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Policy Research Institutes in the Arab World: Current Activities and Initiatives

Summary of the Stock-taking Meeting organized by the

Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, AUB

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Overview

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs' (IFI) project on the Consortium of Arab Policy Research Institutes (CAPRI) organized a stock-taking meeting entitled "Policy Research Institutes in the Arab World: Current Activities and Initiatives" which was held on September 23, 2013 at the American University of Beirut. This meeting gathered Policy Research Institutes (PRIs) and institutions that, like IFI, are currently managing projects to study the work and impact of PRIs and research centers in the Arab world. Participants joined the workshop from Jordan, Oman, Spain, Qatar, Egypt and Lebanon.

The purpose of this stock-taking meeting was to exchange views on the various projects undertaken by the institutes and identify common or complementary areas of interest and policy priorities in order to benefit from collaboration among the institutes on different projects underway.

Dr. Hana A. El-Ghali presented the ongoing work for the CAPRI Project at IFI. In the three sessions that followed, the floor was given to participants to present an overview of their respective institute's work on PRIs and research centers, highlighting the research areas of focus, achievements and lessons learned to date, as well as challenges faced.

CAPRI Project

Dr. El-Ghali, Senior Program Coordinator at IFI, presented an overview of the CAPRI project, which is part of the Research Advocacy and Public Policy-making program aiming to fill the gap in understanding the specific link between PRIs and policy-making in the Arab world. The objectives of the CAPRI project are to study the role and map the landscape of PRIs in the Arab World, enhance PRI's role and impact on policy-making and facilitate networking and collaboration among Arab PRIs. CAPRI has gleaned and compiled a significant amount of data regarding the state of PRIs in the Arab World over the past three years through conducting a variety of activities, together with establishing a regional PRI database, convening regional strategic and technical workshops and seminars, and developing a series of working papers.

¹Dr. El-Ghali introduced the preliminary findings of CAPRI's work since 2010. Two-hundred and forty institutes have been classified within the regional PRI database. Institutes meeting the following definition for a PRI were selected: "organizations that conduct research and produce knowledge of relevance to public policies. PRIs can influence public policy-making directly through policy advocacy and direct links with governments, public institutions and policymakers or indirectly through producing policy relevant research that can be used by policymakers"². Given the sample in the PRI database, it was found that Lebanon, Palestine and Morocco had the largest number of PRIs in the MENA region, and Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Libya had the least. Funding was also found to be one of the significant variables between the PRIs classified within the database, as 26% of the PRIs reported that they receive government funds, 14% reported to receive funding from the United Nations agencies and other international organizations and 19% refused to disclose their source of funding. As for the affiliation of PRIs, 40% of the classified PRIs reported having no affiliation (being independent) in their research and functions. Some of these findings have a number of limitations, particularly that the methodology followed to compile the database depended on local researchers in every country, the availability of data on PRI websites and the willingness of surveyed institutes to disclose information. Common challenges identified by the CAPRI project include the lack of sustainable long term funding for PRIs, the lack of research capacity within the institutes, the interference of government and donors in their research agendas and the lack of transparency in the policy-making processes in the Arab world.

Participants' Experiences

"Policy-making by invitation" and Stakeholder Involvement Approaches

The first session began presented the types of policy research one of the participating centers engages in and the three forms of influence that the center used in the past:

- 1) Papers and reports, which was not deemed as highly effective;
- 2) "Policy-making by invitation", whereby the center was approached by the government for consultation on specific topics on which information was needed. Numerous examples were given about the cooperation of this PRI with the government in various areas of policy such as drafting an electoral law or preparing reports for summits on climate change. In 2005, the center was invited to contribute to drafting an electoral law, after which they moved on to a broader study of electoral behavior in the country. This also included monitoring the role of parliamentarians, not only in terms of session attendance but also legislative activity. In 2012, the center was also invited to be a member on the committee assigned to study the decentralization law;
- 3) Stakeholder engagement/involvement approach, whereby the center approached the concerned governmental agency and made it a partner in the project from the start. The center has been following this strategy with its latest project on Gas resources, more specifically

¹ For more information on the database and its findings, please contact IFI at ha58@aub.edu.lb.

