Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
معهد عصام فارس للسياسات العامة والشؤون الدولية

American University of Beirut
Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
Research Advocacy and Public Policy-making Program

Summary of the Workshop on

University-Based Research Centers: Experiences and Interactions with Policy-making

February 19, 2014

Overview

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs' (IFI) project on the Consortium of Arab Policy Research Institutes (CAPRI) organized a workshop entitled *"University-based Research Centers: Experiences and Interactions with Policy-making"*, on February 19th, 2014 at the American University of Beirut (AUB). The meeting gathered directors and members of university-based research centers, in addition to participants representing university administration.

The purpose of the workshop was to present the primary research findings of a case study conducted by IFI on university-based policy research centers in Lebanon. The workshop aimed at bringing the participants together to discuss the preliminary findings and emerging themes of the case study. The workshop served as a methodological stage for the project to contribute to a better analysis of the emerging material through triangulating the results and themes and sharing with the participants the broader perspectives towards these findings. The case study focused on university-based research centers, especially those that have identified themselves as having a policy initiative or any attempt to play a role in the policy-making cycle. Dr. Hana A. El-Ghali presented the primary research findings of the study conducted by the Research, Advocacy and Public Policy program (RAPP) at the IFI. In the session that followed, three research centers presented the experiences of their own institutes in policy-making.

IFI case study on university-based research institutes in Lebanon: Presentation of findings

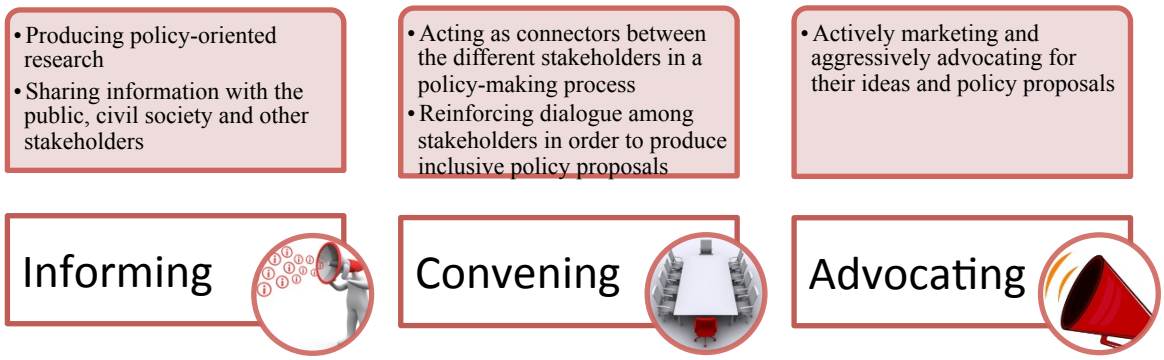
The research case study aimed to study the features and traits that are characteristic of university-based research centers in Lebanon. It looked at issues like the institutes' policy research production (quantity, quality and impact) and the substantive domains of focus. Furthermore, the study looked at the networks that exist among these institutions and with other local, regional and global organizations. The case study was based on findings and

conclusions that were drawn from 15 interviews at 8 universities conducted with representatives of university-based research centers in Lebanon. The following are some of the primary research findings presented:

Roles of University-Based Research Institutes

The perceived roles identified by the interviewees were categorized into three main categories: an informing role, a convening role and an advocacy.

Figure 1 Perceived Roles of University-based Research Centers



All institutes viewed themselves as playing an informing role both in an academic and a public setting targeting students, policymakers and other stakeholders, therefore achieving the mission defined for them and assigned by the university. Participants at the meeting highlighted the importance of distinguishing between the role of informing internal stakeholders and that of informing external stakeholders. Some institutes reported having a convening role which involves conducting seminars, workshops and conferences and acting as connectors between the different stakeholders in the policy-making process. Few institutes viewed themselves as advocacy agents in which they directed their energies towards activities which targeted policymakers. Participants at the meeting highlighted the risks that may be associated with playing a dual role when it comes to policy-making since their participation in the public and political negotiations of policy-making may not necessarily reflect the standpoint and views of the university they are affiliated with. Alternative modes of advocacy are then sought to bridge the gap between policy discourse and academic work, such as establishing non-governmental associations that are directed by academics. Within that capacity, academics have more freedom in bringing forth issues that may be viewed as "sensitive" by their academic institutions. Another role was identified by the meeting participants which is that of implementing. It was argued that some university-based research institutes played a role in the implementation phase of public policy.

