Learning to monitor think tanks impact:  
Three experiences from Africa, Asia and Latin America¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The impact of think tanks has received increasing attention in the literature. Accordingly, stakeholders, such as donors, policy makers, academia representatives, think tanks themselves, among others, are increasingly aware of the importance of monitoring and evaluating think tanks’ impact and many think tanks worldwide are working on identifying their impact areas and on developing mechanisms to measure it.

In this context, the objective of this study is to provide elements for an analytical framework to monitor and measure the impact of think tanks working in less developed contexts. This is done by integrating different impact definitions and indicators, variables, contexts and approaches based on a literature review. This literature review informed the development of an analytical framework that was applied to all three think tank case studies. The objective of the study is also to understand the difficulties of measuring the impact of think tanks in the different spheres of their work, i.e. policy influence, contribution to academic field of research, public agenda, etc., and to learn from the experiences of the selected cases.

Understanding Think Tanks Impact

In the literature review, we find that think tanks are generally explicitly concerned with the generation of impact and they are often seen as organizations which ‘help transfer the intellectual matter that underpins policies’ (Stone 2000, 47). This knowledge transfer role has led to characterisations of Think Tank (TT) activity in terms of ‘research brokerage’ or ‘policy entrepreneurship’, which captures the nature of TTs as organizations focused on producing and disseminating knowledge and their close relation with policy making. The specific role played by TTs in knowledge transfer and the generation of impact will largely depend on their overall orientation, that is, on how they conceive themselves and the work they do - whether they see themselves as organizations supporting specific political projects, as advocates for certain topics or policies, or as disinterested knowledge producers more akin to academia. And in the last instance, it is important to consider that ‘impact’ will refer to changes, for instance

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in people's quality of life, and not only at the formal policy level (e.g. legislation, etc.), which tends to be the case in many developing contexts where the gap between formal policies and their application is significant.

Understandings of the causal relation between knowledge production and its use are at the basis of different conceptions of impact. Weidenbaum (2010) shows that the usual indicators through which the influence of think tanks is sought to be established, such as publication outputs, participation in seminars and conferences, etc. are more a measure of visibility than of real impact. For him, the 'extended nature of the policy process typically takes a decade or more for an idea to be transformed into a specific public policy decision and thus, rather than trying 'to dominate the print media or the nightly news', or even 'to influence government decision making', the main mission of think tanks should be 'to elevate the level of the national discussion on the serious issues facing society.' (Weidenbaum 2009) This same point is recurrently made with regards to the nature of the policy process and the ways in which knowledge gets diffused by Stone (2000). For her, it is also clear that the prime importance of TTs is in the construction of legitimacy for certain policy and in agenda-setting. In this process, intermediate outputs, as well as of visibility, are means for, but not equal to impact. Thus, methodologies such as discourse analysis, policy trajectory studies, and in general more qualitatively rich analyses are needed together to assess impact.

**Factors influencing impact**

The previous quote highlights a set of important factors, exogenous and endogenous, that influence the role played by think tanks and the impact they can generate. Endogenous factors are basically the resources that different TTs count towards the generation of impact such as their organizational characteristics, their mission definitions, their governance structures, sources of funding, research management and the types of research they produce; their human resources and ability to recruit and retain leading scholars and analysts; as well as the quality and reliability of the organization's networks (McGann, 2011).

Another major factor affecting the work of think tanks is the sources of funding on which they operate. As shown by Correa (2009) with reference to Latin American think tanks - but this probably applies to TTs working in developing countries in general - TTs research agendas tend to be defined by the priorities set up by donors and funders, rather than by the organizations themselves, as the research portfolios of their
members will be prone to variation and will be focused on specific projects, rather than on the development of a personally defined field of ideas.

Exogenous factors refer to the economic, political and institutional context in which TTs operate that can strongly influence their impact. While in contexts such as the US and Europe, TTs have a highly institutionalised and thus very stable role in the policy process, in developing country contexts, the usual degree of institutional weakness, the nature of the political party system, the characteristics of the civil service and the bureaucracy, all contribute to a more volatile role of TTs in policy debates (Braun et al. 2010; Correa Aste 2009; Young 2005).

**Strategies for measuring impact**

Following Davies et al. (2005) and other studies, we organized the different strategies into: forward tracking from research to consequences (outputs), research in user communities and a category that attempts to capture more directly evident impacts than those suggested by measures of output and use.

The most commonly used indicators of impact are in fact measures of output, which actually constitute measures of intermediate impact and, as noted by Weidenbaum, are indicators of visibility more than anything else. However, it is relevant to generate such measurements as they might contribute to generate a level of reflexivity within the organization that can enhance its ability to generate impact. Such indicators of intermediate output can include quantitative measurements of publications (important to distinguish between publication type, especially whether they are peer-reviewed or not), internet activity, media appearances, advisory roles played by members of the organization, networking activity, conferences and seminar presentations.

