

THE THINK TANK AND ADVISORY BUSINESS IN AFRICA

Report of the 2009 Tswalu Dialogue

Prepared by Adrian Johnson, Terence McNamee and Greg Mills



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The Tswalu Dialogue was established in 2002 as a premier African forum to discuss issues of concern to continental development and security.

The 2009 Dialogue evaluated the role of the advisory business in Africa and further afield in a number of different sectors: peace and security, foreign affairs, economic development, conflict resolution and trade. It asked think tanks/advisers and their clients (governments, civil society, media and business) to identify areas and approaches where there have been particular successes and failures and the benefits of certain methods and the weaknesses of others.

This conference report helps establish a best practice (or at least, a better practice) in the role and operation of think tanks and advisory businesses in Africa.

Foreword

The prospect of African development depends on the presence of responsible and responsive government, effective administration, appropriate skills and investment. Just as the recent increase in aid will help to provide some of the necessary finance, civil society has an important role to play in ensuring governments adopt policies that will not only assist in ending widespread poverty and helping to ensure stability, but will also generate long-term prosperity by attracting the private sector.

The 2009 Annual Tswalu Dialogue focused on the role of think-tanks and other services in fulfilling such functions, determining whether there is an international advisory *best practice*. The debate on the role of such institutions was led off by two veterans of the South African government, Ronnie Kasrils and Neil van Heerden.

Ronnie Kasrils

When we, the military wing of the ANC,¹ walked into our first meeting with the medal-bedecked generals of the South African Defence Force shortly after the lifting of the ban on the ANC in 1990, our commander (and future defence minister) Joe Modise turned to me and quietly said: ‘Now I know what Piet Retief felt like in Dingaan’s kraal!’ The reference was to the slaying of the Boers, led by the Voortrekker leader Retief, on 6 February 1838 at the Zulu monarch’s residence. This act was followed by the Battle of Blood/Ncome River on 16 December of that year, setting the stage for the mistrust which characterised relations between our races for much of the following 150 years, as colonial conquest had done since 1652.

Joe was joking – but it highlighted the mutual fear and loathing between MK and the old SADF which had been at the sharp end in enforcing apartheid. But we grew to respect each other, and were able to put personal differences and past history aside for the betterment of our country. Compliance built trust on both sides, without which it would have been impossible to progress.

Much of this was down to a combination of professionalism and the personal relationships that were forged in spite of – and perhaps because of – our past. My personal assistant at the Ministry of Defence (after I became deputy minister to Joe Modise), it turned out, had been on the South African Air Force raid in March 1979 on the ANC

camp at Nova Catengue in Angola where I had been intermittently based. Yet he soon became indispensable to my office and my functioning in government, and was subsequently promoted. That very bombing raid was a failure because of a tip-off we had received from within the SADF – an illustration that support for the apartheid regime was not as monolithic among white South Africans as some believed.

Our progress from 1990 was greatly assisted by the contribution of civilian non-governmental specialists in bringing about our transition. They both provided the bridge between two eras and two political traditions, from apartheid to democracy, and assisted us with the analytical tools necessary to build a defence structure in a non-racial South Africa. They came from a variety of backgrounds, which itself proved the old maxim of strength through diversity. For instance, Laurie Nathan, from a pacifist End Conscription Campaign orientation, played a major part in the writing of the 1996 defence white paper. He also worked with MK cadres in the Military Research Group on drafting the constitution’s security chapter, amongst other related tasks. Greg Mills and his international network especially enabled us to understand the role of a modern navy in a post-apartheid era. Jakkie Cilliers’ Institute for Defence Politics (later Institute for Security Studies), with its links to the former SADF, helped to form a common approach. Our national defence review process, concluded in 1998, was the result of a

¹Umkhonto we Sizwe (‘Spear of the Nation’ – better known as MK)

countrywide, province-by-province consultation founded on civil society interaction with the military.

The role of business in the transition is often overlooked. But the mission headed by Anglo American head Gavin Relly in coming to meet with the ANC in Zambia in September 1985, in the face of Pretoria's opprobrium, was as brave as it was path-breaking. The role of visionaries such as Harry Oppenheimer is often overlooked in this process. A notable South African, he saw the need to use his time and deploy his resources to educate and inform his colleagues and politicians about the common good – and the importance of never losing sight of it. It is pertinent that his example is still being avidly followed today by his family through the Brenthurst Foundation.

As our democracy matures, the role of non-governmental organisations will continue to change. Those that adapt, advance and supply what is required by the market, including the needs of government, will be relevant and prosper. It is incumbent, too, on government to make full and better use of the talents outside of its own corridors. Just as invaluable intelligence often comes from

open source material, the best brains are often in the private sector. More than that, through co-operation and partnership, we can build teams more powerful than the sum of their parts.

Atop the Sir Herbert Baker memorial to South Africa's war dead at Delville Wood, a site near Longueval where a brigade of 3,153 South Africans emerged with just 780 survivors in July 1916, in an action to protect a tactical salient during the battle of the Somme, sits a bronze sculpture by Alfred Turner. This represents the twin brothers Castor and Pollux clasping hands in friendship over a horse's back. This statue has become symbolic of all the peoples of South Africa, united in defence of their common ideals. Similarly, the relationship between government, think-tanks, business and other elements of civil society should seek that synergy to build a stronger, democratic, prosperous South Africa and African continent today.

Ronnie Kasrils was head of Umkhonto we Sizwe's intelligence wing (1983-89), South Africa's deputy minister of defence (1994-99), minister of forestry and water (1999-2004), and minister of intelligence (2004-08).

Neil Van Heerden

The role played by civil society in the decades preceding South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994 was crucial in bringing about the peaceful transition. In fact, it is generally agreed that the transition would not have been peaceful—or indeed possible – had it not been for the contribution of the various elements of civil society.

