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THINKING THROUGH CRISIS – THE ROLE OF THINK TANKS

Abstract

Most of the research in academic institutions is data-intensive and based on statistical models, which is often difficult and time-consuming to read for governments and businesses. Here comes the role of think tanks to serve as knowledge connectors - translating academic research into user-friendly information for informed policymaking. The rise of science-skeptical movements since a few years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic and their strengthening during the pandemic has put increasing pressure on global think tanks. Populist regimes in many regions of the world cut financial resources for think tanks, thus shrinking the space for an independent analysis. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a multitude of crises, including large-scale social, economic, health and livelihood challenges. An unprecedented economic meltdown, interruption of economic activities in all business sectors, and immense burden on the health sector left governments reeling and scrambling to find appropriate policy responses to minimize the pandemic's impacts. The pandemic has further accentuated the challenges think tanks are confronting. One of the first responses by the think tanks from the outset was adopting new technologies and a quick shift to online work modality. Think tanks in the region organized dozens of webinars on the pandemic's critical challenges to facilitate the governments and influence and shape public opinion in their respective countries. These webinars covered a broad range of topics, including the research and analyses on the impacts of the COVID-19.

Key words: research, information, think tank, pandemic impact, crisis, economics, politics.

Think Tanks and Civil Society Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania [1] defines think tanks as public policy research, analysis, and engagement organizations generating policy-oriented knowledge products in support of informed public policymaking. Most of the research in academic institutions is data-intensive and based on statistical models, which is often difficult and time-consuming to read for governments and businesses. Here comes the role of think tanks to serve as knowledge connectors – translating academic research into user-friendly information for informed policymaking. To remain relevant in a fast-changing world, think tanks need to package their products – like knowledge nuggets – to suit busy policymakers who have little time and appetite for reading voluminous reports and statistics-rich research papers.

Think tanks have to face scarcer funding in the coming years.

The rise of science-skeptical movements since a few years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic and their strengthening during the pandemic has put increasing pressure on global think tanks. Populist regimes in many regions of the world cut financial resources for think tanks, thus shrinking the space for an independent analysis. Think tanks are also partially responsible for this state of affairs. They failed to sufficiently understand and respond to non-traditional sources of competition – the mushrooming growth of tech-intensive information platforms, not recalibrating their strategies to meet growing knowledge expectations of policymakers, and precariously relying on traditional sources of funding. Then hit the COVID-19 pandemic with its devastating impact on life and livelihood across the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a multitude of crises, including large-scale social, economic, health and livelihood challenges. An unprecedented economic meltdown, interruption of economic activities in all business sectors, and immense burden on the health sector left governments reeling and scrambling to find appropriate policy responses to minimize the pandemic's impacts. The pandemic has further accentuated the challenges think tanks are confronting. One of the critical challenges is to ensure financial sustainability, mainly when governments changed priorities and the bulk of the funds

in the public sector, foundations, and philanthropies have been channeled toward shoring up people and sectors on the brink of financial collapse.

Think tanks from developing countries are even more affected.

According to a study by Enrique Mendizabal of On Think Tank (OTT) [2] – a global platform dedicated to promoting better-informed policy – on the Impact of COVID-19 on think tanks, the bulk of respondents predicted that there would definitely be setbacks, particularly in the second half of 2021 as most of the previously available funding will be redirected to COVID-19 related response and that there will be less means available for think tanks also in the long run. The study paints an even gloomier outlook for think tanks in developing countries – 52% of respondents from Latin America believe that the crisis will have a significant effect on think tanks in their country; 48% of respondents from Africa, 44%, from Asia, 38% from Europe, and only 11% from the US and Canada share the same view. But there are a handful of respondents who are upbeat about the future of think tanks. They base their optimism on the availability of new opportunities in the form of a modernization push toward digitalization, webinars' popularity, and the emergence of the virtual workspace.

Think tanks have reacted in many innovative ways.