Reputation is another important measure of impact, as it reflects the credibility of the organizations' work. Although most former output indicators reflect credibility, McGann (2011) also includes other more indirect, reputational measures of impact, assessed through esteem shown by key stakeholders and research use in particular communities. Although this work has been criticised for putting too much emphasis on subjective appraisals of TTs' work, we do consider that such reputational measures, especially when used alongside other variables, are important. This is so because reputation, other than a measure of visibility, can also indicate the extent of research use in particular communities. Research impact in user communities can also be
monitored using a diversity of methods such as surveys of policy makers or other relevant stake holders, interviews and focus groups with selected stakeholders.

Finally, final Impact indicators should be included. Following McGann (2011), these indicators should reflect recommendations considered or adopted by policymakers and civil society organizations; advisory role, awards granted; publication in or citation of publications; public testimony and the media that influences the policy debate and decision-making, among others. It is relevant to note that these more complex assessments of impact that seek to go beyond mere quantifications of output, tend to include more qualitative analyses of how research has been diffused.

**Analytical Framework**

The analytical framework presented here has been elaborated based on the literature review on how to measure the impact of think tanks. It is assumed that different understandings of these issues will lead to different weightings, or even selection, of the proposed variables.

**Conception of Impact:**

In order to reflect the heterogeneity of TTs as discussed in the literature review, we consider a broad understanding of impact that includes not only policy but also academic impact as well as impacts generated on particular populations.

**Endogenous/organizational variables**

a. Mission statements: independent, academically sound, research production; advocacy of particular policies or knowledge transfer towards the policy sector
b. Main functions performed by the organization: Information production, policy advocacy, networking, academic production and/or educational activities
c. Organizational characteristics and resources: Origins and evolution of the organization, governance structures: strategic management and administration, funding (types and stability of financial support), human resources (entry requirements, ability to recruit and retain leading scholars, incentive structures)
d. Research management: are topics defined on the basis of the availability of funds and/or in relation to the organization agenda?
e. Type of research produced: applied, academic, data/information, producing and analysing arguments (considering degree of domestic/international focus)
f. Primary audiences of the research produced: politicians, policy makers, civil society and academia
g. Communication and diffusion strategies used by the organization,
h. Networks: Proximity and access to decision-makers and other policy elites, academic communities and the media

Exogenous variables

a. Political-institutional variables: extent of civil and political freedoms in the country, existence of political demand for research, characteristics of the bureaucracy and degree of government capacity, degree of political stability
b. Media: characteristics of the local media and relationships between research producers and the media
c. Policy linkages: general relation of TTs with the policy making community, policy environment and its openness to research

Output indicators

a. Publications: reports, working-papers (non-peer reviewed), papers in academic journals, other peer-reviewed papers and editorial membership
b. Internet activity in owned website
c. Media appearances: written contributions, references to the TTs research (in general or from individual members) in the media, television, radio and internet
d. Advisory roles played by the organization's members to policy makers and other relevant institutions (civil society, etc)
f. Networking participation (national or international)
g. Conference and seminar presentations (internally and externally organized)
h. Educational activities conducted within the TT (courses, workshops, other)
i. Other roles played by the organizations' members including teaching in higher education institutions, positions in government institutions, and others

Indicators of research use

a. Invitations to provide expert judgement to policy-makers, media and others
b. Invitations to participate in panel deliberations
c. Citation of published works by the organization and its members
d. Visits to the organizations' website

Reputational and final impact measures

a. Stakeholder engagement to assess their perception of the organization through the use of surveys, interviews or focus groups
b. Awards granted to the organization
c. Examples of research use and influence: in challenging the conventional wisdom, of recommendations adopted by policymakers or civil society organizations and of societal impacts of the TT research

The case studies
Three TTs cases were selected, one from Latin America, one from Asia and one from Africa. The cases were selected based on think tanks’ recognition for good quality research and for their experience in the process of monitoring and measuring its impact. In addition, in an effort to provide less dispersed results, cases were selected considering only independent and non-university think tanks. The cases are: Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), African Institute for Applied Economics (AIAE) of Nigeria and Group of Analysis for Development (GRADE) of Peru.

The previous framework provided the guidelines for researchers on how to address the case studies. The central aim of the case studies was to reflect upon the different aspects and elements of impact measurement, the difficulties surrounding them, the extent to which each organization is measuring these issues and whether they consider them important or susceptible of measurement.

Conclusions and lessons for monitoring think tanks impact
The objective of this study was to provide elements for an analytical framework to monitor and measure the impact of think tanks working in less developed contexts. This was done by integrating different impact definitions and indicators, contexts and approaches collected from the literature review and case studies in an analytical framework. Some lessons of this process follow.

TTs impact will largely depend on their overall orientation, that is, on how they conceive themselves and their mission and functions. The evidence revised in the study, complemented by the review of responses of Think Tanks in the electronic forum previous to the TTI South Africa Exchange, show that there is quite a consensus that although Think Tanks missions differ, they share some combination of: providing high quality research, serve as informed and independent voice in policy debates, putting issues in the agenda and influence policies and contributing towards the well being of society. Furthermore, for all those objectives, it is agreed upon that credibility is a key attribute. However, there is also a consensus that there is no common and systematic method for monitoring and measuring impact (and success). This is the case mainly
because many of the impacts are very difficult to objectively be measured, i.e. how do we monitor and measure “credibility”?

