

Think Tanks and evidence based policies to accelerate the health-related Sustainable Development Goals

A Satellite Session at the Fourth Global Symposium on Health Systems Research
Vancouver, Canada

Tuesday November 15, 3pm- 5pm

Report prepared by IDRC staff

Note: The session was organized in fishbowl format: meaning an inner circle of speakers addressed an outer, larger ring of audience; and participants voluntarily moved between inner and outer circle. This session was moderated by Dr. Szabo, Director of Inclusive Economies. It was attended by approximately 40 participants, drawn from the larger Global Symposium, and representing an international sampling of academic institutions and think tanks. The majority of the attendees were from LMICs, with a handful of HIC representatives. The discussion was guided by the following four predetermined questions:

- 1. In your country, what relevance does the SDG discourse have for health? To what degree (if at all) has the SDG agenda thus far been mainstreamed into national health planning, health policies, and health research in your country?***
- 2. In countries where this mainstreaming is already happening, who are the primary actors? What roles, if any, are policy research institutions (think tanks and academic institutions) currently playing in the mainstreaming, implementation, and monitoring of health-related SDGs?***
- 3. In your opinion, what should be the main niches / contributions of policy research institutions (think tanks and academic institutions) in implementing and monitoring the health-related SDGs?***
- 4. What challenges might limit the ability of policy research institutions to play a meaningful role in the implementation and monitoring of health-related SDGs? How might these challenges be addressed?***

1. Opening Remarks by the moderator, Dr. Sue Szabo

- In 2015 over 190 world leaders signed Agenda 2030 and committed their countries to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs lay out a global vision for development for the next 15 years. It is a vision that is universal, meaning it is meant to be considered in all countries. And it is a vision that is so ambitious that it is seen as transformative.
- Agenda 2030 explicitly recognizes that each country has the primary responsibility for its own development. At the same time, Agenda 2030 calls for contributions from other, non-state actors, including the private sector and importantly, civil society and philanthropic organizations.
- At IDRC we have a mandate to support research done by researchers in developing countries, on national or regional development priorities. IDRC – a Canadian Crown Corporation - been supporting applied, development research in LMICs for more than 40 years.
- A great deal of the research we support is done by researchers working within policy research institutions – that is, institutions which produce applied research with an explicit intention to influence policy. Often policy research institutions sits within academic organizations, often within non-governmental organizations, and often as well within think-tanks. Think tanks as we tend to use the term, are autonomous organizations that produce high quality policy research and engage in sophisticated communication and outreach to promote the use of their research evidence in policy debates.
- Given the transformative and intersectoral nature of the SDGs, and given the recognition that non-state as well as state actors must be involved, we at IDRC are excited about the potential importance of policy-research institutions in implementing and monitoring the SDGs, particularly the health related goals and targets.
- As a result we are currently engaging in a series of regional consultations on the role of policy research institutions in informing health policy and practice, and contributing to the health related SDGs. Earlier this year we have already had consultations in Geneva, in Kampala, and in Rio de Janeiro. Today we are having this one in Vancouver. Later this winter we will have additional consultations in Islamabad, in London, and possibly also in Dakar.
- Some of you here today have participated in these other consultations, or plan to participate in the upcoming ones. As opposed to the other consultations, which are generally 2 days long, today we have only 2 hours so not much time to share thoughts. Let's get started with a few brief opening remarks from 4 different regions of the world.

2. Brief remarks from a representative of a think tank in **Tanzania**:

- In Tanzania we are still trying to figure out, what do the SDGs mean for us
- We are still unsure of how they can or will inform the national agenda
- I would argue that we *have* a lot of data. We have it nationally, and it exists internationally. It exists.
- What we need to do better, is to make this existing data more available.
- And we need to share it with the citizens. We need to make data available to common citizens.
- We also need to privilege citizen generated data, thus giving impetus to citizens to be a part of the bigger picture.
- As research institutions we have the ability to be context specific, to know our context.
- We need to engage in analysis which informs the agenda.
- We need to collaborate.
- We need to facilitate learning platforms. This is a question: How can we better facilitate learning platforms?