The domestic development of civil awareness grew in concert and was supported by the escalating objection internationally to the racial policies of South African governments – going back as far as the League of Nations after the First World War. These policies featured in the first meetings of the United Nations in 1946 and stayed part of the agenda for more than four decades.

Opposition to racial separation was part of the zeitgeist and was not driven by specific interests or pressure groups, at least in the initial stage. These initiatives claimed to represent the voice of the people and were supported by organisations such as the South African Council of Churches; COSATU; Contralesa; and the South African National Civic Association.

In time, structures promoting specific interests were established, such as the End Conscription Campaign, and proposals calling for Alternative National Service. This camp was initially more fractious than organisations in sympathy with government policies – individual initiatives tended to be more independent and often provided an umbrella for disparate interests.

However, the ideology driving these initiatives – their opposition to apartheid and alignment with the zeitgeist – matured in time. It culminated with the establishment in 1983 of the United Democratic Front – an informal alliance which was to grow and achieve significant impact. The traction they achieved was further strengthened by the liberal establishment from across society in South Africa.

On the pro-government side, there was a plethora of organisations: religious, cultural, academic, sporting, trade unions and business associations. They were deeply embedded mainly – but by no means exclusively – in the White Afrikaner community. This support base was unified by the fear of losing political power and domination by the black majority. They found themselves in conflict with the spirit of the time and became increasingly isolated. However, they took comfort in the belief that they were being judged hypocritically; a strong existentialist justification was part of the mindset.

In addition to these two diametrically opposed camps there was another force at play – a force with a non-racial support base – one which was unequivocally opposed to racial separation but which avoided partisan positions. One example was the Centre for Intergroup Studies, which dealt with conflict resolution and mediation at the academic level. The founder, H W van der Merwe (a Quaker) emphasised respect for negotiating partners together with a carrot and stick approach in mediation. For Van Der Merwe, meaningful communication and reliable information were key elements of a successful mediation process. This initiative, among others, benefitted from the extensive international experience of partners in conflict resolution. The approach appealed to a wide domestic audience.

Other initiatives in this category included the Urban Foundation, Beyers Naude's Christian Institute and the American Friends Service Organization – a Quaker group which promotes non-violent change.

From the business sector, the South Africa Foundation, amongst others, tried to keep doors open to the markets where South African products were sold and were under threat of boycott. It was argued through their offices abroad that prosperity accelerates positive change. The USSALEP (US-South Africa Leadership Exchange Programme) afforded several hundred South Africans of all races the opportunity to benefit from visits to the US.

The press, which had remained essentially free, reflected the cleavages in our society, and as such vigorously championed the cause of the various constituencies. This contributed to a remarkable degree of transparency in the public debate.

These domestic civil society initiatives were supported internationally, including by the Programme to Combat Racism of the World Council of Churches, and numerous national organisations opposed to apartheid.

Brought about by the rising threat of serious violence, a National Peace Accord was signed in 1991, establishing a permanent peace secretariat and local committees. In time, this was followed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Looking back over time at the wide array of civil society initiatives in play before 1994, it is clear that our successful transition was due to a good deal of downright hard work, courage and honesty from across the spectrum.

The battle over racial separation has essentially been won. But continued vigilance is required. And looking at our continent as a whole, a great deal needs to be attended to in the field of development and conflict resolution – including the protection of our environment, governance and corruption. This calls for analysis based on serious research and the

marketing of these products in a way which will facilitate implementation.

A great deal has been achieved by research institutions and think tanks but an honest review of the state of our continent points to important shortcomings. The environment is often hostile to honest and incisive analysis of policy. An important part of the task must also be the sensitive study of the policy environment and appropriate steps to influence that environment to bring about a climate conducive to the implementation of new ideas.

The platform offered by the Brenthurst Foundation is timely and critical. After decades of advisory work by well-intentioned specialists, it is important to continuously and honestly review the achievements and the failures of the past. The inclusion of an impressive spread of non-African participants and partners brings international best practice into play.

The Oppenheimer family, with its long association with and commitment to Africa, is to be saluted for this important contribution to development on our continent.

Neil van Heerden was director-general, South African Department of Foreign Affairs (1987-92); ambassador to Bonn (1980-84) and the EU (1992-96); and director of the South Africa Foundation (1996-2003).

Day Two – 15 May 2009

Session One: International Experiences

Malcolm Chalmers opened with the simple point: think tanks must evolve to survive. Offering a British perspective, he described an ecology within which think tanks and advisory bodies exist. This constitutes a core of senior civil servants who advise government; political parties and parliament; the media; academics; private companies and sectional interest groups; as well as think tanks themselves. All these elements form a complex system, but it is this very complexity and multifaceted interaction that is a source of strength in the British case.

Professor Chalmers then offered some general observations. All elements of this ecology are necessary, and each has a specific role. For policy-makers and implementers, trusted advisers with congruous political interests are an invaluable asset. But dependency on advisers can be dangerous if interests are not aligned. In addition, no organisation can survive without financial capability. We should therefore concern ourselves with how advisers and think tanks are funded. 'Advisory capture' is also a worry – the extent to which the ideology, thinking or funding of elements that appear independent are in fact captured by

government. For example, much of the British NGO sector has been indirectly 'captured' by the Department for International Development (DfID) due to the nature of its extensive funding.

Razeen Sally assessed the European think tank sector through comparison with America. The US has the most vibrant think tank sector in the world; a critical mass of large, well-funded institutions with deep pools of expertise. The fluidity of policy culture in the US helps these think tanks carry weight and influence in public debate.

Europe is starkly different: the funding is worse, the profile is limited, and influence is reduced. The incubation and generation of ideas is much more curtailed. To an extent, this is due to the culture of policy-making, which is more dominated by career politicians and civil servants. Consequently, many of these institutions appear as public arms of government, which is not conducive to the generation of truly new ideas.