Many think tanks worldwide have quickly and effectively responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by innovating their business models and providing timely and dependable policy guidance to the governments. One of the first responses by the think tanks from the outset was adopting new technologies and a quick shift to online work modality. Think tanks in the region organized dozens of webinars on the pandemic's critical challenges to facilitate the governments and influence and shape public opinion in their respective countries. These webinars covered a broad range of topics, including the research and analyses on the impacts of the COVID-19 in terms of households, food security, economy, MSMEs, tax incentive, social packages, epidemiology, vaccination, etc. The think tanks followed both demand-driven and supply push approaches in responding to the pandemic. The former approach highlights policymakers' trust in think tanks' capacity and credibility as key knowledge providers. A hallmark of their response during the pandemic is their ability to leverage digital technologies and social media for research, capacity building, and advocacy.

More than ever, think tanks need partnerships and technologically advanced outreach.

As a way forward for think tanks, it is imperative for them to win public trust so that their opinions and recommendations are heard, accepted, and adopted by the public, society, and the governments. Understandably, think tanks have limited financial and human resources and can focus only on limited topics. To gain broader expertise on a range of regional policy challenges, they need to forge alliances and partnerships with regional and global think tanks to compensate for resource constraints. Most of the think tanks have developed excellent expertise on national issues of the country of their domicile, but as the COVID-19 has proven, most of the region's challenges have regional underpinnings, hence requiring a very well-coordinated regional response. It is imperative to cooperate and collaborate with think tanks in the region to learn from success and failure stories to recalibrate their approaches and responses. One key lesson learned during the pandemic is the use of cutting-edge technologies to reach out to the maximum, diverse audience to send across the message. Think tanks need to use virtual platforms, social media, online forums; and conduct data analytics and data visualization that is well understood by the public.

The CAREC Institute started a virtual dialogue among think tanks.

Against this backdrop, the CAREC Institute¹ – as a Secretariat of the CAREC Think Tanks Network (CTTN)² – organized a virtual dialogue on 24th March 2021 to facilitate an intellectual discourse on think tanks' role in times of crisis. Think tank representatives – Center for China and Globalization (CCG), the PRC; Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI), Japan; Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Pakistan; Economic Research Institute (ERI), Mongolia; Centre for Economic and Social Development (CESD), Azerbaijan; United Nations Office for South-South

¹ The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Institute is an intergovernmental organization dedicated to promoting the economic cooperation. The CAREC Institute is jointly shared, owned, and governed by eleven member countries: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, the PRC, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The Institute acts as a knowledge arm of the CAREC Program to ensure coherence in design and implementation of policies, programs, and projects to promote regional economic cooperation and integration.

² Leading think tanks from the CAREC member countries agreed to establish the CAREC Think Tanks Network (CTTN) in 2017 to provide innovative solutions for promoting economic cooperation by recognizing the importance of regional perspectives.

Cooperation (UNOSSC) – shared their experiences of policy support to governments and deliberated on the strategies to remain relevant in times of crisis. Their response to the pandemic has been wide-ranging, encompassing initiatives such as webinars, policy research, capacity building trainings, public opinion surveys, developing online platforms and portals, and advocacy engagement with policymakers. They expressed interest in close cooperation also with other think tanks and universities from the region, including the Turan university.

In the post-pandemic recovery period, CAREC Think Tanks Network (CTTN) needs to play a more active role in bringing regional think tanks together for collaborative research and capacity building. To reinvigorate the (CTTN), there is a need to create an online platform for exchanging ideas and experiences among the members and learning what works and what does not work in a particular policy setting. Setting up sub-groups on sectoral issues will further deepen and enrich regional cooperation for informed policy research and responses. Moreover, the CTTN will serve its member think tanks better if a CTTN Journal is launched to provide a regional platform to researchers to publish their work in peer-reviewed journals. The CAREC Institute, as a Secretariat of CTTN, will allocate more resources for the network in coming years.

