

Managing Policy Research*

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Although research is somewhat different from other pursuits, the keys for effective management of a policy research institute nevertheless have many characteristics in common with the effective management of other types of organizations. One needs to have an in-depth understanding about the products and functioning of the organization, the keys for bringing about success, and potential problems that require special attention. In this article, I shall set out some thoughts on these issues based on my experience from working at the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) for about 15 years, and in managing the institute for about five years. These experiences should be of direct use for those involved in policy research, and may also be indirectly applied to other types of organizations.

TDRI was founded in 1984. During the early part of the 1980s, the country went through a phase of structural adjustment, brought about by the world economic downturn in the aftermath of the second oil shock. While the country avoided a debt crisis and recession that afflicted many developing countries through out the world, many economic restructuring policies were undertaken, partly under the advice of international organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. During that period, many senior policy makers, together with foreign experts from multilateral organizations, saw the need for Thailand to establish a policy research institute, in order to carry out sustained research to support policy formulation. It was felt that most government agencies had to spend most of their time supporting the government on short-term and urgent policy matters, with little time to spend on in-depth research to support policy formulation. At the same time, most university researches are targeted at basic or applied knowledge, and there are ineffective linkages between research and policy formulation. The Thai university system also lacked sufficient flexibility to encourage good research, following very much the public bureaucratic system. Experiences in other countries also showed the potential benefits of having a policy research institute to support policy formulation, such as, for example, that in South Korea, where the Korea Development Institute (KDI) was established in 1971.

Under the support of the government and many senior policy makers, particularly Dr. Snoh Unakul who was then the Secretary General of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB, which is Thailand's planning agency), TDRI was set up as a private non-profit policy research institute with an initial capital grant provided by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). CIDA's support covered non-research expenses such as office rent, library, and non-research support staff, etc. The institute had to find alternative sources to cover research expenses, including that to cover researchers' salaries, and received generous support, both financially and in kind from many agencies, such as the NESDB, the Department of Technical and Economic Cooperation (DTEC, Thailand's agency to coordinate foreign assistance), and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The main reason for setting up the institute as a private non-profit organization was to provide managerial flexibility, without having to abide by rigid rules and regulations of the public sector, including its rather low pay structure. This provided incentives for those with research expertise to come to work for the institute, including those Thai researchers that were working for various organizations abroad at the time.

As TDRI was established to carry out policy research, the ability to link from research to policy became very important. Without this, the value added from establishing the institute would not be that high. The key question then became how to link research to policy, particularly given that the institute is a non-government organization.

In the early days of the institute, the thinking was that the link from research to policy could be achieved through senior individuals directly associated with the institute who also had strong links to the policy making arena. For example, Dr. Snoh Unakul, the NESDB's Secretary General, also became the first Chairman of the institute's Council of Trustees; Dr. Anat Arbhahirama, the institute's first President, and Dr. Virabongsa Ramangkura, Director of the Macroeconomic Policy Program, were at that time advisors to the Prime Minister. After a while, it became clear that this approach to linking research to policy was not all that

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effective. The main reason is that in the Thai context policy cannot be effectively directed from the top down without sufficient support from lower levels of policy managers. If the institute's research was not accepted by middle level policy makers, then it would be very difficult for the senior policy makers to push for actual implementation of the policy recommendations from the research. Thus, it became clear that a different approach was needed. The target of the policy research cannot be limited to those in the upper rungs of policy making, but needs to spread to those policy makers lower down, in order to generate a broad consensus on the research recommendations leading to actual implementation.

Getting senior policy makers who were directly involved with TDRI to accept the recommendations from the institute's research was relatively easy. However, getting acceptance from lower levels of policy makers who had no direct links to the institute, and who might not have seen much importance in having such an institute, was much more difficult. The key was to create a process where there was a feeling of joint ownership in the research and the policy recommendations stemming from the research. If, for example, a researcher produced a research report that he or she believed had good policy recommendations that should be implemented. If the researcher took the report to present to a policy maker and said that my ideas are highly beneficial for the country and you should implement them, then it was likely that after the researcher had left the room, the research report would simply end up on the shelf, or worse, in the waste paper basket. This is easy enough to understand. If the policy maker does not feel any ownership in the research, then it is difficult to expect him/her to push for the implementation of the recommendations from the research. Everyone needs to feel that they can come up with their own ideas, rather than simply implementing someone else's ideas. Therefore the process of research needs to stress the involvement of policy makers in all steps of the research, from beginning to end, so that the final research outcome appears as a joint product between the researchers and those who will implement the policy recommendations from the research.

