Overview of Policy Research Institutes in the Arab World
Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
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The Research, Advocacy and Public Policy-making (RAPP) Program at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) hosted a panel discussion entitled “Overview of Policy Research Institutes (PRIs) in the Arab World” to launch its first publication on PRIs in the Arab world. The panel discussion was led by Dr. Hana A. El-Ghali, Senior Program Coordinator, who presented an overview of the monograph report, and commentators Dr. Fadi Al-Jardali, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Health Sciences at AUB, and Director of the Knowledge to Policy Center for Health and Dr. Bruce Currie-Alder, Regional Director of International Development Research Centre. The monograph report synthesizes the findings the RAPP team arrived at after studying and interacting with PRIs in the region for the past five years.

The monograph presents findings collected during strategic and technical workshops held at IFI covering issues that are relevant to PRIs in the Arab world. Defining a PRI in the Arab world emerged as one of the highly debatable topics among experts. For the purpose of the project and the study of PRIs in the Arab region, IFI adopted a broad definition of PRIs whereby they are policy-oriented institutes that produce evidence-based research and engage with policy-makers. IFI has identified over 200 PRIs in over 15 Arab countries and included them in an online searchable database. The database is reviewed and updated biannually in order to keep up with the dynamic landscape of PRIs in the Arab region. One of the major issues that IFI deliberated with when developing the database was whether the organizations in question are considered PRIs or not and whether they fit the proposed definition. Judgements were based on a review of websites, face-to-face interviews and phone interviews. Dr. El-Ghali explained that as IFI moves forward with this project, a better assessment will be developed of which PRIs to include in the database.

The state of PRIs and policy-making in the Arab region was presented in the monograph as one that is characterized by a lack of regular interaction among decision makers and civil society. Against this backdrop, Arab PRIs seem to have low visibility which has so far resulted in their limited impact on policy-making. Furthermore, it was evident that Arab officials do not regularly call on PRIs expertise for a number of reasons, particularly the absence of accountable governance systems. Another important report finding showed that funding and political constraints influence the selection of research agendas of Arab PRIs and the durability of their projects.

Dr. El-Ghali then concluded with a number of recommendations, among which is the need to direct the efforts of PRIs towards strengthening their communication and outreach strategies in an attempt to better influence and inform the policy-making processes. In many
cases, policy-makers are still not aware that there is such evidence to be used and that they can draw on experts to make better-informed decisions. Therefore, a change in the existing culture must take place in order to make decision-making more evidence informed. Networking and sharing of resources should also be promoted as it provides sources of credibility, legitimacy and efficacy for PRIs in the Arab region.

During his commentary, Dr. Bruce Currie-Alder presented a constructive critique of the monograph report. He explained that the monograph would benefit from articulating the problem, although it identified a number of concerns like the lack of interaction between researchers, the lack of accountability among policy-makers and the need for continuity and credibility in research agendas. He argued that the problem is more a concern for research in terms of “misinformed citizens and public action”.

According to Dr. Currie-Alder, the monograph remains an exploratory attempt which could benefit from grounding in theory and in key messages. He stressed that the monograph could provide insights on the strategic communications, funding strategies and knowledge translation, in addition to the role and purpose of networking. It was also recommended that the project addresses the following question: “is the Arab world unique?”. In attempt to answer this question, Dr. Currie-Alder compared the Arab region to the rest of the world and stated that Arab PRIs harbour the following distinctive set of weaknesses: 1) Governments operate in an opaque manner 2) Lack of academic freedom and mobility among institutions is constrained 3) Funding constraints and the stigma of foreign funding as outside influence.

Another distinctive feature of the Arab region is the lack of stability in the region and the dynamic landscape of PRIs with 45 new institutes opening and 16 others closing down since 2009, as the monograph reports. An opportunity which seems to be unique to the Arab setting is the creation of new public spaces as a result of the recent uprisings that has prompted public discussion. On the other hand, the Arab region shares similar challenges with other settings, such as: 1) The lack of autonomy, in which scarcity has caused funders to be more proactive in articulating research agendas and expected results 2) Operational challenges of how to ensure legitimacy, staffing and funding over time 3) Programmatic challenges in choosing the right research agenda among popular, controversial and taboo topics.