Dr Sally identified three lessons from this comparison. Firstly, purpose: it must be clear and fill a useful niche. Recommendations must be based

Case Study One: The Gulf Research Centre

Mustapha Alani gave an account of the challenges faced by think tanks in environments of limited political space: independent, critical and impartial institutions face tremendous difficulties in the face of hostile governments. Yet remarkably, the Gulf Research Centre (GRC), in which Alani serves, has not just survived, but achieved a level of credibility and trust with regional governments in an ecology inhospitable to independent policy advice.

The GRC's key stated task is to influence government policy. Initially, it was desired more by foreign entities – such as the EU, US military, and embassies – than by the government.

By persisting with its various initiatives, it has now earned the trust of government to some degree. One such proposal, that of a nuclear-free zone in the Gulf in response to the Iranian weapons programme, was initially criticised by governments. But careful nurturing of the initiative led to the proposal being discussed at the Gulf Co-operation Council summit in 2005. And more recently, government has approached the GRC to seek maritime security solutions to the crisis of piracy in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden. Now, government takes the initiative in starting policy relationships. However, there is a limit to progress – the organisation remains technically illegal in the UAE where it is based.

on sound data and original research. This requires an appropriate mix of scholars and practitioners. Secondly, there is a relative paucity of funding. In particular, EU bodies give funding to many think tanks, and rarely do they produce fresh, critical and informed work. Instead, they become consumed by the process and inward-looking. Thirdly, good communication is paramount. Reports must be concise and clearly written. New technology must be harnessed, but used to complement the message – not become it. Finally, he added that credibility is the result of hard work and long-term commitment.

Alistair Harris² began from first principles. What are we trying to achieve when we proffer advice? In short, we are trying to persuade someone of the merits or demerits of a course of action. We persuade someone by providing proof of what we are saying.

This can be aptly illustrated by looking at Aristotle's three forms of proof. The first was 'ethos' from which we derive ethics. This is dependent on the character and reputation of the speaker. In essence, if the speaker's 'ethos' is credible, we are persuaded by their sincerity. 'Pathos', from which we derive 'pathetic', is a deeply emotional appeal. It is defined as the ability to identify and understand another person's feelings, ideas and situation. It is adopting the view point of one's interlocutor, an empathetic approach. The final proof is that of 'logos', the logic of what we actually say. The truly effective advisor blends empathy and sympathy in a logical framework to be persuasive.

There are many reasons why this standard is not the norm in the advisory business. Tomes have been written on the need for local ownership, an inclusive and participatory approach to consultation with partners, re-orientating the power dynamics and acknowledging the 'other'.

But how does one actually do these things? A re-reading of Aristotle is unlikely to change the way we do business. So what is the most important but underused skill in the advisor's tool box? It is not a mastery of project cycle management, SWOT or PEST analysis, actor mapping or Gantt charts. It is the art of active listening. Perhaps this is a statement of the obvious, but listening is not the same thing as hearing. Indeed, deriving meaning from what is said is a tiring activity. It is far easier to rehash a tried and tested model, the 'cut and paste' approach to advice provision, than to listen.

Listening may, in one sense, be the antithesis of doing, but it is far from a passive activity. A soft skill, the real importance of listening lies in how *effective* it makes an advisory input. It is about much more than showing respect or cultural and historical sensitivity. It ensures a common understanding and a shared lexicon, both of which are key to unity of purpose and effort. Listening ensures that both parties understand equally what activities will be undertaken, what inputs, outputs and outcomes will look like and how progress can be monitored and effect evaluated. This is not some pointless management or oversight function but a process that empowers both advisors *and* recipients of advice.

Further, advice and expertise are quite different things. An expert is an individual having, involving or displaying special skill or knowledge derived from training or experience. An advisor may possess expertise in a particular field, but that individual is merely saying how the situation seems to them. They are offering an opinion, not a prescription. Whether that opinion is persuasive will depend on the particular blend of pathos, ethos and logos. An advisor should eschew the mantle of expertise. There are many dreaded acronyms in this field, but none is more pernicious than SME: subject matter expert.

² Alistair Harris was, regrettably, unable to attend the conference due to unforeseen circumstances. What follows is an adapted version of the presentation he was due to give.

Case Study Two: Think Tanks in China

Yang Guang provided three defining features of Chinese think tanks involved in African issues: attachment to academic institutions; concentration of staff in two main institutions (Institute for West Asian and African Studies, and the Institute of African Studies); and government ownership. There are no private think tanks. The Institute for West Asian and African Studies is attached to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which is itself run by a vice premier administrative rank.

Clients are either the Chinese government and its branches, or Chinese businesses investing in or operating in Africa. The relationship between Chinese government and think tanks is very much subordinate; they must reflect

government requirements in what they do. The relationship with business, however, is much more commercial. Issues consulted on have varied with the nature of China's interest in Africa – recently, trade has become an important area of analysis.

Evaluating the Chinese experience, Dr Guang noted these think tanks' success in influencing policy based on an increasing number of invitations for consultation. However, it is hard to get direct feedback on the effectiveness of their work. Another problem is reliance on secondary sources for analysis. Due to financial constraints and the distance between China and Africa, there were insufficient resources to conduct the necessary field work.

An advisor's role should be limited to raising awareness of the functioning and utility of other tools available, whilst acknowledging that the provision of advice is far more than a technical activity. It is taken as read that an advisor must be competent and credible. But the provision of advice is inherently political. There will be consequences if a partner does or does not pursue a particular course of action. But in the face of a recipient's reluctance to accept advice the answer is patience, and the realisation that efforts to persuade have been insufficient, or political considerations make the proposed course of action unacceptable. Indignation, anger or resignation is unlikely to improve the situation.