LIST OF LITERATURE

1 TCSP GLOBAL GO TO THINK TANK INDEX REPORTS, 2020: https://repository.upenn.edu/think_tanks/18/.

2 COVID–19’s effect on think tanks in 10 headlines by Enrique Mendizabal: <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/covid-19s-effect-on-think-tanks-in-10-headlines/>.

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ДАҒДАРЫС АРҚЫЛЫ ОЙЛАУ – АНАЛИТИКАЛЫҚ ОРТАЛЫҚТАРДЫҢ РӨЛІ

Аңдатпа

Академиялық мекемелердегі зерттеулердің көпшілігі үлкен көлемді деректерді қажет етеді және статистикалық модельдерге негізделген, оларды оқу үкіметтер мен бизнес үшін жиі қиын және көп уақытты қажет етеді. Мұнда білім арасындағы байланыс ретінде қызмет ететін аналитикалық орталықтардың рөлі пайда болады, академиялық зерттеулерді негізделген саясатты жасау үшін пайдаланушыға ыңғайлы ақпаратқа аударады. COVID–19 пандемиясынан бірнеше жыл бұрын ғылымға деген скептикалық қозғалыстардың өсуі және пандемия кезінде олардың күшеюі жаһандық ғылыми орталықтарға көбірек қысым жасады. Әлемнің көптеген аймақтарындағы популистік режимдер аналитикалық орталықтардың қаржылық ресурстарын азайтады, осылайша тәуелсіз талдау үшін кеңістікті тарылтады. COVID–19 пандемиясы көптеген дағдарыстарды, соның ішінде ауқымды әлеуметтік және экономикалық мәселелерді, денсаулық пен өмір сүру мәселелерін тудырды. Бұрын-соңды болмаған экономикалық құлдырау, бизнестің барлық салаларындағы экономикалық белсенділіктің тоқтап қалуы және денсаулық сақтау саласына үлкен ауыртпалық үкіметтерді пандемияның салдарын азайту үшін тиісті саясатты іздеуге мәжбүр етті. Аймақтағы аналитикалық орталықтар үкіметтерге көмектесу және өз елдеріндегі қоғамдық пікірге әсер ету және оны қалыптастыру үшін пандемияның маңызды мәселелері бойынша ондаған веб-семинарлар ұйымдастырды.

Тірек сөздер: зерттеулер, ақпарат, талдау орталығы, пандемияның әсері, дағдарыс, экономика, саясат.

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МЫШЛЕНИЕ ПОСРЕДСТВОМ КРИЗИСА – РОЛЬ АНАЛИТИЧЕСКИХ ЦЕНТРОВ

Аннотация

Большинство исследований в академических учреждениях требует большого объема данных и основывается на статистических моделях, чтение которых правительствам и предприятиям часто бывает затруднительно и требует много времени. Здесь важна роль аналитических центров, которые служат связующим звеном между знаниями, переводя академические исследования в удобную для пользователя информацию для выработки обоснованной политики. Рост скептических движений к науке за несколько лет до пандемии COVID-19 и их усиление во время пандемии оказали большое давление на глобальные аналитические центры. Популистские режимы во многих регионах мира сокращают финансовые ресурсы аналитических центров, тем самым сужая пространство для независимого анализа. Пандемия COVID-19 вызвала множество кризисов, включая крупномасштабные социальные и экономические проблемы, а также проблемы со здоровьем и средствами к существованию. Беспрецедентный экономический спад, приостановка экономической деятельности во всех секторах бизнеса и огромное бремя для сектора здравоохранения заставили правительства биться в поисках надлежащих ответных мер политики, чтобы минимизировать последствия пандемии. Одним из первых ответов аналитических центров с самого начала было внедрение новых технологий и быстрый переход к онлайн-методам работы. Аналитические центры в регионе организовали десятки веб-семинаров по важнейшим проблемам пандемии, чтобы помочь правительствам и влиять на общественное мнение в своих странах и формировать его.

Ключевые слова: исследования, информация, аналитический центр, влияние пандемии, кризис, экономика, политика.