3. Brief Remarks by a representative of an independent think tank in **Peru**

- SDGs are not currently present in the larger national level policy discussions.
- But, the discourse doesn't need to be explicitly addressed to the SDGs, to still be basically about the content of the SDG goals.
- In other words, the SDGs are a framing. They can be a means, but not an end. The actual issues within the SDGs are the endgame, not the SDGs themselves.
- In Peru when we are talking about access to health care, and the quality of health services provided, we need to go beyond the official figures. These don't tell the whole story.
- That is why *Observatories* are important. In the Latin American context we have a number of Observatories.
- Research institutions need to get better at moving into the political arena.
- And research institutions need to get better at working across sectors, at relating to and with different sectors.
- There are others – civil society organizations – that know better how to move in the political space. We need to work in collaboration with them, or we need to learn from them.

4. Brief remarks by a representative of a think tank working within an academic institution in **Lebanon**:

- In my country, the SDG dialogue has not started yet.
- Policy makers and politicians are not really aware yet of the SDGs. Not really thinking about them, or talking about them
- I work on knowledge translation, within a knowledge to policy research centre, which is like a think tank sitting inside AUB University.

- I note that in moving from the MDGs to the SDGs, we go much broader. The MDGs represented a more top-down approach. The SDGs are far broader, far wider. And much more interdisciplinary.
- The top-down approach was not being applied effectively in local contexts. Issues need to be teased out in local contexts and linked to the SDGs.
- This means that this cannot be “business as usual” for Think Tanks, for policy research institutions.
- We need to think and act differently.
- One thing that needs to be done, is to “package” the SDGs in a way that makes sense for the country. For individual countries.
- Think Tanks can tease out, from the SDGs, the issues that will resonate in the national context.
- SDGs require intersectoral, interministerial actions: and these are easy to say, but hard to do
- Can Think Tanks help to work across different intersectoral stakeholders and bring them together to address priority issues?
- Do Think Tanks have the capacity to start doing things differently?
- Think Tanks must move from being passive research generators, to active solution providers
- We have specialized in knowledge production, but not particularly in knowledge sharing
- Universities need to start thinking differently about their mandate to play a key role
- We need to *bridge the gap between science and society*
- Our research needs to be policy relevant research

5. Brief remarks by a representative of a government funded research centre in **India**

- At the higher level in India, SDGs are on the policy agenda
- I cannot speak in detail for the larger Indian national context but I can speak about one state, which is Kerala state
- In Kerala the process of mainstreaming, of integrating, the SDGs is well underway
- It is important to understand the context: in Kerala a new government was elected in May 2016 and it is a left leaning government that saw the opportunity to use the SDGs in health
- This government took advantage of the SDG framework to start a new way of doing business in health
- It developed targets in health that are interconnected / intersectoral, that follow a “health in all policies” approach
- There are 17 specialist committees each specializing in a particular health topic
- And each is providing advice on how to mainstream, intersectorally, that particular topic
- What is the role of public health in this, of the public health school
- The SDGs are replete with public health implications
- I am personally working on and promoting gender and social equity as cross-cutters
- For example, when looking at tuberculosis. Within tuberculosis incidence and care, what are the gender differences? The social strata differences?

- We need to collect this data on gender and social equity, which is often hidden or not present in the official data, and pass it up
- Pass it up and ensure that all indicators are disaggregated, by sex and to show differential effects on critical disadvantaged groups, whoever they are within a particular context
- We are focused on producing an equity report card, not just showing, has this goal or that goal in aggregate been achieved, but showing how equitably they have been achieved.

