

CIPE's Ongoing Efforts to Strengthen Think Tanks

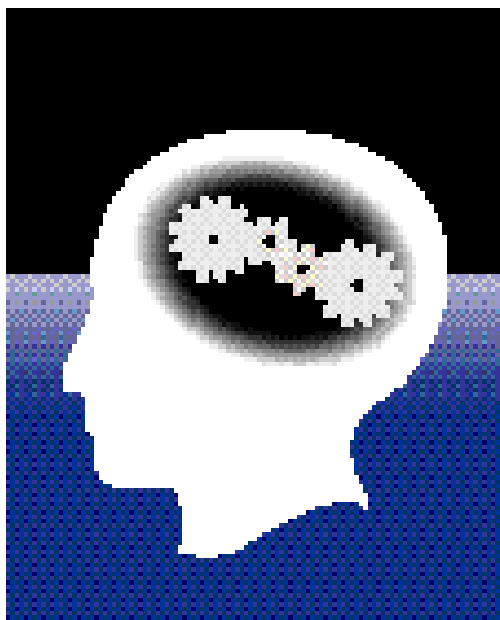
Since its inception in 1983, the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) has recognized the important role of public policy research institutes, or think tanks, in civil society. In many of the countries where CIPE collaborates with partners, the legislative branch of government does not participate in the policy process on an equal level with that of the executive branch, thereby undermining the quality of participation and weakening the principles of democratic governance. Many governments also suffer from a lack of resources to generate sound policy research and analysis necessary to stimulate debate and participation.

An absence of public policy research institutes and local experts means that local problems do not benefit from local solutions. The development of think tanks, through sound policy research coupled with effective advocacy, contributes to the democratic strengths of civil society through the debate and dialogue process.

One of CIPE's core programs is an institution-building training program to help think tanks address some of these problems. For more than 15 years, this program has

sought to achieve the following specific goals:

- ▶ strengthen the capabilities of think tanks by stimulating the development of new research, programs and products;



- ▶ increase collaboration and the sharing of knowledge among think tanks; and
- ▶ enhance the effectiveness of governmental policy formulation through the dissemination of research and policy analysis.

Over the past few years, CIPE has pursued a strategy which rec-

ognizes the unique role that regional networks of think tanks can play in addressing the challenges faced by developing nations as they attempt to transform their economies to market-oriented ones built on sound, democratic institutions. As noted above, some of these challenges include a lack of knowledge and experience among lawmakers to make informed decisions on economic policy, the existence of undemocratic policymaking structures and procedures, and the lack of broad-based understanding of the benefits of a competitive market economy.

In recent years CIPE's awareness of the role that think tanks play in fostering a more democratic society has led to a collaborative effort with other donors to support the development of think tanks. In 1997, CIPE launched a joint initiative with the World Bank Institute (WBI, formerly known as the World Bank Economic Development Institute) to strengthen public policy institutes and the connections among policy researchers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Two conferences of the Mediterranean Development Forum (MDF) brought together regional

think tanks to disseminate knowledge, build skills and foster networks among the members of the research and policymaking community in the MENA region. The success of the Middle East program has led CIPE to create a "virtual association" intended to increase communication and linkages among MENA program participants.

Regional Networks

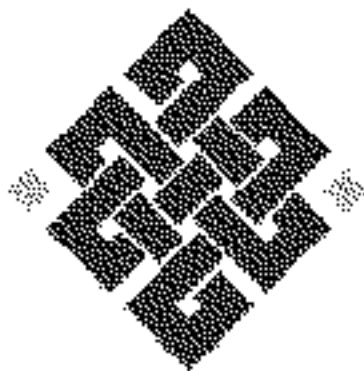
The MENA program has since been replicated to include regional networks in the Newly Independent States, Central Europe and Africa. These networks were established through regional capacity-building workshops that emphasized objectives such as increasing the institutional capacity of think tanks in key areas of their activities and strengthening regional networks by promoting the sharing of knowledge and information. Workshops took place in:

- Moscow, Russia (*Seven Years After the Breakup: A Regional Conference for the Newly Independent States*);
- Beirut, Lebanon (*Think Tanks as Civil Society Catalysts in the MENA Region: Fulfilling Their Potential*);
- Harare, Zimbabwe (*Think Tanks As Policy Catalysts in Africa: A Capacity-Building Workshop*); and
- Bucharest, Romania (*Establishing the Global Development Network*).

The Global Development Network (GDN) is a new association of policy and research institutes around the world whose goal is to assist developing countries to improve their research capacity and use the results of this research in their policy debates. The overarching goal of the GDN is to bring together researchers and policy practitioners from around the world to generate and share knowledge on development-related issues.