Common Challenges and Opportunities

The study participants identified a number of challenges that restrain their role as a research institution. Funding was found to be a concern shared by a significant number of the participating institutes. All institutes identified more than one source of funding, more than half reported receiving their funds from their affiliated universities, others identified general donors and foundations, and very few reported receiving funds from the government. Another

common challenge among the study participants was that of human resources. Almost half of institutes interviewed reported a lack of qualified researchers and scholars which impedes their research potential. In other words, the number and quality of employees within a research institute was reported to affect the research quality and influence of a research institute on policy-making. It was also noted that research capacities differ among universities and within a particular university. Another challenge that was identified is the difficulty of dealing with the Lebanese government. More than half of the participating institutes reported having difficulties dealing with the local government and also shared a common discontent with the political leadership and the Lebanese political system.

As for opportunities, many research institutes identified that being affiliated with a university allowed them to utilize the financial and human resources and the numerous facilities provided by a university, which were opportunities to revert their focus away from some of the financial matters they faced. Others explained that there was value added to have among the board of directors of some of the institutes, significant public figures, such as ex-ministers and/or ministerial staff. This affiliation made it easier for the institutes to establish links to decision makers which in turn provides increased visibility.

Interactions with Policymakers

More than half of the study participants reported to play a significant role within the agenda-setting phase of policy-making. Some of these institutes did not identify influencing public policy as a goal by itself, but they reported to have been indirectly doing so through publishing policy-relevant research (briefs, reports, etc.), trainings and convening activities. Many institutes reported that they often interact with governments, ministries and other decision-makers in Lebanon. However, it remains not clear whether or not this interaction has had any considerable impact or policy change so far. Most representatives the participating research centers expressed their desire to influence public policies by putting more emphasis onto advocacy.

Presentations by Research Institutes

Center for Lebanese Studies, Oxford University

Dr. Maha Shuayb, Director of the Centre for Lebanese Studies, introduced the Center and gave a brief overview of its interactions with policy-makers in Lebanon. The Centre was established by a group of Lebanese businessmen after the civil war with an aim to produce impartial and balanced research about issues facing the country. Dr. Shuayb explained the Center's shift from an academic research center to one that now focuses on both research and advocacy activities. She explained this shift as an attempt to generate research that can change reality and affect the wider Lebanese society. The Centre was asked to join the Committee on citizenship education at the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), which aimed to develop a new reform policy. The committee was successful in generating a new strategy for reform on citizenship education. However, the Centre faced some challenges when getting involved in the implementation especially after the Ministry decided not to adopt the recommendations developed by the Committee. Dr. Shuayb described another model of advocacy based on another experience of the Center with policy-makers. The Centre established an Association for History Education which brought together all professionals interested in the field of history education. The aim of this Association is to focus on influencing the discourse regarding history education and on producing content to be included in prospective history textbooks. The ultimate aim of the Association is to be

called upon by policymakers when they are ready to implement reform in the field of history education. Dr. Shuayb concluded that the Centre finds it extremely difficult to engage in research while also influencing policies in Lebanon particularly when a getting involved in the implementation phase. This does not mean that research institutes should necessarily disregard advocacy activities completely. She also questioned the cultural readiness of policymakers in Lebanon to accept scholarly or evidence-based research and accommodate it in the policy-making process.

The Tobacco Control Research group (TCRG), American University of Beirut

Dr. Rima Nakkash, Coordinator of AUB-TCRG and Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Health Sciences, introduced the TCRG and presented its experience with the Tobacco law (2011) through a series of advocacy initiatives. TCRG is composed of a group of academics focused on producing research and evidence on tobacco control, emphasizing the importance of local knowledge to inform policy and convince policymaker on establishing a ban of tobacco use. In order to fulfill their advocacy role, TCRG established partnerships with civil society groups already involved in this issue, engaged with parliamentarians and raised awareness through the media. She reflected on the lessons learned as experienced by TCRG describing the policy-making process as a time-demanding endeavor that involves a lot of setbacks and requires persistence by research institutes. She expressed difficulties in the implementation phase but insisted on the determination of the TCRG and its partners within the civil society to overcome the barriers that are impeding implementation.

