and Ajoy Datta. 2010. “Think Tanks in East and Southeast Asia.” ODI Report. <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/5202.pdf>.

⁹ Cummings, S., J. E. Ferguson, P. J. Bury, A. Garai, B. Islam and P. Ngulube. 2006 Editorial: On Knowledge Divides and Joined up Thinking—Anybody Interested? *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* 2(3), pp.1-4. www.km4dev.org/journal.

¹⁰ Engel, P.G.H. 1997. *The Social Organisation of Innovation: A Focus on Stakeholder Interaction*. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute.

¹¹ Powell, W. 1990. “Neither Market nor Hierarchy: Network Forms of Organisation.”

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¹² Hearn, S. and Mendizabal, E. 2011. “Not Everything that Connects is a Network.” ODI Background note <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/5137.pdf>.

¹³ See Global Knowledge Partnership. <http://www.globalknowledgepartnership.org/index.cfm>.

¹⁴ Court, J., Hovland, I. and Young, J. eds. 2005. *Bridging Research and Policy in Development: Evidence and the Change Process*. Rugby: ITDG Publishing.

¹⁵ See Chronic Poverty Research Center. <http://www.chronicpoverty.org>.

¹⁶ See Chronic Poverty Research Center. <http://www.chronicpoverty.org/events/event/2009529-social-protection-for-the-poorest-in-africa-learning-from-experience>.

¹⁷ The Chronic Poverty Report 2008. http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/CPR2_ReportFull.pdf.

¹⁸ See ODI: Stories of Change. <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/3787-stories-change-mdgs.pdf>.

¹⁹ See Climate and Development Knowledge Center (CDKN). <http://cdkn.org>.

²⁰ CDKN Progress Update May 2011. <http://cdkn.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/CDKN-Progress-Update4.pdf>.

²¹ From “Power, Knowledge and Home Grown Solutions.” February 2008. Norman Girvan. Forum on the Future of Aid. Blog. <http://www.futureofaid.net/node/395>.

²² Datta, A. and Mendizabal E. 2008. “Lessons Learnt in Think Tank Development.” Briefing for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Unpublished.