6. Remarks from a representative of a national civil society organization from **India**

- We often make too many false assumptions about the good intentions of the state
- We assume that states uniformly want to benefit their citizens
- Often states do not uniformly care about the benefits to citizens, especially some categories of citizen
- And states change over time
- This means, for example, that within the 15 year timeframe of the SDGs (2015 – 2030), states will change creating multiple political realities across a 15 year time horizon
- Just because a national government nationally signed on (to Agenda 2030) doesn't mean that ministers know about the SDGs. There is lots of ignorance about the SDGs.
- Think Tanks can potentially fill in gaps in ignorance, gaps in knowledge, if governments and ministries are not intentionally unaware
- But states are not equally intent on benefitting all the populations that they rule over
- Knowledge making is a political act – the person and context of the knowledge being made can make or unmake things
- Resources are not always allocated to the most critical voices
- So let's not assume that the state is always naïve
- So Think Tanks must challenge the state
- This is important in the North as well as the South
- The role of the Think Tank is not just to provide knowledge
- It is to fight
- It is to be an anchor of aspirations for equity
- We must work within the politics of a place
- We must be political
- This is not the classic role of think tanks
- We need new ways of engaging stakeholders
- New ways of moderating evidence to policy and making knowledge useful
- How do we find ways to bring issues of equity to the eyes of the government?

7. Response from a representative of a think tank working within an academic institution in **Lebanon**:

- The nature of the relationship between state and civil society is extremely important
- Think Tanks should not be reactive and their priorities sometimes do not align with the government
- Politicians do not always know the real priorities of their people

- Politicians are not always clear about the real priorities of a population
- Therefore think tanks must advocate for the populations, must mobilize, must be activists
- Think tanks should inform national agendas using their research
- But let's be aware of who think tanks really are, how they are funded, and how often are they truly independent?
- We need to understand the politics of how things are done
- This is about political economy, the role of citizens in political economy
- There is an important role for citizen dialogue in to reach policy – citizen engagement can reach the government
- How to have a , how to open a , dialogue with citizens
- We are at our most effective (as a society?) when citizens voices are brought out and into policy debates

8. Remarks from a representative of a public health department within a **Canadian** university:

- We are dealing with a lot of messiness and complexity
- When I arrived a number of years ago in South Africa, I soon noted that the MDGs had no relevance on the front lines
- The MDGs were irrelevant except when it came to writing / applying for grants. THEN they were critical.
- So at the university level they were irrelevant but at the national level the country was taking them seriously.
- The fact that they were important for grant writing is not necessarily a bad thing: it shows how donors / funders can incentivize research and researchers in certain ways, and into certain directions, and this is probably a good thing.
- In Quebec province, the SDGs are not yet mainstreamed but they might be in a year or so. In a year or so they might be politically appropriated.
- But we are constantly challenged to keep the SDGs on the radar by our students, who indeed think that the SDGs are very important
- But let me say also that my concern from the beginning with the Think Tank Initiative (at IDRC) has been its possible effect in terms of undermining universities.
- If the best, most creative, most entrepreneurial university faculty are able to absent themselves from teaching to go work in specialized research centres (think tanks or think tanks within universities), through buy outs etc, then we are hollowing out our teaching staff
- The students then don't get the benefit of the most experienced and most connected researchers
- The students are left with young or new contract staff
- Is this fair for the students, for the next generation?

9. Remarks from a representative of a health network in **East and Southern Africa**:

- I feel that I have a different view, a different understanding of what a Think Tank is, compared to the views I have heard expressed here
- I take of course as my example, EQUINET, which is an alliance of many different types of organizations
- I don't think that Think Tanks always should be technical institutions
- Think Tanks should generate knowledge across many spheres, and therefore should represent an alliance of actors
- Think Tanks should be about knowledge *and actions*
- Virtuous policy cycles get built by a community of actors
- There is an abundance of information, and often it is information that people (policymakers) don't even disagree with; but they don't know what to do with this information
- We need to convene an alliance with actors to solve priority issues
- They want to know, want to be told, *what is the solution*. What does this information mean, what solutions does it suggest, how should we act.
- The SDGs are not about health services. They are about Health in all Policies.
- So in the resource-scare countries in which we work, we need to support the risk-taking policy makers, the decision maker swilling to test and try out intersectoral solutions.
- The SDGs give us a huge, huge opportunity to advance on the social determinants of health.
- But decision makers can't do it alone, they need civil society support.

