



International Development
Research Centre

Centre de recherches pour le
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Policy Community Survey Follow-up Qualitative Interviews

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

As part of the Think Tank Initiative, a program implemented by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and designed to support independent policy research organizations in three global regions, GlobeScan was retained to design and conduct a primary research study, with the main objective to develop an understanding of the policy community in specific countries. Specifically, IDRC wanted the research to help identify strengths and weaknesses of particular think tanks; what activities are associated with the success of think tanks in order to help prioritize support strategies (funding, training, and technical assistance); and to create a benchmark against which future surveys can be compared to indicate broad changes in the policy community and the perceptions of think tanks.

The quantitative benchmarking research was completed over the course of 2009-2010 in 11 African countries, 7 Latin American countries, and 5 South Asian countries. Following the quantitative study IDRC then wished to conduct a qualitative research exercise in order to better understand underlying perceptions and issues in more depth.

The specific objectives of this qualitative phase of research are to:

- Delve deeper into key findings identified in the three regional reports, including understanding underlying perceptions;
- Learn how respondents defined and interpreted key terms and themes; and
- Add context to the quantitative findings.

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In total 29 qualitative interviews were conducted over the phone. All stakeholders participating in this qualitative study participated in in the quantitative phase of the research as well. As such, it is worth noting that the quantitative study was not designed with the intention to gather perceptions of a statistically significant sample of the policy community. Instead stakeholders were selected to participate in the quantitative study, realizing the limitations of the sample, but acknowledging the value of understanding perceptions of individuals in senior positions within each national policy community. As a result, the same limitations apply to this qualitative follow-up, in which the respondents were selected with the intention of representing the sample of the quantitative study.

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Stakeholders were recruited based on their response to the final question in the quantitative study, asking if they were willing to participate in future research related to the policy community survey. Respondents answering yes to this question were selected at random to participate, ensuring distribution across all countries in each of the three regions (South Asia, Latin America, and Africa), as well as distribution across the seven targeted stakeholder groups.

- Government
- Non-government organizations
- Media
- Multilateral/bilateral organizations
- Private sector
- Research/Academia
- Trade unions (in Latin America only)

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The policy-making process

- Stakeholders have different opinions when it comes to how the policy-making process has changed over the past five years. Some say things have improved, largely due to better public consultation, increased stakeholder involvement, and greater transparency throughout the process. However, some stakeholders indicate the process has worsened or remained unchanged, for some very similar reasons, including; little stakeholder involvement, little or no public participation in the process, failure of implementation, a lack of process for evaluating policy, and more generally, political instability or corruption. The differences in opinion are likely the result of the different national political contexts in which the stakeholders work.
- According to nearly all stakeholders, changes to policy-making processes are expected in the near future. Anticipated positive changes include better government facilitation, better budgeting, increased funding, the consolidation of civil society, as well as better consultation with various stakeholders involved in policy making. Uncertainty exists among some stakeholders around emerging and future political challenges as well as a reluctance to be transparent. Some stakeholders also indicate that there is doubt about the amount of public consultation that will actually occur moving forward.
- Quality in the context of the policy-making process is not simple to define. Stakeholders illustrate this by mentioning a wide array of thematic areas when asked about the definition including stakeholder inclusion in the process, the ability of the policy to be translated into action, clear outline of goals of the policy, the ability of a policy to respond to citizens' needs, and the existence of an effective evaluation process for the policy.

Implication for the Policy Community Survey (PCS):

- *Because quality in the context of policy-making processes is difficult to define, the definition used in the Latin America / South Asia wave of the PCS should continue to be included in future waves of the PCS to ensure all participating stakeholders are answering from a similar perspective.*

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Types of information

- Similar to the results of the quantitative survey, stakeholders involved in the qualitative phase tend to work in the areas of agriculture/food, economic issues, poverty, trade/industry, education, and human rights.
- Many stakeholders want information on more than one topic. Agriculture, economic issues, environment, human rights, and poverty tend to be types of information that are needed congruently, suggesting that much of the stakeholders' work related to policy making is interdisciplinary, and it is difficult to classify areas of work into a single area.

Implication for the PCS:

- *Questions included in the PCS about the types of information relevant to stakeholders' work related to policy making should be re-visited to take into account the interdisciplinary nature of their work.*

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Ease of obtaining information

- Stakeholders indicate that obtaining information needed for their work related to policy making tends to be difficult. The reasons for this largely relate to lack of infrastructure at the local level, controlled access to information, and poor dissemination of information.

Implication for the PCS:

- *Future PCS could explore the issues related to lack of infrastructure and poor dissemination of information. These are areas in which stakeholders could provide insight and advice for think tanks in their respective regions.*

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Quality of research

- Government – Echoing the findings of the quantitative survey, stakeholders concur that they have concerns about the quality of government sources of information. The cause of the dissatisfaction with government sources relates to access, inconsistencies in the information, reservations about methodology, and concern that the research is driven or affected by political interests.
- Independent policy research institutes – Overall, stakeholders from all regions and stakeholder groups agree that research outputs from independent policy research institutes are good. The only concerns that are voiced relate to the independence of these types of organizations, as some stakeholders suggest the organizations may have biased interests, or that their funders may have specific interests that compromise their independence.

Implication for the PCS:

- *These findings echo the results of the quantitative survey and could be explored further in future waves of the survey. Questions such as – why are there quality concerns related to government sources? And if the quality of independent policy research institutes is considered high, how can this be leveraged to increase use?*

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Research Formats

- Many stakeholders indicate that they prefer using multiple research formats for their work related to policy making. Many mention databases / statistical databases, which are considered a preferred format by many as they allow them to work with raw data. However, others mention they prefer published reports and policy documents, which summarize and include analysis on a specific topic.
- The policy brief gets mixed reviews as a medium to receive information. In part it seems that stakeholders like reviewing briefs in conjunction with other more detailed formats of information, however, there also seems to be lack of understanding about what a policy brief actually is, and what form it should take.

Implication for the PCS:

- *Given the uncertainty surrounding the term policy brief, future waves of the PCS should provide a clear definition of what is meant by a policy brief. Stakeholders could also be asked when they find policy briefs most useful and when they prefer more detailed information.*

Future challenges facing think tanks

- Stakeholders report a wide range of future challenges for think tanks. Some of these concerns can be classified as functional, internal concerns, such as securing funding, producing quality research, awareness raising, as well as effective dissemination of their research. Other challenges are external to the institution, such as the political/social context in which they operate, infrastructure, and external partnerships with other organizations.

Implication for the PCS:

- *The PCS is a useful tool for monitoring the challenges think tanks face. Tracking the performance ratings grantee institutions receive over time, will give useful insight into how think tanks are addressing challenges. The attributes on which grantee institutions are rated should be reviewed to ensure they cover the many challenges faced by think tanks, and be adapted to include new challenges, particular related to infrastructure and methods of information dissemination, as think tanks adapt to evolving technology.*