

**Consortium of Arab Policy Research Institutes (CAPRI) Project
Strategic Workshop Report on
“Policy Research Institutes and the Arab Uprisings: Agenda Setting and Beyond”¹**

Introduction

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), in partnership with the Arab Forum for Alternatives (AFA), organized the second strategic workshop for the Consortium of Arab Policy Research Institutes (CAPRI) project on April 18 and 19, 2012 in Cairo. The workshop was entitled “Policy Research Institutes and the Arab Uprisings: Agenda Setting and Beyond”. The CAPRI strategic workshops are based on the findings of the regional CAPRI seminar held at AUB in May 2011. The first workshop was held in Beirut in January 2012 and included participants mainly from the Levant, and some countries from the Arab Gulf area (GCC). The second workshop, focusing on the Arab transformations in North Africa, was held in Cairo.

The purpose of the workshop was to review and find ways to enhance the role of policy research institutes (PRIs), particularly in light of the Arab uprisings. The workshop also aimed to uncover potential for collaboration and common interests in prioritizing research agendas. Senior representatives of PRIs attended the workshop from each country in North Africa, including: Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Sudan.

Defining Arab PRIs

Although defining Arab PRIs proved to provoke debate and reveal differences of opinions, there were aspects of the definition of a PRI which attendees agreed on. First, to be considered an Arab PRI the research institute must be a part of civil society and serve the public. The participants agreed that the purpose of a PRI is to ensure that decisions that affect the public are evidence-informed. The research agenda should therefore reflect the people’s needs rather than the agenda of policymakers. However, this agenda should reach and be accessible to policymakers. This definition also precludes research centers which are founded and funded as a branch of institutes outside the Arab world, or “foreign created” and may not reflect the needs and agendas of local populations.

Closely tied to the definition of a PRI as a civic organization, is the notion that a PRI must also be independent. This means that a PRI should be free from undue influence in the following three categories: financial, political, and governmental. It should not be structurally or administratively linked to any other entity. The critical need to differentiate between “real” and “infiltrated” PRIs

¹ This report was prepared by Hania Bekdache, Project Coordinator and revised and edited by Hana A. El-Ghali, Senior Program Coordinator at the Issam Fares Institute. (April 27, 2012)

was often brought up in the discussions and suggestions were made for regulation and categorization of these factors. The question of funding and influence is addressed in the proceeding section of this report (page 3).

Second, the participants discussed the issue of the registration status of PRIs. It was agreed that an organization's registration status is not a reliable factor upon which to define PRIs. A variety of types of registration statuses exist and many PRIs come into existence under different circumstances. Furthermore, a number of reasons beyond its mission and vision may cause the institution to register as a for-profit or non-profit institution. Until the laws of association are changed, a PRI's registered status should not be considered adequate to define a PRI. It was recommended that a PRI should, however, be a registered legal entity in some form and not be expressly profit-seeking which would bias the research. It would also then serve as a marketplace for ideas to serve the needs of policymakers, which goes against the first premise of PRIs, stated above.

Finally, the quality of the work conducted by PRIs was also considered an important defining factor by the participants. It seems difficult in some cases to draw the line between intellectualism and activism, but the attendees believed that the work of a PRI should stop before activism in order to preserve the intellectual nature of PRIs as primarily knowledge producers. It was proposed that the PRI should have a scientific board of directors to avoid an overlap between action non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and PRIs. It was strongly recommended that PRIs primarily produce knowledge through publishing papers and conducting research projects rather than holding frequent seminars and meetings. The participants expressed concern for the regional research standards and called for greater evaluation measures for research and PRIs. In addition, it was expressly stated that university research centers that conduct research relevant to policy-making should not be overlooked even if they are not typical policy research centers.

Changing PRI Environments: The Arab PRI Paradigm Shift

The participants highlighted the importance of defining the terms "democracy" and "civil society" in the transition period in which both are either nascent or radically changing concepts. One participant noted that before the Arab uprisings the concept of "democratization" was discussed, but after the uprisings, the concept of "democracy" emerged as comparative research that addresses the local context of each country. Furthermore, some of the revolutions recently witnessed are called "movements" like the "movements" in Morocco that did not continue because there was no escalation of demands.

Before the uprisings, participants described civil society as relatively closed and operated on the basis of survival, usually avoiding sensitive topics, or red lines. Some participants described their role as a balancing act of co-existence with and in opposition to the government. It has been especially hard to discern the changes particularly due to moving from decades of oppression toward a sudden leap forward in the past two years.

In addition, it was acknowledged that the changes occurring in each North African country were very different. Therefore, it was difficult to standardize these events. However, in all cases there have been radical changes in civil society which is opening up to new types of organizations

including a “flurry” of new PRIs. It was agreed that each country should study the role of PRIs within their individual policy-making context.

Nevertheless, participants agreed that they believe there has not yet been a proper fundamental change in the power structure. Therefore, there is a need for new actors and civil society in restructuring the policy-making environment. Incremental changes taking place within parliaments and shaping of opposition components are hopeful, even if no radical changes have yet to take shape.

