

## Emergence, Growth and Role of Think Tanks in Nepal

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### **Abstract**

*The term think tank defines the independent institute engaging in research, policy advocacy, advisor of policy maker, informing and sensitizing the public debate related to policy issues. This article is an attempt to analyze the emergence, growth and role of think tanks in Nepal. It looks at the background, evolution and role of think tanks from history and present, to understand the broad pattern of political and social development process that conditions their role in this context. This paper also examines the gap between knowledge-power interfaces and suggest to site reflecting the knowledge-power nexus borne out of the complex interplay between endogenous and exogenous political process. It discusses the issues based on data and information gathered through the secondary sources of information which have been used to sharpen the conceptual issues related to this study.*

**Keywords:** *Think Tanks, Public Policy, Knowledge-Power Nexus, Endogenous, Exogenous.*

### **I. Introduction**

The general definition of think tanks is the institutions as independent, non-interest based, non-profit organizations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and to influence the policymaking process. Operationally, think tanks are non-profit organizations that conduct and disseminate research and ideas on public policy issues. For James McGann, think tanks are unlike other institutions with which we are more familiar. They are centers of research, debate, and learning; but, unlike universities, they have no students (except interns), do not offer courses, and do not try to cover all subject areas. Instead they concentrate on key public policy issues (McGann, 2007). Politically, think tanks are aggressive institutions that actively seek to maximize public credibility and political access to make their expertise and ideas influential in policy making (Rich, 2004). The emergence of think tank as Stone (2007) claims not to bridge a false ontological divide between theory and practice or science/knowledge and politics/power, rather crucial interplay of the knowledge-power nexus borne out of the complex interplay between endogenous and exogenous political processes and actors.

### **II. Review of Literature**

There are various definitions of think tanks. Their definitions depend on their nature of work and style of composition (government, private and public). Think tanks insert themselves into the

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networks of people who are influential in particular area of policy. They organize conferences, seminars and workshops and publish books, briefing papers, journals, and media release for policy-makers, journalists and people able to sway the policy makers (Beder, 2001:128). They liaise with bureaucrats, consultants, interest groups, lobbyists, and others. They seek to provide advice directly to government officials and to government agencies and committees through consultancies. Ultimately, think tank employees become policy maker themselves, having established their credentials as a vital part of the relevant policy network (Beder, 2001:129).

Think tanks in South Asia perform not only production and dissemination of knowledge, expert policy advice based on research, workshop conferences and publications of research materials but also engage on activism, policy advocacy, media campaigns, public protest and demonstrations (Srivastava, 2011). By giving illustration of four types of state: feudal, imperial, authoritarian and bureaucratic, Mann (1986) argued that the nature of the state power helps to explain the different spaces think tanks occupy in the countries of South Asia. On the other hand, the roles of international agencies, intergovernmental organizations and private foundations and global frames have been influencing on the nature and functioning of think tanks (Srivastava, 2011). Nepal is not an exception from South Asian experience of Think Tanks both in the endogenous (nature of state power) and the exogenous (nature of international relationships) levels. The history of think tanks goes back to Panchayat era in Nepal. In truth, drawing indisputable distinction between think tanks and other types of organizations is neither entirely possible nor wanted; rather, institutional boundaries are frequently amorphous and overlapping in Nepal. Nonetheless, the products and objectives of think tanks are central to any clarification of how think tanks might be differentiated from other actors in their operations and influence. There were few university based research centers that were used by the Panchayat regime for the policy for Guided Democracy and Panchayat Development mission in Panchayat era. After 1990, varieties of think tanks, mostly private foundations, and action-based, hybrid and primary research based have been coming up in different forms and functions in Nepal.

Recently, the government has formed a five-member think tank to suggest it on various policy issues concerning economic, political, social and administrative reforms. A Cabinet meeting formed the think tank that would be officially named Policy Research Academy (Niti Anusandhan Pratisthan). Led by Prof. Chaitanya Mishra, the panel has Mina Acharya, Prof Rajendra Dhwoj Joshi, Prof Surendra Labh and Ganesh Gurung, former member of the National Planning Commission, as members. The Policy paper states, "A think tank of experts will be arranged for to regularly recommend the government through study and research on development, construction, security, foreign relations, and good governance, among others." One of the members said, "It will research core issues independently, in a critical approach from a national perspective at a time when major policy researches in the country are generally funded by foreigner research institutes". It is also

stated that the issues related to national security, governance, economy, development, and social security will be the areas of interest of the think tank formed by the government (The Kathmandu Post, 2018). In this way government can form special think tank for a specific policy issue and a general think tank can work for the collaboration of the government for all time.