² Thunert, M. (2004). Think tanks in Germany. *Society*, 41(4), 66-69.

looking at the economic, political and geopolitical aspects of the issue. In addition, the center was involved in research regarding the industrial sector in collaboration with influential actors in this sector and focusing on "highly sophisticated products".

Another participating center described its experience in mapping civil society organizations in an attempt to better understand the environment in which those operate and identify the challenges, weaknesses and strengths they are facing today. The institute was also involved in the study of the role of think tanks in the democratic transition and organized a regional conference that gathered around 40 academicians, researchers and think tank representatives to discuss the main challenges and to identify strategies to support both new and old think tanks during this transitional period. The main recommendations included establishing a database and a network of think tanks in the region, and conducting an analytical study of the democratic transition in the Arab region. The institute has also developed a directory of think tanks and faced difficulty in validating its information and finding a single source of information. One of the recommendations within the scope of work on a directory for PRIs in the region has been to embark on collaboration with IFI in an attempt to capitalize on shared resources and merge the existing databases of think tanks.

Longevity and Sustainability

During the second session of the meeting, the participants discussed the question of the longevity of think tanks, especially new ones that have been established in the past few years. "This proliferation of these new organizations is not anything new," commented one participant, "...after the collapse of the Soviet Union, we witnessed a large number of new organizations that would come up and initially with such great enthusiasm. However over time, as many of these organizations started facing problems, they would shut down or we would see at times three or four merging together to create one organization." One of the issues raised in this session was the potential of cooperation between veteran and recent think tanks which could be established as a way of support for relatively "younger" institutes. A further concern that was discussed highlighted the proliferation of new think tanks in the Middle East and the settings in which they were being set up, such as the economic and political security of the country. . Moreover, there was a concern policy-makers could become too dependent on the think tank if the think tank stays past its necessary lifespan to try to unnecessarily achieve more than there is.

Cooperation and Collaborative Networking

During the third session of the meeting, the issue of networks and networking was discussed as well as the ability of research centers to maintain their independence when receiving external funds. Participants agreed that a "hands-off" approach was for the best of the institute in the long term in order to avoid risks of losing independence or credibility. Sustainability was much more preferable to "thrivability"; meaning focusing too much on obtaining funds for expansion might compromise the quality of research produced, so the organization needs to maintain the quality and focus of its work to ensure its sustainability on the long run. The participants also discussed the topic of research and cooperation in the field of research by multiple think tanks and research networks to increase the quality of the material being produced. One of the participants brought forward his idea of creating a

loose, central network of various organizations and NGOs as a way to increase cooperation between the various organizations and support younger, less experienced think tanks.

Project Selection

Another topic discussed was how to best manage projects that the each institute is willing to lead. It was debated whether the organization would be better off focusing on certain types of projects in order to build expertise and not end up with a mission drift, or to keep its areas of interest wide and flexible allowing for more opportunities; as one participant noted, “there is value in being imprecise in research interests”. As such it was agreed that there was a need to establish a strategic plan for the institute in order to create a sustainable and manageable continuity of projects.

In conclusion, the intent of this stock-taking meeting was to bring together institutes that, like IFI, study the work and impact of PRIs and research centers in the Arab World. Among the main issues identified in the meeting were:

1. More research on the individual country level is needed to understand how different PRIs that target different audiences impact policy.
2. Funding and sustainability always stand out as challenges even for institutions like IFI that have a secure core budget but still need to raise money every year for program expenses.
3. Technical issues, including research, translation, communication and strategic planning, are vital capacities that PRIs need to strengthen in order to be successful.
4. The status and role of new PRIs that are emerging all over the Arab region due to the Arab uprisings need to be studied closely for a better understanding (i.e, understand their composition, what motivates them, what their “mindset” is).
5. Cooperation and collaborative networking are important but generally happen informally. There needs to be a formalized systematic process or consortium. Suggestions included harnessing the use of technology (for example, creating an App similar to the Global Reporting Initiative App that acts as a database) for developing a central database or common platform.