It can also be concluded that exogenous and endogenous factors are important to define and measure TTs impact. Think tanks impact can differ considerably given local or regional context as well as the subject focus of the institutions research and potential opportunities for their outreach. Similarly, TTs will include dissemination activities and select mechanisms for dissemination and influence depending on the particular characteristics of its organization and context of the country and their networks. The case of IPS (Sri Lanka) illustrates this situation. The Institute manages its exposure to public comment strategically in view of sensitivities that can arise from its semi-government status.

Endogenous factors also clearly determine how to design and implement a monitoring system and how to measure impact. Within these factors, the TT mission conception is the most important. This assertion is illustrated by looking at the case of AIAE. Its mission is to promote evidence-based decision making, accordingly, their mix of research, research communication and policy dialogue and training has been in the ratio of 60%, 30% and 10% respectively during the last years and this is reflected in their impact measurement, as monitoring tools are tailored to elicit achievements benchmarked according to the degrees of involvement in these respective areas.

Another important finding of the study is that the case studies have clearly shown an increasing interest and expertise of TTs in their monitoring systems, in particular after receiving the institutional support of Think tank Initiative (TTI), both because of the resources received for institutional strengthening and as a consequence of the TTI’s introduction and requirement of systematic ways to track progress indicators. Therefore, nowadays, in all cases, a system is in place; indicators are regularly estimated for main outputs and used inside the institution. All three organizations had accumulated significant learning experience in monitoring impact since their origins. Initially, monitoring was sporadic and primarily driven by the specific demands (making proposals/applications for funding support, institutional profiling and responding to enquiries by donors and funders). During the last years, with the TTI support, the process became more systematic and functional but still faces important challenges.

The case studies have also shown that some measures of impact, which really are output or intermediate impact indicators (showing mainly visibility) are more easily
estimated across the TTs. This is the case of publications, web activity, media appearances, conference, seminar and other events organized and educational activities within the institution, and some other outputs that have been registered in all cases by the three Think Tanks, almost from the beginning of their activities. Advisory roles of researchers and their participation in conferences or other types of events are being monitored in all cases, but these indicators seem to face important limitations because it is difficult to capture the type and importance (for TT impact considerations) of the participation or of the advisory roles.

All TTs consider that attracting and retaining highly qualified core researcher and attaining financial sustainability (being able to diversify their sources of income in a sustainable manner and reduce volatility and dependence) are key for success and should be monitored and considered intermediate outcomes.

On the other hand, more difficult and less usual to monitor seem to be outcome indicators, more related to the TT’s reputation, such as invitations to provide expert judgements and professional opinions, citations of published works (in other publications and even more difficult on public documents, norms or speeches) and user surveys. For example, AIAE continues to grapple with finding appropriate and valid mechanisms for measuring penultimate and final end-user impacts. What they already do as part of the monitoring practices is to include with every research or policy conference, workshop or seminar, a post-event feedback survey. The survey elicits how the conference, workshop or seminar has benefited the participants and for that they intend to use the benefits gained.

Even more problems are faced by the TTs in their process of monitoring citations, key variable for measuring impact. According to IPS, given that their core objective is attempting to influence policymaking at the national level, monitoring their direct contributions to government policy frameworks and its research citations in policy documents (of government and donor agencies in particular) is the most relevant measure of impact. However, current monitoring of the above is not perfect and there are shortcomings in the way these are measured. Also, in the case of GRADE, although important efforts have been made to monitor citations, as it is consider a key indicator of influence, they are still facing difficulties, particularly when looking for citations of its publications in government (policy documents) since very few libraries
and public institutions have their documents in an accessible electronic system and public documents do not tend to include citations.

One of the more important conclusions of the study is related to the acknowledgment of the complexities of monitoring and measuring impact when defined as policy influence. This is where the idea of "research brokerage" comes in, as think tanks not only have to produce information but also convince policy makers, civil society or other actors that those ideas are worth considering. Although in some cases research impact is relatively easy to identify and show, in some other it is very difficult. Even in the cases where the impact is clear, case studies show that qualitative information is required, i.e. somewhat detailed examples. It is recognized that policy influence is very difficult to objectively measure and requires qualitative evidence provided by examples (citations, testimonies, invitations to provide judgement, etc.).

We find also some consensus both in the literature and in the cases revised, that the final impact indicators are the most difficult to monitor and objectively measure. Depending on the specific missions and priorities of the TT, final impact will be along the lines of recommendations adopted by policymakers; awards granted; publication in or citation of publications in academic journals; public testimonies and/or success in challenging the conventional wisdom. However, we can conclude that measuring TT’s impact is a complex challenge yet to be solved.