### **III. Methodology**

Methodologically, the paper relies on the analysis of secondary information from selected literature from practitioners, academics and various sources such as published and unpublished literatures, previous study reports, journals, government planning and policy document to sharpen the conceptual issues related to the study. This is a qualitative study with analytical research design. Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions that explore a social or human problem, from which researcher builds a holistic picture, analyzes words, and details views of information. Data analysis has been done through reviewing the information as it is obtained, verifying information, and drawing conclusion. It is the process of making sense of the collected information. Quantitative data is analyzed through linking information with various theoretical and conceptual results related with think tanks in Nepal.

### **IV. Result and Discussion**

#### **History of Think Tanks in Nepal**

Before 1951, Nepal was virtually closed not only for political, and social organizations but also for research activities advocacy and policy research institutions. After the end of Ranacracy, separate planning and policy advice body was felt urgent. With the initiation of planned development process, a planning agency by the name of Planning Commission was constituted for the first time in Nepal in 1956 under the Chairmanship of the Prime Minister. To make it more capable and effective, the Yojana Mandal was set up in the same year in accordance with the Yojana Mandal Act, 1957. Besides the responsibility of plan formulation, the Yojana Mandal was entrusted with various executive powers. Following the overthrow of the multiparty democratic system in 1960 and with the initiation of Panchyat political system thereafter, Rastriya Yojana Parishad (National Planning Council) under the Chairmanship of His Majesty late King Mahendra was constituted (NPC 2014). As the decisions of the Council were treated as equivalent to that of the cabinet, the Council was regarded as the highest authority in the sphere of economic planning and policies. There was not any policy review institution. During late 1960s, Tribhuvan University based research institutions were opened to provide research based policy advices. To fulfill the aims of Panchayat development, palace appointed elites to come out research based policy advices from academic think tanks. After restoration of democracy and open air socio-political environment in 1990, varieties of public and private think tanks emerged to address policy gap in democratic context. Therefore, there is not long history of think tanks but their emergence and contributions to policy dialogue is significant.

### **Governmental Think Tanks**

Universities are the most important government institutions which directly or indirectly contribute to policy issues. Among them, Tribhuvan University, the oldest among other, has four autonomous research centers named CNAS, CEDA, CERID, and RECAST. They have been working like government think tanks from their inception. Originally established as the Institute of Nepal Studies in 1969, it was renamed INAS in 1972 and again renamed CNAS as a purely research centre in 1977. CNAS is a statutory research centre under Tribhuvan University for conducting independent research and deliberation on issues and studies in social sciences. CNAS is a multidisciplinary research centre with a team of full-time academic researchers (TU 2014). CEDA was established in 1969 under a tripartite agreement between His Majesty's Government of Nepal, TU, and the Ford Foundation. Started as an autonomous institution, the centre was later integrated into TU and given the status of an institute in 1975 after the National Education System Plan (NESP) was implemented (TU 2014). CEDA has been serving as a policy-research centre contributing towards the national development policies and strategies. The centre's activities are basically confined to research, consultancy and training programmes.

CERID has been working for the development of education in Nepal since its establishment in January 1979, especially focusing on the need for achieving academic excellence in the education system. In line with this, CERID's activities are directed towards undertaking educational innovation, issue-based research and need-based training programmes. Moreover, CERID has devoted itself to piloting innovative ideas that bear on national educational issues and concerns, and disseminating research outcomes (TU, 2014). RECAST was established in 1977 as a premier research and development institution within the organizational framework of Tribhuvan University. It functioned as a secretariat to the National Council of Science and Technology of Nepal till 1999 (TU, 2014). The goal of the Centre is to contribute to rapid and sustainable development of the country through enhanced research and policy with the optimum utilization of natural resources, improvement and dissemination of socio-economically relevant and environmentally sustainable technologies to the communities and the institutions concerned.

During Panchayat era, these research centers were used as think tanks for the Panchayat development policy advice. Development was the main banner of Panchayat government. To meet the development target, government appointed political-academicians as coordinators of the research centers. Their research outcomes were highly regarded by planning commission and policy makers. The think tanks provided legitimacy of Panchayat policy of unity and development. Pasupati Samser Rana, Parkash Chandra Lohoni and other key ideologues were supporting the state by recommending policy makers and policy review. After the end of Panchayat regime, the TU based think tanks were also politically influenced or their research outcomes were ignored by the government. Rather doing independent research activities, they were considered dumping places of political cadres of political parties. Therefore, nature of state influenced forms and functions of the think tanks.