10. Further Remarks from a representative of a national civil society organization in **India**

- Knowledge making – in this area - is a political act
- This is not like physics, which is perhaps more apolitical, where there may be an absolute technical answer
- Here we are talking about human lives
- The fact of political power leads to inequities
- Governments do not always take into account the interests of the most poor in society, in their countries
- Point and counter-point: weights and balances: checks and balances. This can be a role guiding think tanks.
- Look at India as an example. It is a donor darling countries. Many funds are pouring in. But we have not come close to resolving our maternal and child health problems.
- We as researchers have often shield away.
- Lots of – most of – the very critical – the cutting-edge work – doesn't get published.

11. Remarks from a representative of a government funded health research institute in **Burkina Faso**

- In Burkina, the SDGs are not already included in the political discourse at the national level
- Globally, we have a big problem with lack of accountability
- Take for example the MDGs
- At the end of the MDG mandate, many African countries had not obtained the MDG targets
- And yet now we have ignored that and passed directly on to the more ambitious SDGs?
- As long as there is a lack of accountability, the SDGs will be but a slogan. A grant writing terminology.
- In West Africa we can produce scientific knowledge, however our knowledge generating institutions are weak.
- We ask IDRC to help strengthen these knowledge generating institutions, help us to make these institutions stronger.

12. Remarks from a representative of a university as well as the national public health institute of **México**

- To illustrate the potential roles – and limitations – of Think Tanks, let me use an example from Mexico
- In Mexico, we did not reach the MDG goals for maternal mortality, except in two southern states
- So nearing the end of the MDG era, seeing that we were not in a position to meet the goal, the government in some areas decreed that all pregnant women would be taken to the tertiary hospitals to deliver, and forbade women to go to the lower level health centers to deliver
- This was a last minute attempt to lower maternal mortality...still we didn't reach the goal
- But many civil society organizations had been working on this issue, had been demonstrating the potential of professional midwives
- Many CSOs were invested in, supported, the professional midwives movement
- But one politically motivated decision completely overruled all of that evidence, all of that work. Swept it away.
- A lesson is that too many civil society organizations, too many think tanks, are too narrowly issue-focused. They have a too specific focus. And as a result lose sight of the larger system within which they operate.
- Lost sight in this example of the government decision to move women to hospitals
- So Think Tanks should collaborate to define a set of goals, and work together cooperatively to maximize complementary strengths, can work together for example with civil society organizations which are more advocacy oriented and which think more broadly in system terms
- Not all policy decisions are good, we need to be critical.

13. Remarks from a representative of a university in **Perú**

- I agree with my fellow Peruvian, that the SDGs are currently not on the state agenda
- So we don't know about the national institutions arrangements, in terms of who is in charge, who is overseeing, how the country will handle the indicators
- But universities and Think Tanks are thinking about the SDGs, are very aware
- A consortium of the top Peruvian universities just held in Lima a two day meeting to strategize about the SDGs
- It's clear to us that the SDGs require a multidisciplinary approach
- Think Tanks and universities are slowly learning to work in multidisciplinary ways, just barely
- So let's think about the chances that the state can work in this way...working across sectors. I think the apparatus of state structures are not prepared to work like this. We have seen them try, with some commissions etc. Which are generally not really successful. It's hard.
- So Think Tanks have to better understand how the state works, and actively help the state to work more intersectorally.

14. Remarks from a graduate student studying in Canada but from **Burkina Faso**

- Speaking from my experience working in Burkina Faso, I think the SDGs are a higher level concept
- How do you think that SDGs will work in a resource constrained country like Burkina Faso
- Discussions about democracy and civil rights are only happening, are only on the agenda, thanks to the efforts of civil society
- Think Tanks are important to raise awareness about what is happening in a country. They need to raise this awareness both inside and outside of a country.
- Think Tanks and civil society in Burkina Faso need more support to survive and continue their important work. They are limited in what they can do, if they don't get external support.