Dr. Currie-Alder pointed out that there seems to be a missing market between the supply of and demand for research, which the monograph fails to mention. What might be helpful in understanding this issue, he suggested, is an economic analysis of incentives for researchers and policy-makers. There seems to be a need to highlight alternative linkages between PRIs and policy-makers such as journalists, media, public opinion shapers, the private sector and universities, which are all part of a vibrant ecosystem. The report seems to also lack a unit of analysis. He suggested studying PRIs in their operating context, instead of studying them in isolation, and to further study how they contribute to the circulation of people and ideas within the countries of the region. There is also a need to understand what shapes policy in the Arab
region. Governments remain largely unaccountable to the Arab public. There is an emphasis on elections but not necessarily the constant culture of holding policy-makers accountable for what they are doing and not doing while in office. Finally, he explained that there seems to be an opportunity to shape the understanding of what constitutes a successful PRI. He suggested assessing PRIs not just on quantity or quality of publications, but on the production of talent, ideas or action. He also suggested the need to understand the funders’ perspective of success. This may also include the need to look at the multiple roles of PRIs in policy processes as:

- Sense-making: diagnosing public problems
- Agenda-setting: putting forward what the public debate should be about
- Myth-busting: disapproving assumptions that are empirically false
- Enlightening: reframing of problems and understanding them
- Learning: implementing and putting into practice

Dr. Fadi Al-Jardali described the monograph as a foundational piece that could be used to develop strategies to make PRIs more successful and to increase their engagements with policy-makers. Dr. Al-Jardali proposed a number of needed next steps to move forward with the findings of the monograph.

Dr. Al-Jardali’s first recommendation was the need to increase capacity-building at the levels of policy-making institutions, researchers and PRIs. According to him, the monograph shows the poor capacity of Arab PRIs to produce policy-relevant research, adopt knowledge translation tools and advocate for their own policies. He suggested widening the lens to not just focus on PRIs but to include research studies on the capacities of researchers and government institutions as well.

Drawing from the monograph and other studies conducted by AUB, Dr. Al-Jardali believes that the policy-making environment in the Arab region requires changes in the existing culture. There is a wide gap between PRIs and policy-makers. Policy-makers are not fully aware of the importance of using evidence emanating from PRIs and they tend to listen more to consultancy firms than PRIs. Dr. Al-Jardali also raised the need to devise novel approaches for the interaction of PRIs in order to challenge the existing culture of policy-makers and gain their trust. He highlighted the lack of accountable governance in current policy-making processes, especially in Arab countries in transition. “Stagnation fills the policy-making processes because policy-makers are afraid of accountability,” he explained. Therefore, there seems to be a pressing need for installing accountability measures and frameworks within and across policy-making institutions, in which policy-makers can look at it as an opportunity to be transparent and accountable to citizens rather than a fear of being penalized.

Dr. Al-Jardali further explained that PRIs are also incapable of synthesizing and communicating existing knowledge to better influence the policy-making process. He proposed harnessing evidence in knowledge translation tools as an extremely important strategy for
PRIs to have an impact on national decision making. The monograph further explores the relationship between PRIs and their funding agencies. This relationship can be described as a conflict of interest between the two. Dr. Al-Jardali suggests that PRIs can begin experimenting with a mix of revenue-generating models and adopt those that do not have any implications on their independence. The monograph also highlights the challenges in the links and relationships between media, researchers and PRIs. Dr. Al-Jardali proposed to promote evidence-based reporting in media.

IFI’s RAPP program has been pioneering the study of PRIs and the policy-making processes in the Arab world. Building on the comments and suggestions provided by Dr. Al-Jardali and Dr. Currie-Alder, the RAPP program will continue to develop research projects which will delve deeper into the issues highlighted in the panel discussion that need further probing. The program aims to organize a meeting with policy-makers in order to better understand their needs and priorities and to host workshops for continued collaboration among PRIs.