None of this should be interpreted as meaning the advisor should only tell a partner individual or organisation what it wants to hear; far from it. In an environment of trust and mutual confidence an advisor should be able to challenge and provoke. But to go further is to move beyond the definition of advice as 'this is how it seems to me' to 'if I were you' – a very big difference indeed that is frequently lost in the often well-intentioned scrum of advisors telling partners not what the options are, but which option to take.

Discussion

The opening session of the Dialogue built on several specific themes of the presentations. Most notably, discussion centred on strategies of influence available to think tanks and the political environment in which they work. Related to influence is the use of media and new technologies, which affects both the creation and distribution of output. The role of the political context and the way in which funding is generated were also assessed. The discussion indicated that given the broad range of circumstances, there is no universally-applicable template. Domestic and foreign institutions alike must navigate their individual environments, although indigenous institutions may be better at this. Contextual understanding is vital.

Defining Think Tanks

An important question related to the nature of think tanks within their political ecology: what is the line drawn between them and lobbying institutions? A fundamental distinction between think tanks and consultancy was offered. A consultancy model follows a client's agenda and produces exclusively for them. The ideal-type think tank is the reverse – it generates its own ideas and offers its findings.

Another cautionary note was sounded; although lobbyists are driven by economic or interest-based motivations, think tanks are not necessarily impartial. And faith-based think tanks, which are perhaps especially pertinent in the African context, are not conceptually different from other kinds of think tank: it is rare to have such institutions without an underlying identification or association with a particular value system. The significance of a think tank, therefore, is the application of a scientific approach and sound research.

Political Context

The specific demarcation of think tanks within the advisory taxonomy was accompanied by two political questions: what specific obstacles does African political culture create, and what is the appropriate role of foreign institutions?

First, there was elaboration of the contextual challenges faced by African institutions in their domestic polities. In particular, the general political context in African states is very much unfavourable or outright hostile to think tanks. A key challenge is convincing governments that new ideas from independent institutions are not a threat or challenge to authority, but instead are a support tool. Overcoming this barrier requires careful presentation of ideas.

The GRC experience in the Gulf provided one illustration of this: helped by its regional dimension (covering nine states), governments soon discovered their value. The GRC could say things government could not (or at least initially). In this way, the contribution of think tanks in broadening debate into taboo subjects was recognised. ECIPE in Brussels demonstrated how think tanks can aim for gaps in the study of important policy areas – in its own case, EU trade policy.

International involvement in African politics is extensive. One participant referred to the 'elephant in the room': the politics and interests of rich-country think tanks offering analysis and policy prescriptions for Africa. What is good for foreign state policy is not necessarily good for Africa. Indeed, competition from Asian institutions may expose many of the assumptions and implicit interests of Western think tanks. For now,

however, the production and flow of ideas has been one-way; even ideas about Asia predominantly come from Western institutions. But the issue is complex, and there are many facets to international involvement.

It is not simply a question of interest: analysis and prescription embody a set of inculcated assumptions, mindsets and models. Foreign institutions must be particularly aware of their own; hence involving local actors at all stages of work should be a matter of course, particularly given Africa's diversity of experience. Despite these obstacles, however, outside institutions can assist in the provision of neutral, impartial reporting and analysis of divisive issues. This is particularly so in cases where the domestic space for impartiality is lacking.

Given these possible advantages, is it essential that they are of indigenous origin? Are we now in an era where institutions can globally project influence? This may indeed be the case with a handful of (US-based) think tanks. But diversity is desirable. One panellist suggested that think tanks with global reach could be useful in providing policy ideas on behalf of small states that lacked capability. However, the question of the alignment of incentives was once again raised: a government needs its advisers to be loyal. Global institutions can never completely substitute for indigenous capacity.

Strategies of Influence

The issue of context underpins the specific strategies of communication think tanks should pursue. Strategies to influence policy and debate will vary by the type of issue and the specific relationship with government. In the case of insider strategies, the 'gatekeeper' problem – how precisely one gets past the civil servant or secretary to get the ear of a leader or minister – bears particular relevance. But communication does not just relate to governments and elite. The internet provides new opportunities for the dissemination of information to the wider public, so long as it is harnessed correctly.

The fundamental distinction of insider and outsider strategies was offered by one participant. Think tanks have a public role – and should place research in the public domain, make it easily accessible, and thus

contribute to public discussion. But many think tanks also want to influence government channels. This can be a parallel process involving other means.

Insider strategies raise the problem of the 'gatekeeper'. High-level officials are insulated by bureaucracies and their ear or time may be difficult to get. Ecologies defined by 'big men' or 'big boss' politics provide few avenues of entry for policy influence. So the question of access is also a question of context: it varies by society. This is a concern for new think tanks that do not yet have the level of institutional prominence needed to overcome or sidestep this barrier. One panellist responded by refining the role of gatekeepers: they can be important in fending off other politicians with partisan agendas. And confidentiality requirements of ministers may be a further barrier to widespread involvement of outside actors, including think tanks. Another comment suggested that outsider institutions, through prestige and access, can provide a substitute function in this regard.

Discussion also studied particular cases of success or failure. Some general points emerged. While it is hard for outsiders to have direct influence on policy, they can shape the agenda and overall direction of discussion. Networks including key actors in policy processes can augment this influence. One panellist highlighted the so-called 'Dracula effect', whereupon scrutiny is shone onto previously unexamined areas of policy by think tanks. This can multiply the power and influence of outsider think tanks. Track-two dialogue also presents an alternative means of influence. Its dominance by academics, politicians and careerists can create a tendency to conform to government stances and inflexibility in questioning received wisdom. But its utility as a pathway towards credibility should not be dismissed; track-two is particularly useful for think tanks working in unfavourable environments.

