

# **The Gap between Think Tanks and Policymakers – Special Focus on the Arab World**

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Technology is advancing extremely fast, climate change is threatening the whole world, poverty and social injustice are increasingly threatening sustainable development efforts, and political conflicts are impeding development efforts not only in the countries involved but also extending beyond their borders to regional and international levels. All the above calls for close collaboration between think tanks and policymakers. In fact, the only way policymakers can keep up with these challenges is through this strong association between the two sides; specifically, through think tanks “doing the thinking” for policymakers.

However, there seems to be a widening gap between think tanks and policymakers. More often than not, policymakers make their decisions away from think tanks; they don’t even ask for their help, and when they do they take their recommendations very cautiously as supporting evidence, seldom as a main source. We often hear from policymakers expressions like “You do not understand the situation,” “Your analysis is too theoretical,” or “Your suggestions are not realistic.” We also hear frustrated - sometimes even hurtful - comments on the part of think tanks as they feel no appreciation for their efforts and the useful solutions they provide to policymakers who instead go for mediocre solutions that they feel comfortable with.

Closing the gap between think tanks and policymakers is becoming more and more eminent for all the reasons already listed above, but this cannot be realized unless the nature of the gap is analyzed and dissected. Only a close and detailed analysis of the problem can lead to a final and sustainable solution.

Lots of resources go to think tanks primarily to guide policymakers, if not directly and immediately, then at least indirectly and after a period of time. The existence of such a gap between both sides means that scarce resources are going to research that doesn’t find its way through to its beneficiary (i.e. wasted or underutilized resources).

The purpose of this short article is to closely analyze the nature of this gap between the two sides and identify solutions for every segment of the problem to make a tangible impact. It focuses primarily on the economic and strategic planning interests of think tanks. Think tanks specialized in political conflicts are not addressed in this note. The size of this gap in the case of the Arab world is also addressed. Finally, a few suggestions for tested solutions to different components of the problem are presented.

For starters, the gap between think tanks and policymakers can be broken down into five types: an information gap, a time zone gap, a language gap, a communication gap, and a trust gap.

While each seems to be dealing with a separate issue, the reality is that they are all interlinked and feeding with a multiplier effect into the last type: the trust gap.

The time zone gap deals with the different pace of action between policymakers and think tanks. Policymakers are under a lot of pressure to make decisions. They have questions about alternative solutions to problems, and they want the answers NOW or even yesterday if possible. Think tanks, on the other hand, want to take their time with research and by the time they are done, their research is useless because the eminence of the issue is over and decisions have already been taken. Naturally, this gap exists with different degrees depending on the topic and time frame.

The time zone gap is further emphasized by the information gap. In order for think tanks to act quickly, they need updated and reliable information in a timely manner. This in itself is a big problem especially in developing countries, with the Arab world topping the list. When the work of think tanks is assessed by policymakers, they hardly ever remember this part of the problem.

The language gap is equally important. Policymakers need a simple language that they understand and can use to defend their policies. Think tanks often use economic, social, and political jargon that sounds foreign to policymakers. Policymakers often feel intimidated with such language, and they are more comfortable using alternative mediocre analysis and conclusions simply because they understand them.

The communication gap is another major problem. Outcomes of research and policy recommendations are typically presented in seminars and published articles in journals. This channel of communication is used more by the academic community rather than policymakers. A deeper communication problem presents itself when reaching out to policymakers actually takes place. Policymakers are typically involved after the research has been completed and policy results are presented.

Policymakers are hardly ever involved in the process of research, choice of methodology, and decision on assumptions. They typically just see results and their 'what if' questions are not answered because the research is already completed.

Another aspect of the communication problem, closely related to the information and time zone gaps, is accessibility to the 'stock' and 'flow' of research on a certain topic. Meaning, all the accumulated research - measured at any point in time - on any topic, versus on-going research on the same topic and policy briefs that attempt to do a quick analysis of a situation. While the first might be accessible to all, the flow is often much less accessible not only to policymakers but also to other researchers, whether they are part of think tanks or independent. This leads to old rather than new, up-to-date policy recommendations prevailing, not to mention missed opportunities for capitalizing on and following up on new research as opposed to repeating research unnecessarily.

Finally, keeping aside commissioned research, think tanks choose the topics they want to work on; the ones they think are important. It's important to ask whether policymakers see priorities in the same order.

All the above gaps feed into 'trust' in think tanks. Policymakers do not trust think tanks especially if they are not 'theirs' (i.e. governmental in nature). They see them as specifying

policies for which they will not pay the price. Should the policy recommendations be inappropriate, the blame falls on the policymaker and not the think tank.

How big is the gap between think tanks and policymakers in the Arab world? The statistical results by Govern, the Economic and Corporate Governance Center, prepared for T20 (19 and 20 Jan 2020) on the governance of Arab think tanks revealed that out of 140 think tanks only 40 are active. A large percentage are governmental think tanks and they all claim to be independent, but their perceived independence is minimal, especially because very few are NGOs. Most of them stated clearly that funding and resource instability are perceived as key risks threatening their continuation. With governance deficiencies of this kind, the gap between think tanks and policymakers is even wider.

All think tanks try to narrow the gap in different ways, and a few techniques have proved successful at the Egyptian Center for Economic Studies (ECES): 1) involving policymakers in the research process from the beginning even when it involves using an economic model; 2) forming steering committees for each project involving the policymakers as well as the business community; 3) daily publication of economic commentary on pieces of economic news, which made policymakers and the business community feel that we work at their same pace; 3) collaborating with others and not working alone, which allows us to capitalize on existing research by all thus providing more answers to policymakers; 4) addressing ‘what if’ questions as part of the research to be prepared for policymakers questions in advance; 5) performing cost-benefit analysis public policy to the maximum extent possible so that policymakers see their options and what they stand to gain or lose from the decision.

In other words, we try to put ourselves in the shoes of policymakers and do our research work with that in mind.