Due to the changing environment within each country, participants agreed that the role of policy research centers must be different than it was before the uprisings, particularly made evident through their activities and purposes. The role of PRIs would then be an exceptionally different one. Despite the participants’ agreement that PRIs should do more research than action in principle, they recommended that during this period of transition PRIs may need to engage more in actions in which they would not engage in normal times, such as awareness raising campaigns, capacity building trainings, and leading certain advocacy campaigns. It was recommended that PRIs offer training and outreach to decision-makers at this phase of the transition. This is particularly important in countries where new decision-making institutions are emerging and a great lack of understanding of the decision-making is identified by all.

In terms of agenda setting, however, it was noted that PRIs cannot have a common agenda because agendas are sectoral. PRIs can agree on common values in agenda-setting stemming from the transition period. These values include instilling a culture of accountability, transparency, and information and data sharing. They should also include a concerted attempt to dismantle the autocratic and corrupt political and cultural systems and promote proper management of the transition period through transitional justice mechanisms tailored to local needs. PRI agendas during the transition period should also strive to collaborate with other research institutes, especially new ones.

The Question of Funding & Influence

PRIs generally prefer not to be under the influence of any entity. This phenomenon of autonomy brought forth the question of independent funding. It was argued that the question of funding and influence is not an issue of foreign funding alone. It is also an issue of the absence of local funding for research. According to the participants, two types of local funding need to exist: private sector funding, including individual businessmen, and public sector funding, as part of the national budget.

It was reported that the public sector is bureaucratic, politicized, and exclusive. There needs to be a focus on finding funding that is not just project-based, but rather core funding. The private sector in some cases is still quite linked to the former regimes and embodies their power structures, thus making foreign funding appear less tainted in comparison.

The general consensus among the participants was that a strong, independent PRI with quality researchers, a solid research agenda, integrity and transparency, and an independent budget would be able to attract more funding without influence. In relation to agenda-setting, it was noted that

the agenda should be representative of local values and principles. Participants also highlighted that just because some values may also reflect “foreign” agendas, such as democratization and development, does not necessarily mean that they are imposed upon them. They may be topics that attract foreign funding but they are still indigenous interests.

There is undoubtedly a stigma on foreign funding despite the arguments provided by the participants. Some PRI directors admitted that they were offered several grants since the Arab uprisings but had to turn them down because they felt they were asking too many questions related to their internal decision-making and relationships.

Until there is more local or regional public funding, the group agreed that they must rely more heavily on foreign funding because a PRI cannot wait for policies to change before it can operate; it must work on changing those policies. Furthermore, some argued that there is too strict a division of “local” and “foreign” notions of funding and agendas. They are all diverse and different outlooks within even seemingly homogenous funding institutes.

Collaboration

The participants were skeptical about starting a formal consortium or PRI network at this time. They pointed out that networking in the Arab world is a problem because the more developed institutions would shoulder greater responsibility and often do not have the incentive to collaborate. This is also related to the competition for funding and the issue that there needs to be a shift to a more collaborative spirit among PRIs in the region.

Given the common challenges and concerns facing PRIs in the transition period, the workshop participants identified some common areas in which collaboration would be most useful.

First, sharing information would be a beneficial step on two fronts: to counter the shortage of and access to data, and to contribute to a culture of transparency. The PRI database by the CAPRI project was suggested as a useful way to facilitate this exchange of information.

Another suggestion was for a permanent exchange program of researchers between Arab PRIs to increase knowledge production and training of researchers. – a form of collaboration/partnership and capacity building.

The participants also identified the need for training in communications because researchers are not experts in communications and it is key to collaboration and the successful dissemination of their work.

Suggestions & Recommendations

It was noted that the role of a PRI during the transition period is not the same as the “normal” role of a PRI. Therefore, some exceptional suggestions and recommendations were made to support North Africa during its transition period. The following were suggestions of practical steps and strategies that Arab PRIs may find beneficial.

- PRIs should raise awareness about the role and importance of PRIs to the public, to civil society, and to decision-makers with the help of the media.
- PRI’s need to “build capacity” of policymakers during the transition phase (although this would not normally fall under a PRI’s mandate or agenda).
- PRIs should lead in bridging the gap between different sectors of society. Civil society organizations (CSOs) can act as spokespersons to the public and hold dialogues between all sectors – focusing on making them independent would show the public that they are not a shadow of the government or a puppet of soft power by foreign entities.
- PRIs should lobby to change laws governing NGOs, CSOs, and PRIs to increase potential impact in the long term.
- The inclusion of a “Waqf” financial endowment system was repeatedly suggested as a solution for funding problems commonly faced by Arab PRIs. Participants suggested establishing a North African endowment for democracy.
- Other forms of suggestions of collaboration include coming up with a local criteria of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) for the assessment of research and work of Arab PRIs.
- PRIs should strive for transparency to avoid corruption in funding.
- Examine a “successful model” Arab PRI institute that is independent and has an endowment and see how they did it to learn from them.

Conclusions

It is evident that the role that PRIs are currently fulfilling during the transition period in North Africa is not identical to the role they plan to play once the transition period is over. According to the particular context, the PRIs largely enjoy the opportunities provided in this new period despite the new and added challenges they face, particularly related to funding, sustainability, and legitimacy. Participants strongly recommended that an action plan is drafted for follow up on the suggestions provided in this workshop.