Impact of New Media

A key question evoked the possibilities of the internet age. Are centralised think tank models obsolete in an age of more democratic production and distribution of information? The panellists provided some important insights on the opportunities for dissemination provided by the internet and also the pitfalls of its use.

Firstly, the prevalence of the internet lowers entry barriers into the think tank world. Only modest resources are required for start up now, and networks of researchers around the world can be harnessed more cheaply. As a result, competition in the sector is increased. However, a network model – as opposed to a centralised one – is not sustainable beyond a certain size of institution. Nevertheless young institutions can benefit: a relationship with key media figures can help defend think tanks from government pressure of the threat of closure.

'Information poverty' is also another problem: the sheer volume of information on the internet paradoxically hinders comprehension. But blogging can be a powerful tool despite this. And the enhanced public profile blogs create can facilitate the entry of think tanks into insider processes and increase the effectiveness of communication. However, a warning was given: the medium of communication should be used to complement sound, in-depth research, not substitute for it.

Funding

Not as deeply discussed in this session as it subsequently would be, the tensions inherent in external funding were nevertheless mentioned. It is undeniable that money is necessary, but the source of funding and its effects can sometimes undermine the wider utility of think tanks for society. Panellists suggested that while funding should not compromise integrity, the need for it can sometimes determine the balance of issue areas examined. This could particularly be the case for new think tanks; more established institutions have a degree of flexibility based on accumulated resources.

Key Lessons from Session One

- Think tanks exist within a complex political ecology
- Both 'insider' and 'outsider' strategies are available to think tanks
- 'Insider' strategies carry a risk of capture by government departments
- An independent voice is crucial
- Clear results and good communication develop credibility
- Involvement of local actors is critical to maintaining relevance
- It is imperative to identify the core audience
- New media is a tool, but not a substitute, for quality research

Session Two: International Experiences

Mark Bellamy outlined the structure and funding of the US Department of Defense's Africa Center. Though it is very much a foreign institution looking at African issues, in its operation it is careful to both guard its independence from US government interference and also work with African partners in a context of mutual dialogue.

Diversity is a recognised asset of the Center's staff. And its work develops communities and networks not just between the US and African states, but also between African states. Moreover, African participants direct and own the final result. Listening is an important part of US use of the Center – this has conditioned AFRICOM, for example, to set maritime security in response to piracy as a key priority.

Local ownership is critical for a useful end-product. The Africa Center has also realised that, in this case, process is more important than intellectual output. The habit of collaboration and degree of trust that is fostered by dialogue is the key product of this iterative process. Finally, the stress is on long-term processes. Security is an enduring goal, so continuous engagement develops the Center's credibility.

But there is a problem with the measurement of output. How is a monetary value assigned to networks and partnership, and what is the impact upon partner governments? This would be a persistent theme in later discussions.

Switching the focus to Southeast Asia, **Barry Desker** described the development of think tanks in Singapore. In East Asia, public policy institutions are a relatively new phenomenon, but have been consolidating their positions in the discourse.

He first identified four models of think tank:

- Academic – associated with universities
- Contract research – as exemplified by the RAND Institute
- Advocacy – put forward a viewpoint determined by ideological goals seeking to influence public debate in their direction
- Government-linked – directly affiliated with government ministries, with a constant flow of ideas between each.

Professor Desker stressed the importance of funding. In his experience within the RSIS, there has been considerable evolution. Initially funded entirely by the Singaporean Ministry of Defence, sources of income have diversified significantly. A teaching sideline now composes 20 per cent of income; the rest is derived from think tank activities. Financial security means institutions can develop long-term careers for staff.

The teaching activities of the institution have also been tailored to fit particular gaps in international studies curricula worldwide. There is a focus on a practitioner's skill set in foreign affairs. Students and staff are recruited worldwide. But despite being a lucrative sideline, the main focus remains on think tank activities. And having consolidated the institution as a whole, new centres have been created to extend the issue footprint.

Alberto Trejos provided a Latin American perspective. His presentation considered a unique example: a regionally-focused think tank that emerged from a Costa Rican business school: INCAE.

The developing world, Professor Trejos argued, needs more institutionalised think tanks, rather than consultancy outlets of a few individuals. This requires appropriate staff, philosophy and structure. He offered some specific lessons and considerations for such projects.

First, resources: money dictates composition of the agenda, not the agenda itself. But becoming overly responsive to external demand turns a think tank into a consultancy. Second, there can be some natural overlap with lobbying. An agenda should not be for sale, but think tanks can keep pushing one to its conclusion – and assist institutions and leaders who want to push policy forward. Third: influencing public opinion is vital, particularly by fostering a favourable media agenda. From experience, this proved more useful than more transient moments of political success. Only a persistent message broadcast to the public will effect a shift in national opinion. Fourth, only an appropriate mix of international and local staff works. The most useful contributions of external analysts are reflective accounts of their own experiences: this nourishes a fundamental approach that stresses what is local.

Discussion

Three broad issues were examined here: overlap in the typology presented by Desker; elaboration on the interaction of political culture and think tanks; and discussion of product and the measurement of its effect.

Overlap with Academia

The first strand of discussion considered the increasing overlap between the activities of universities and think tanks. This may be a disturbing phenomenon: more and more of the research university departments undertake is driven by research grants. These are often policy-relevant endeavours rather than genuinely academic

pursuits. Surely this undermines the important distinction between university and think tank?

One clarification was offered: a university department has crossed the line, as it were, when its outlook is no longer the sum of individual projects contributing to a specific discipline of academic study. Instead, the dangerous overlap occurs when a department pushes out joint research projects based purely on the funding available, and which have more in common with the policy and consultancy staple of think tanks.