Institute of Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), Lebanese American University

Dr. Samira Aghacy, Director of IWSAW and Professor of English and Comparative Literature, gave an overview of the Institute which is based at the Lebanese American University. The Institute focuses on advancing academic research on women in the Arab world and integrating women's studies in the university's curricula. It also aims to serve as a platform to create public awareness on significant issues that need policy changes through its published research studies and its organized convening activities such as seminars, conferences, workshops and training sessions. Although the Institute does not play a direct role in policy-making, it does have a direct role in informing the public as well as policy makers of research that relates to policy.

Discussion Recommendations and Conclusions

What influences the role of university-based research centers?

A number of the workshop participants commented on the factors that affect the advocacy role of a university-based research institutes. It was noted that research centers with an advocacy orientation would usually be those with employees who are also active in the civil society. Others added that a number of factors may influence the ability of an academic to take on an advocacy role particularly the expectations of the organization he/she is affiliated with and its mandate. The participant added that if the promotion system of faculty members doesn't take into account a professor's advocacy achievements, then it is more likely that the academic will shy away from such activities. It was also argued that there is a need for universities to engage in more outreach activities in order to have a policy impact and to first get across to society, and then to the policymakers. Therefore, having Arabic publications is one of the important aspects of these outreach initiatives. However, these publications are not taken into consideration when a faculty member is up for promotion. This in turn discourages academics from engaging in such initiatives and activities, and thus hindering their capacity

to play an advocacy role within public policy-making. It was reported that some universities have started accepting alternative publications in addition to journal publications when addressing the promotion of faculty members, such as policy briefs. Such procedures encourage academics to engage in the policy-making arena, in an attempt to bridge the gap between research and policy-making, and move towards a culture of evidence-informed policy-making.

University Affiliations

Another issue raised by the meeting participants was that of the university affiliation of university-based research centers. This affiliation was viewed by many as a value added to the center, bringing forth opportunities of funding and access to researchers. However, it was also viewed as a hindering factor in terms of limiting the affiliated faculty members from addressing issues that may be categorized as "off limits" by the university. For example, writing articles which criticize the government may be percieved by policymakers as representing the views of the affiliated university. This may cause the institutions which house these centers to place pressure on academics asking them to abandon controversial research topics and campaigns. It was argued that some academics create independent research organizations in order to escape the boundaries placed by the university affiliation. As such, they would be able to redirect their controversial research interests without pressure from any party.

The need for a lobbying agent

It was also argued that having centers take on convening and advocacy activities were important for bridging the gap between research and policy-making. However, it was equally important to have a lobbying agent to follow up on the implementation of public policies. Lobbying the government requires great effort and university-based research centers do not and cannot play that role alone. These centers are usually the catalyst that supports this lobbying agent. This is one way to make sure that good policies are presented to the government do not remain as an academic exercise but are also implemented.

Establishing a network of Stakeholders

Another recommendation for increasing the effectiveness of advocacy activities by university-based research institutes calls for establishing a network of stakeholders or an external network of NGOs by bringing on board civil society activists and business leaders to partner with academia. This would in turn launch strong campaigns which help in advocating for policy change. It was also recommended that a network of research institutes is convened in order to facilitate the sharing of resources and knowledge. This is in line with the recent development of research collaboration that have been observed globally, where research activities have become increasingly a joint endeavor which researchers and faculty members undertake across institutions.

The dilemma of policy implementation in Lebanon

It was agreed that policy implementation in Lebanon is difficult due to a number of actors, among which is the extremely politicalized environment. A question raised was whether it is the responsibility of university-based research centers to take on the implementation role. It was argued that any process of change requires a joint effort in which academics have a significant role to play. This role may extend to involvement in the implementation phase particularly through measurement and evaluation. In an attempt to increase the impact of

university-based research centers, it was suggested that there is a need to identify alternative audience of policy discourse. Centers may find that, for example, directing their research/policy discourse towards municipalities may increase their chances of having an impact on a certain policy.

The research team leading the study at the Issam Fares Institute will continue to further analyze the data collected through the interviews with the university-based research centers in light of the meeting convened. Additional issues will be addressed, such as the relationships between the age and the experience of the institution, the role it plays within the policy-making process, and the deliverables it produces. This study will have broad implications by providing a better understanding of the changing role of universities through their university-based research centers, as well as a look at one of the modes of bridging the gap between research and policy-making.