To go underneath of research policy recommendations of university based researchers were ignored by policy makers. There were few reasons why policy makers did not use academic research outcomes as sources of policy making. Most of the findings and recommendations of the academic researchers are abstract. But the policy makers need very straightforward and clearly practical research findings. Another reason was academic researcher recommends long term effect of policy but the policy maker needs policy for the present time. Policy has to address present problems rather long waiting. The ignorance of university-based academic research by policy maker is worldwide phenomena. James McGann (2070) argued that since the 1960s universities and university-based academics have become less important in high-level Washington policy-making. That role has been increasingly taken over by the Washington-based think tanks, research centers, and policy “shops.” After 1990, Kathmandu-based hybrid think tanks, private research centers and I/NGOs played dominant roles of policy debate in Nepal.

At endogenous level, universities based think tanks were heavily dominated by political power and budget constrain to conduct grand research, publication and policy discussions. Rather they were funded by international agencies and their research outcomes were influenced by the interests of funding agencies at exogenous level.

### **Non-governmental Think Tanks**

Saubhagya Shah showed the picture of mushrooming scenario of non-government organizations after 1990. From 1990 to 2006, the number of NGOS working in development, human rights, democracy, conflict and policy review and advocacy, most of them funded by bilateral or multilateral sources, had increased in Nepal from 193 to over 33,000 (Shah, 2008:viii). Because of democratic air of post 1990, many non-governmental think tanks emerged in Kathmandu. There are very few think tanks which are doing purely policy research and dialogue. To look behind the curtain of various types of think tanks in Nepal, they are fulfilling interests of funding agencies or particular group of people. Their research issues have epistemological flaw and methodological biasness. Some examples of non-governmental think tanks are given below.

The Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS) is a fully independent, non-political, secular, research think-tank based in Kathmandu. It organizes conferences and conducts research in areas of South Asian regional cooperation, peace and conflict in South Asia, small arms proliferation, trade and connectivity and strategic issues concerning South Asian countries as well as Nepal's conduct of international relations. CSAS is also involved in research, dissemination and deliberation on Nepal's current peace process and constitution drafting with several programs on federalism and integration. But, CSAS is not publically established as a dominant think tank because bilateral agencies conduct high sounding policy dialogue and conferences in Nepal. Similarly, Nepal Development Research Institute (NDRI) aims to address the contemporary policy challenges, such

as the gaps between policy and practice, and to influence public policy through rigorous scientific research but it mainly focuses on development activities rather than policy. Established in 2004, it comprises of an interdisciplinary team of experts with highest academic standings, mostly doctoral degrees, and wealth of national and international experiences. During the past ten year's period, NDRI focused on creating opportunities for research, dialogue and collaboration which strengthened the linkage between the policy makers, academia and a pool of experts. Although NDRI has yet to produce outstanding results of policy research, the outcomes achieved so far have clearly demonstrated the potential of NDRI to evolve as the leading public policy think tank in Nepal.

Institute for Policy and Development (IPRAD), established in 1995, aims to concentrate on research and studies in economic and social fields of national and international importance in Nepal's development, policy alternatives and promoting regional and international cooperation. Nepal Policy Research Network (NPRN) strives to contribute to public policies that are developed in a democratic and inclusive manner to work for the poor and disadvantaged groups and time to safeguard national interest. We promote policy relevant to social science research and provide multiple windows to enhance their adoption in policy-making. It has been trying to bring together research, policy and academic leaders to collectively engage in policy debate.

Social Inclusion Research Fund (SIRF) played roles on policy analysis and public debates through sharing of research knowledge using diverse media and academic institutions at national and local levels. Significant sharing activities were conducted that aimed to inform a diverse range of agencies, such as members of the Constituent Assembly (CA), policy makers, heads of line ministries, leaders of development and civil society organisations. SIRF facilitated the establishment of Social Inclusion Resource Centres (SIRCs) at Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) and regional campuses in Dharan, Birganj, Janakpur, Pokhara, Nepalgunj and Dhangadhi. It started dialogues to establish Social Science Research Council (SSRC) as an institution that can take leadership and develop vision, where informed knowledge about Nepali society is reflected in development innovations, policy, teaching, research and practice. SIRF seeks to support the formation of an autonomous national institution comprising of highly professional and interdisciplinary body of social scientists. Stakeholders in the government are informed about the demand for SSRC and the Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers is taking initiatives for its formation. To observe roles of Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) on research and policy recommendation, SSRC is desirable. If SSRC is owned by government, it will be similar to university based research centers. The debate of SSRC establishment lies on its ownership. SIRF also picked up issues listed by World Bank and focused on research and policy dialogue accordingly. Though university based researchers were employed for research activities, findings of such research were misleadingly interpreted. The published research outcomes were interrogated because of institutional inclination and ethnocentric perspective.