An effective process whereby researchers and policy makers can jointly participate in research does not happen automatically or easily. It requires adjustments from both the researchers and the policy makers. From my own experiences, the ones that need to adjust most are the researchers. There are at least three limitations that researchers have to overcome in order to participate effectively with policy makers in research. Firstly, many researchers think that they know everything. In actual fact, researchers (the good ones) have strengths concerning the conceptual framework and analytical methods for research on particular problems. However, they usually have limitations in not fully understanding the constraints, complexities and trade-offs inherent in actual policy implementations. Thus, many policies recommended by researchers tend to be somewhat abstract or have an "ivory tower" nature, and are difficult

to implement. Secondly, many researchers come from a teaching background, and they have a tendency to regard those in the policy making bureaucracies as though they are their students, and in actual fact many bureaucrats may have been their students in the past. However, effective participation in research between researchers and policy makers requires that each side treats the other as intellectual equals. Researchers need to give credit to the policy makers for having better knowledge of certain aspects of the research than they do, and can thus contribute equally to the research, particularly on aspects of effective policy implementation. And thirdly, research as an occupation stresses the ownership of ideas. In academia, researchers carry out research to develop new ideas, write them up and publish them in books or journals with the names of the researchers appearing as authors of these ideas. Progress up the academic ladder depends on these research outputs. However, for policy research where the stress needs to be on joint ownership of ideas, researchers need to be particularly careful about claiming ownership of ideas. This does not mean they should never claim ownership, but they need to do it in a way that does not create an impression that all the key ideas came from the side of the researchers, which would create a feeling of inferiority for the policy makers. A stress on recommendations that were developed jointly is particularly useful, as this gives equal credit to the policy makers and will generate additional impetus to bring the policy recommendations to actual fruition.

Policy makers participating in the research need to adjust as well. They need to accept that what may come out of the research may not be what they would like to see or had in mind from the beginning. They must recognize that researchers can bring new perspectives to bear on a problem and generate new insights based on sound conceptual frameworks and analytical methods, leading to more prudent policy making. If policy makers simply want researchers to rubber stamp their own ideas, then there would be little value added from the research. At the same time, if researchers are simply content at becoming rubber stamps for policy makers, then public acceptance in their technical impartiality will quickly decline.

If researchers and policy makers can make mutual adjustments and work effectively together, then the research output tend to be better than what each side can achieve by themselves. There will be a blend of each side's strengths, and in this case one plus one becomes greater than two. This method of working together is what TDRI tries to encourage, and outcomes from the past experiences have been highly satisfactory in most cases. Obviously there will be cases where no consensus can be reached between the researchers and the policy makers. In such cases, one simply needs to accept the differences as best as one can. The key also is to make sure that the institute does not depend too much financially on any one particular source of contract research, otherwise that important source may begin to influence research recommendations and the impartiality of the research would be affected.

When discussing policy research, it is unavoidable to mention politics, as the political arena is where policy is made. In the case of TDRI, we have a deliberate policy to be non-partisan politically, as clear political leanings would inevitably affect research outcomes and eventually public acceptance in the impartiality of our research. This issue is considered to be of utmost importance, and it is a delicate matter that requires special attention from management. What can be done at the institutional level is to have clear rules and regulations about what the staff can and cannot be involved in politics. For TDRI, there are rules that no staff can be an advisor to individual politicians or political parties. However, being involved in policy research, it is difficult to avoid being involved with those who hold political positions, for example, as members of various policy committees. What is important is that the staff should not accept positions that are political positions, and in their involvement in various policy committees they should limit their comments and recommendations to those that are clearly based on technical knowledge that they themselves have expertise in.

The issue of political impartiality is obviously very delicate. It does not mean that one cannot have view points or give public comments that favor or go against one side of the political spectrum or the other. However, these viewpoints should have clear technical support, and should not be based on feelings or political leanings. It is also particularly important to understand that even technical opinions or the provision of factual information do not by themselves indicate impartiality. There are literally hundreds of issues and information of public interest, and the choice of what opinions or factual information to give, and the timing of such pronouncements, depend on each person's discretion as to what impacts he or she is after. Therefore, for an

individual to be publicly accepted as being impartial takes time, and depends on the track record of the individual. This issue reminds me of a book that I studied while still a student called "How to Lie with Statistics" which illustrated numerous ways of using factual information to give a distorted impression of reality.¹ In the current information age, the message in that book is now even more important, as those on the receiving end of information need to use careful judgment on what weight and credibility to give to each piece of information.

Finally, a critical key for success lies with the personnel. This is particularly so for a research organization, where institutional knowledge is accumulated in the brains of the research staff. Thus, high priority needs to be given to human resources development. While this is also true for other types of organizations, there may be a difference in that researchers should be thinkers by occupation and need to be managed flexibly. Putting researchers into a rigid managerial mold goes against the very concept of research, which needs people to explore various lines of thought in an open and flexible manner, possibly going astray at some point. Management needs to guide rather than regulate. Equally important, the research manager must be prepared to learn and develop himself/herself, so that he/she will gain an understanding of the subject matter that the research staff are engaged in, for without such an understanding it would be very difficult to provide appropriate guidance to the researchers.

ENDNOTE

- ¹ Huff, Darrell. *How to Lie with Statistics*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, August 1993 (Latest Printing).