The origins of the GDN initiative can be traced to a June 1998 meeting in Washington, DC on capacity building for knowledge institutions, a meeting attended by the representatives of more than 20 think tanks from the developing world. The meeting was followed by the series of regional development forums and regional capacity-building workshops co-sponsored by CIPE and WBI mentioned above.

This process of regional conferences and workshops culminated in the December 1999 conference in Bonn, West Germany, an event co-sponsored by many donors including CIPE and WBI. The Bonn conference represented the public



launching of the Global Development Network. The objectives of the Bonn conference were to:

- facilitate the exchange of best-practice strategies among think tanks in developing and transitional economies;
- increase the institutional capacity of think tanks to be leading policy catalysts in civil society; and
- enhance linkages among regional think tank networks and their individual members.

One of the main underlying purposes of the conference was to equip think tank researchers and policymakers with the skills necessary to promote the transfer of new ideas (research) into action (advocacy). The conference and all the

previous workshops have contributed to this process of building institutions that are better able to generate the kind of policy research and analysis needed to create effective debate and participation. As a result of the regional and now global networks, think tanks are better able to obtain, share and apply the lessons learned and best practices developed by experts around the globe.

Over the course of four days, the Bonn conference focused on the theme "Bridging Knowledge and Policy." The conference facilitated the exchange of policy ideas and development strategies across regions and countries by bringing together over 600 people from more than 300 organizations in 111 developing countries. The participation of researchers, policymakers, think tank and foundation representatives, and officials from aid agencies was an important step in furthering the process of linking the industrialized and developing countries.

In order to achieve conference goals, some sessions of the GDN conference were focused on bolstering the capacity of think tanks to undertake research that would enhance their ability to generate knowledge. Other sessions sought to improve the ability of think tanks to share knowledge by strengthening their capacity to contribute to the policy debate process.

Generating Knowledge—One segment of the conference provided participants with access to some of the latest academic research and thinking on topics such as trade policy and growth, new frameworks for development cooperation, regional experiences, and lessons learned in Latin America and Africa.

Sharing Knowledge—Another segment of the conference, entitled "The Business of Think Tanks," offered participants the opportunity

to share experiences, to discuss the role that think tanks can play in the policy process and to identify the most effective approaches by which think tanks can contribute their ideas on policy. Topics focused on effective communication strategies, effective networking and the use of new technologies.

A Shared Objective

The GDN and CIPE share the objective of assisting public policy research institutes in developing countries to build research capacity and strengthen the connection between the development of knowledge and its effective implementation. CIPE has pursued this objective over the past 15 years through its institution-building program of think tanks. The success of CIPE's long-term strategy to build strong, credible public policy research institutes, capable of effectively shaping governmental policy formulation in their respective countries, can be seen by the strong participation of many past and current CIPE partners at the GDN conference in Bonn. Institutions that participated as either session organizers or presenters of conference papers include the following:

- ▶ Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies – Belarus
- ▶ Center for the Study of Democracy – Bulgaria
- ▶ Unirule Institute of Economics – China
- ▶ Institute for Economic Affairs – Ghana
- ▶ Budapest University of Economic Sciences – Hungary
- ▶ Center for Public-Private Cooperation – Nigeria
- ▶ Center for Research and Communications – the Philippines
- ▶ Center for the Study of Economic and Social Affairs – Uruguay
- ▶ Center for Palestinian Research and Studies – West Bank
- ▶ Center for the Dissemination of Economic Information – Venezuela

Many of these institutions also participated in earlier workshops and conferences, such as those in Moscow and Beirut, and are themselves members of regional networks. The above list illustrates the global representation of current and former CIPE partners at the GDN Bonn conference.

The Bonn conference established

links between members of regional research institutes and policy research institutes and the larger global community. Through their connections with each of these communities, CIPE and other like-minded donors must now ensure that the subsequent step of injecting sound research into the policy-making process occurs in a way that bolsters the process of debate, dialogue and thus democratic governance.

As CIPE has observed over the past 15 years, this democratic process can be greatly enhanced by strengthening think tanks' capacity to undertake high-quality research and to effectively communicate the findings of that research to the general public and key decision makers through a sound advocacy program. As the above list of participants in the Bonn conference illustrates, CIPE grantees have established themselves and are recognized as credible partners, effective spokespersons on behalf of civil society and leading advocates for market-oriented reform and democratic governance. 🌐🌐

The author of this article is Geoffrey Geurts, CIPE's Evaluation Officer.