The Social Science Baha is an independent, non-profit organisation set up with the objective of promoting and enhancing the study of and research in the social sciences in Nepal. By the time of its registration as an independent institution in 2007, the Baha had diversified its activities and become involved in other areas as well, namely: hosting lectures, discussions, workshops, and conferences; publishing books, occasional papers and journals; and conducting research. Martin Chautari, since its inception, has been engaging on public dialogue about development, democracy, social justice and policy debate. Besides, series of regular research presentation, research conferences, publications and policy issues are other concerns of the institution. Chautari has published series of volumes on Nepalese history and society, media studies, and other policy research. Baha and Chautari are considered relatively neutral think tanks in terms of interests of funding agencies and policy recommendation. Their publications are widely accepted as more academic rather policy implication.

Beside these hybrid think tanks, there are other think tanks like Samata Foundation and Madhes Foundation which chiefly concentrate on Dalit and Madhesi research and policy issues respectively. They hosted research, policy debate, conferences and publication of research based findings. Samata Foundation has been involved in policy advocacy in order to implement the Dalit rights-based policies. People oriented advocacy and campaigns are launched for the amendment of the incomplete policies in the current changed context. Madhesi Foundation conducts research and analysis, dialogues, policy debate and publications at various levels. Both foundations are building policy advocacy by producing semi-academic research and policy dialogues.

National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) carried out research on ethnic and indigenous policy issues. The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) is a regional intergovernmental learning and knowledge sharing centre that brings together a partnership of its regional member countries, partner institutions, and donors with a commitment for development action to secure a better future for the people and environment of the extended Himalayan region. Nepal economic forum (NEF) concentrates on economic research and policy 'thought center that takes a business approach to policy analysis and research. It aims to bridge the gap in information on portent economic and policy issues in Nepal through informed discourse and dissemination. The center has developed the business policy research center through which it emerges with multiple stakeholders of policy dialogue. Some international organizations like WB, ADB, UNDP, UNICEF, IMF, WHO and other UN agencies have been engaging on research and policy debate. Because of funding crisis to be established as independent think tank in Nepal, international and UN agencies dominated policy influence and research issues.

## **V. Conclusion**

Nepal has been instrumental throughout history in supporting not only the establishment of think tanks but also research activities. During Panchayat era, government employed university based research centers as state's infrastructural power for state policy making. Therefore, think tanks

were limited to their autonomy. After 1990, international agencies have been a crucial anchor to the emergence and development of think tanks in Nepal. The ongoing challenge for think tanks is to establish mutual trust on research product between government and non-government levels. There is ambiguous relationship and crisis of trust between government and non-government think tanks. Government think tanks do not trust policy recommendations provided by independent think tank and vice versa. Because of lack of state's social science research council (SSRC), Nepal failed to be visible among South Asian think tanks.

The majority of research pursue is largely done within the framework of problem solving, rather than based on a critical approach towards knowledge building in Nepal. Very few think tanks have been able to generate their own revenue and the majorities are vulnerable to a donor-driven research agenda. Funding challenge because of lack of established and trustworthy think tanks in Nepal could not be ignored. The search for a stable source of funding and public announces of research funding constraint them with little free space to pursue long term research. Another challenge of Nepalese think tanks is their research focus and issues are primarily development rather than policy. They concentrate their activities on right based issues, empowerment, conflict analysis, governance etc. It is necessary to emerge multiple interests based think tanks in Nepalese context and to be established and recognized among international intellectual communities. Whatever knowledge has been produced by think tanks, policy makers have to accept and internalize so that there will not be crisis on utility of knowledge. The most important issue is to maintain friendly relationship between knowledge-power interface to develop and identify Nepal all over the world. But, unfortunately, there is not friendly relationship between knowledge-power interface, and knowledge has been victimized by Nepali state throughout history.

## **VI. Limitations**

It is obvious that every study has some limitations and this study also has no exception. The conceptual and methodological limitations also prevail in the study. Conceptually, limited sources related with think tanks are reviewed for this study. The study is based on purely secondary information with analytical research design. So, its finding is indicative rather than conclusive. Hence, most of the information is taken through the published and unpublished academic and non-academic books, articles, and journals. Analytical research design is applied to analyze the information. The result of this study is not able to generalize, as the study is undertaken within a specific period of time in Nepal. Hence, data and information might have been updated over time. Despite the limitation, the researcher did her best to minimize such shortcomings.



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