In Singapore, the growing wedge between university international relations and political science departments and the government and civil service was a cause for concern: ministries were not hiring those educated in the management of the international system or the study of political structures and phenomena. So in this case, a think tank institution was directly redressing a shortcoming of the university sector. A further point was made – academia must be a crucial third wing of the ‘revolving door’ system between governments and think tanks.

Political Cultures

Indeed, this ‘revolving door’ structure was apparent in many of the presentations and much of the discussion of the conference. It is a clear element of the political ecology of Western think tanks, particularly the US. Yet it does not exist in Africa. How might such a system be created?

In such a system, policy impact can in fact come from the shifting of think tank employees into positions of power within government. And in the other direction, ex-practitioners can bring beneficial insights into the workings of government and the experience of implementation into the output of think tanks. But South Africa embodies the problem of dichotomy; one is either in government or outside it, and no culture of alternation over the course of a career exists. For this kind of system to flourish, political culture must have evolved beyond a simple distinction between government opponent and acolyte.

There was also further discussion of the relationship between local think tanks and international actors. What is the manner of conditionality in such relationships? How are local interests taken into account? In situations where a multiplicity of research institutions exists, international involvement is less problematic. Agendas cannot be imposed, either deliberately or unintentionally, when a healthy plurality of local institutions, academics and communicators exists. And governments will respond to public pressure in such open systems, rather than bend to international will. However, international involvement does remain a sensitive issue, especially in the case of government-backed institutions and when their presence might crowd out indigenous institutions.

So the problem remains one widely faced by think tanks. Reliance on foreign funding can subvert one's message and sceptics believe this leads to the pursuit of the donor agenda. This is particularly a risk for think tanks that work on international or regional agendas.

Effective Product and Measurement of Impact

The 'product' of a think tank, in one panellist's succinct definition, is the presentation of new ideas in a clear and concise fashion. Moreover, think tanks enable policy-makers and opinion-formers to interact, creating awareness in government that disagreement in specific issue areas does not imply disloyalty. Many questions concerned the objective measurement of effect. How do we gauge the impact of a think tank's work? Related to this point is the question of what makes an effective product.

A key strand of the discussion focused on the 'model of change' adopted by think tanks. Different conceptions of the 'good society' are more or less inferable, if not explicit, from an institutional mission statement. But more implicit within these are the presupposed models of change through which institutions try to influence an area of policy. Is impact on an influential individual the answer in every policy area? Ultimately, these questions cannot be separated from the measurement of effect.

It is difficult to develop good means of determining the effect of a think tank's product. But the quest for accurate measurements should not be abandoned for easy ones. In the discussion of policy influence, there were competing views.

One panellist argued that, in fact, policy influence is not a good measure: it is very hard to quantify and policy prescriptions are often the weakest part of the product. Policy recommendations are often appended to analysis as a matter of course, when the latter is the most useful and most read elements of a report. Dialogue with sceptical communities can often be an integral part of a think tank's work also, and this shifting of attitudes can be equally difficult to measure.

A counter-argument emerged, which stressed the centrality of implementation to the measurement of success. Conceptualisation is more easily done than the execution. In this, it is vital that policy-makers work within their local context. An effective product is one that is applicable and attentive to the domestic dynamics – one-size-fits-all approaches do not work.

How do think tanks turn 'what' into 'how'? There are plenty of ideas in the marketplace, but few on implementation and execution. Responding to this, one contributor argued that 'how' is as much an academic question as 'what'. Non-practitioners may not be able to best answer this question. However, this does not negate the value of the more conceptual output of think tanks. The world and its possible outcomes are not a set of comparative statics. Therefore, setting a direction of discourse and policy can be as important as a final outcome.

Rankings were identified as one useful product of think tanks. Examples given included Freedom House, Transparency International, the World Bank and the UNDP – all of whom produce influential rankings. Although they are not necessarily apolitical, they have to some extent become 'referee' organisations. In such global rankings, there is also a role for local think tanks, in collecting local data. These rankings may be the most influential aspect of output – they influence legislation as well as assistance programmes.

Key Lessons from Session Two

- Dialogue can foster collaboration
- Investment in staff training, retention and recruitment develops human capital
- Intellectual independence from the exogenous agenda differentiates think tanks from consultancies
- Impact cannot be gauged without clear objectives (i.e. ‘a conception of the good’)
- The ease and relevance of the implementation strategy is a key measure of success

Session Three: International and African Experiences

Eran Lerman opened a hitherto unexplored topic: the interaction between think tanks and the intelligence community. This also has a bearing on the question of what intelligence is. In the narrow definition – the pursuit of secrets – there would appear to be negligible demand for think tank output. But if a broader, more useful definition is used – that of a search for and analysis of information that aids an understanding of the world – then there can be fruitful collaboration.

Therefore the proper outlet for the think tank product – in whatever form – may in fact be a functioning intelligence community. Those who have established and run a functional, efficient and analytical community are natural recipients of the research and data of think tanks.

Nevertheless, think tanks must avoid ‘capture’ by government funding and priorities. There should still be engagement, but the tension between priorities and approaches can be a creative one. The specific forms of interaction can vary from informal lunches to ‘revolving door’ systems.

The most fruitful outcome of such meetings is not necessarily answers. Rather, pointing out the correct questions – challenging the received wisdom – helps break out of existing intellectual templates. For example, is the concept of the ‘Middle East’ useful? Is a Mediterranean template more useful for strategic analysis and policy-making? These are the sorts of fresh perspectives that exchanges between intelligence communities and think tanks can provide.

Deane-Peter Baker of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) outlined the growth and expansion of the organisation and its evolving role in post-apartheid South Africa. Human security has become an integral part of its work as it seeks to become a regional institution. The long-term goal is to become an international institution presenting an African voice to the world.