15. Remarks from owner of a health diagnostic imaging company, **Bangladesh**

- Even though I currently work in the private sector, I come from a background of working in the development civil society sector, so I know it.
- I actually tried to start my own think tank in Bangladesh, but it failed, did not work out. It is not easy to start such an organization.
- I am a big supporter of Universal Health Coverage (UHC). I am a UHC person.
- The SDGs are a global phenomenon, but they don't touch us on the ground.
- When I was trying to start a think tank working on UHC, we were ahead of the curve. Now, the SDGs talk about UHC.
- In Bangladesh 67% of expenditures are out-of-pocket expenditures that are made within the private sector.
- Based on this, I encourage civil society to seek out the data, the information, the business intelligence that resides within the private sector.

- Leverage the business data – which is health data – that is owned by the private sector.

16. Remarks from a representative of a non-profit research organization in Uganda

- The continued elitism of Think Tanks is my worry, and this makes things complex
- The SDGs at the moment are a global level conversation
- Maybe Think Tanks could help us digest what the SDGs mean *locally*
- In my view, Think Tanks must come down to the local level
- My second point is, that SDGs represent a social contract between citizens and governments
- In this is good, because in most countries there exists no such explicit social contract
- Normally, the social contract is never defined, never written down, there is nothing to refer to
- So the SDGs do have value, in that they make that social contract explicit so that there is accountability.
- So we have an opportunity to rally research in support of global solidarity, in support of a global and national social contract.
- Also, in my view the process of negotiating the SDGs was far more valuable than the result – than the SDGs themselves
- I see this as an ongoing negotiation process
- Thinking about global governance and taking Trump as a nationalistic example, the SDGs could be construed flexibly as a way to tackle health governance down the levels: from global down to national down to local

17. Remarks from a graduate student in the UK and working in Sierra Leone

- In my experience working with many economics researchers, they don't provide policy prescriptions
- Their research is often too broad or too specific to be able to generate useful policy prescriptions
- And researchers are hesitant to make policy prescriptions
- As researchers our job should be to figure out what is the policy implications, the policy prescription
- We also need to always be aware of the policy appetite of decision makers, we should always know this
- I have seen that it is difficult for think tanks to come to the table and sit down with the big players including donors
- So Think Tanks have to work in alliance with others, with others who have influence, like donors and some CSOs
- What does a think tank look like a very resource-constrained setting? We have heard from many middle income countries here....what about places like Sierra Leone?
- Think Tanks have a role to play in local knowledge generation

17. Remarks from a representative working in Saudi Arabia

- I work in a high income oil state
- And think tanks could also have a very important role to play in this type of context to tackle health issues
- Not just in developing country contexts
- There are lots of problems for think tanks to address in HICs as well
- TT are needed in every sector, we can't aggregate SDGs as they are very broad
- The challenge of TT is to generate knowledge to go into the policy arena
- Who are the policy makers? Who are the researchers? How do we promote public debate?
- We need to discuss the role and function of TT – we should not be going to TT and asking what evidence they have on X issue
- Universities need to think about how they do and produce research – government does not leverage on this capital

Note: At this point, the facilitator Dr. Sue Szabo invited the original “inner circle” to return, to make summary remarks. Then Sue herself made some closing remarks. Zoe provided a brief overview of the upcoming consultations and the fact that IDRC – a comparatively small donor – will be sharing some of these ideas with other donors to see if there might be future possibilities for a collaboration on a program looking at Think Tanks and health-related SDGs.

Dr. Sue Szabo, IDRC – Closing Remarks

- We're moving away from the world based on poverty targets and moving towards inequalities, which are much more complicated (focus on the silent majority, the unvoiced)
- Issues of diversity – many players that we need to listen to; what may be true in one context may be very different in another
- Issues of incentive – moving beyond slogans; we need to be more humble as research funders and to acknowledge that we are creating incentives for organizations to come out and be a part of the SDGs – and that this may or may not align with national or global priorities
 - Could be a good thing for TT to be advocates and to provide independent views
 - Investing in products or processes – need to think about this in a results-driven world
- Issues of accountability – there is lots of data out there and we need accountability to take what's out there and use it much better
 - Need stronger institutions to be able to do that
 - Issues of role of partnerships - we need to be Need to understand role of citizens
- more solutions-minded – donors need to be more responsible in supporting partnerships and to recognize that there are multiple actors