There have been three main recent trends observed in South Africa: increased co-operation with government partners; more engagement with civil society; and a move towards implementation support. The third in particular has been driven by a sense of the capacity constraints on the continent. The ISS has stepped in to fill these gaps in some instances, which combines the role of think tank and technical assistance agency.

Some individual challenges were identified by Dr Baker. Rapid institutional growth of the ISS has had consequences; dispersion both geographical and in terms of the issue areas examined. In intellectual terms, the Institute must be careful not to overreach and fail to deliver on its promises. Further, when presenting work, while concision is essential, there is a risk of losing the depth that went into reaching the conclusion. Finally, the long-term effects on funding in the current economic downturn remain an ongoing concern.

Greg Mills presented the example of the Brenthurst Foundation, which has some idiosyncratic features within the standard think tank taxonomy. It is family-funded; private-sector linked; works through wider international partnerships; and has a very small staff. Its emphasis is very much on advice for

implementation as well as more general issues – and this demands working as an insider institution.

Its ambition to derive and apply international best practice has taken its work across sectors and continents. Dr Mills identified some general problems encountered in this experience: many advisers, each with their own view, compete for attention; governments can be difficult to work with, and can harden to pressure; ‘final’ reports are rarely final, as the work only begins then; and the temptation to uncritically relay accepted wisdom without empirical basis must always be resisted.

Further, he listed a number of challenges particular to the African context. There is a cluttered agenda – there is no shortage of issues vying for donor and government attention. ‘Gig syndrome’ is also a problem; a whole host of events attended in sequence denies pause for thought and reflection. Amongst this noise, media dissemination is important. But differentiation is essential – few will read the many reports produced by the think tank sector, so a unique product is needed.

Money remains the bottom line and is a massively important consideration. The production and marketing of ideas are now very much a business, and Africa is no exception. As mentioned in previous sessions, the African context lacks a ‘revolving door’ system of fluidity between think tanks and different parts of the political solar system.

Then there are the logistical and political challenges of furthering good ideas and issues. There exists a tension between profile and funding – necessary criticism of government or policy may limit an institution’s access. Conversely, too close an association with government erodes an institution’s credibility. It is vital to note that every country has its own political context and government personality, which can undermine even the best ideas. Governments also face many demands from outsiders, with limited capacity to implement advice. Nevertheless, many are adept at dodging the demands of outsider institutions, and foreigners being present can provide a useful means of protection.

Discussion

Two overarching themes were apparent in the following discussion session. The unique product think tanks can produce is a function of their institutional environments of political awareness and free-thinking. Tied up with the product is its value in a time of uncertainty – and therefore the funding it can command. Going beyond the ‘what’, another set of questions probed the complex matter of implementation – the ‘how’.

Novel Output

The idea of think tanks raising ‘interesting questions’ – challenging assumptions and frameworks implicit in policy – invited comment on a perhaps neglected avenue of research. The link between human security and development, for example, is one area in which think tank output can influence intelligence communities and therefore the advice given to, and activity of, governments. Free-thinking research can therefore be influential by virtue of its novel conclusions if they are based on sound methodology. Indeed, some participants argued that this interaction between think tanks and intelligence communities should be actively sought.

Questions of output also relate to funding. There was wide agreement that the current economic climate stifles fundraising. For many private donors, think tank programmes seem soft targets in budgets. But some participants argued there was still an opportunity to be grasped: in financial downturns, certain issues remain directly related to a company’s bottom line. So while conference and membership income may be hit, in fact there may be more opportunities for areas of research in times of pessimism and uncertainty. Think tanks must therefore target this potential funding, and prove their worth in hard times.

Regardless of levels of private funding, it remains the case, one panellist argued, that the African continent is awash with public donor funding. The difficulty is actually wise expenditure, and preventing the squandering of resources on fruitless projects. In this regard, think tanks must

include practical considerations of implementation, as well as conceptual analysis, in their work.

However, not all participants agreed on the importance of implementation, particularly in the case of international involvement. Think tanks are not government: in this minimalist view, a clear line should be drawn between recommendation and policy-implementation. There is another practical aspect to this conservative approach. American think tanks tower over their international counterparts – and the situation is analogous in Africa, where South African institutions dominate the continental ecology. For young and developing institutions competing against established regional brands, focus and the avoidance of overstretch are essential for effective influence.

Follow-through

Influence remained a nebulous concept in the discussion, and the follow-through of policy advice remained a key strand of debate. One decision-maker stated that he rarely, if ever, made use of think tank output. And, furthermore, bogus analysis and output was always a potential hazard. While this may be less of a problem in a vibrant, open society where debate is free, how might more closed communities ingest the better analysis available? Some tentative suggestions were given: sound methodology is critical in influencing policy, which is often overlooked. Additionally, a more passive role (letting the government come to them) on the part of think tanks can be helpful. By letting the state take the initiative, projects begun in this manner will be more likely to involve a follow-through process, as opposed to outside institutions

pushing on a perhaps reluctant government.

One concern was the brand of think tanks. To what extent were these taken for granted as incorrect shorthand for excellence? How might consumers guard against a leveraging of a trusted brand to compensate for shoddy output? This was not comprehensively answered. But some explanation for the phenomenon was offered: the pressure to perform in the think tank world is similar to, or worse than, that in academia. Presence in the media can become a substitute for thoughtful output, and the production of eye-catching reports a proxy for influence. However, this is a short-sighted strategy, as brand respect and credibility quickly erode. Think tanks must therefore avoid these temptations.

These questions of process and follow-through led naturally to another important theme: that of failure. Not all advice, no matter how well crafted, will succeed. One answer stressed that, first of all, policy *options* must be presented – in other words, downsides and potential negative outcomes must be presented with each suggestion. Nevertheless, in cases of failure, the government is responsible.

Another answer stressed the value of long-term relationships. Think tanks naturally look for ‘quick wins’ to affirm their policy impact. But affecting long-term direction and strategy is more difficult. One example offered was the World Bank: it would be difficult to rank them favourably in a strict interpretation of their track record. Yet the Bank keeps working, which highlights the importance of reflecting carefully on mistakes as well as success: the need to learn why recommendations failed.

Key Lessons from Session Three

- Collaboration with the intelligence community can help maximise the utility of research
- The ‘cluttered agenda’ should not privilege brevity over in-depth analysis
- A ‘revolving door’ system can facilitate the exchange of ideas and personnel between governments and think tanks
- Robust research methodology strengthens credibility
- Think tanks must protect and harness their brand
- Long-term thinking is essential

Day Three – 16 May 2009

Breakout Sessions

Group One: Peace and Security Advisory Best Practice

Underpinning the discussion on peace and security was a very strong consensus that viable solutions to Africa's myriad security challenges demand more and better debate and research coming from *within* Africa. The record of peace-building practice across the world attests to the need for local and national expertise and institutions, because the solutions arising from those interactions are likely to be more sustainable than solutions crafted by external actors. One of the discussants aptly noted that we need to ensure that we avoid using *worst practice* perhaps even more than we need to devise best practice, the former always being a danger when foreign templates are transferred onto the African context.

A number of participants in group one drew attention to the marked decline in systematic discussion and analysis within Africa on what is sometimes referred to as hard security issues: border control and national security, defence policy and strategy, military doctrine, training, leadership and capacity. This decline is of particular concern because there remain vast deficiencies in fundamental areas of defence and security within the African context. Today there are only a small, and declining, number of institutions which focus on these problems. Given that, as ever, the core requirements for a nation-state involve security – the protection of citizens and territorial sovereignty – the need to address this deficit was robustly affirmed.

It was further noted that today the concept of 'security', as traditionally understood, has become subsumed in the language of development, governance and security sector reform. This development is to a large extent a consequence of our enhanced understanding and appreciation of the interconnectedness of hard security with 'soft' security issues, such as employment and

food and water security. In part, this can also be attributed to the fact that donor money and resources are increasingly targeted at more holistic security-related projects, like SSR and post-conflict reconstruction efforts, rather than direct military tasks. And lastly, reputation: militaries, and 'defence' in general, have a bad reputation within the African context. In much of Africa, people fear the state, the police and the military – often because the security forces do not understand their role within the overall governing structures. In general the demands of African citizens are very basic, revolving around core socio-economic problems; in these circumstances, rarely does public opinion support giving more money and resources to the military.

Given the increasingly nebulous language around security, several discussants highlighted the need to rationalise our terms of reference and hone in on a set of clearer definitions and concepts.

Key Questions

Several key questions framed the remainder of the discussion in group one:

- How should the balance between 'hard' and 'soft' security issues be reflected in the work and output of African think tanks?
- How can think tanks redress the declining interest in Africa in bread-and-butter defence and military issues?
- What functions should these think tanks and advisory systems perform – advise the African Union, regional bodies and/or national governments? Shape public opinion? Give voice to ordinary citizens? Link-in with training at universities?
- Have we properly investigated what the 'requirement' for policy advice is?
- Where is the expertise for think tanks going to come from?
- What are the appropriate conduits or access points for think tank-generated expertise?

- What are the African solutions?
- How can funding best be secured from donors who are traditionally resistant to military institutions?

The nexus between the African Union (AU) and think tanks was identified as a key subject to be examined going forward. Currently, the AU is very strained and the capacity of the organisation is very weak. How, then, can the efforts of think tanks be marshalled towards strengthening what the AU is seeking to do with the development of continental peace and security architecture? What type of inputs would be most beneficial to the organisation?

In terms of the provision of information and advice, another key relationship examined was between supply and demand. To date there has been a grossly inadequate focus in Africa on identifying what the actual demand of governments is for advice and assistance of the kind think tanks and external advisory systems are devised to provide. Indeed, there is probably an over-supply of advice in Africa, but too little demand; African governments do not solicit as much as they get – and perhaps because of that, they tend to ignore it. Supply cannot be an end in itself; think tanks cannot operate in a vacuum. If there is a strong consensus that governments are not listening but they certainly need to, then, some discussants asked, what are the other ways to affect a change of mindset in Africa’s corridors of power? How can we engage civil society on defence and security issues when governments are either not listening or lack the capacity to properly evaluate the advice they receive?

Two key recent case-studies which generated considerable debate were Darfur and AFRICOM. The crisis over Darfur and the related peacekeeping mission was cited as a salutary example of what can happen in the absence of robust think tanks and advisory systems. It was suggested that had a well-functioning think tank culture been in place, it may have generated different policy options and advice which could have steered

governments and the AU away from the flawed decision-making that has blighted that mission. On the other hand, AFRICOM, notwithstanding the controversy surrounding its establishment, was cited as a unique opportunity for Africa to generate new thinking and ideas on continental security which could be put to the new command for consideration and, perhaps, implementation. US officials have expressed an openness and willingness to engage national governments and regional organisations on a host of security-related issues on the continent – but have found the African response wanting. Think tanks could help foster collaboration on areas of mutual security concern, and also put the stated intentions of AFRICOM to the test in meaningful ways.

Recommendations

The remainder of the group one discussion was devoted to concrete and practical contributions that think tanks could make to greater understanding of African security issues and, hopefully, a better policy-making environment. Among the key issues identified were:

Internal Security

Address the role of police and the general deterioration of police capacity, as well as the concomitant rise in various forms of criminal activity across Africa.

National Security versus Regime Security

Safeguard against the tendency of African governments to think of security in terms of their own political survival rather than the protection of national populations and territorial sovereignty.

Military Professionalism

Promote through research, advocacy and training a greater understanding of the proper role of the armed forces and the security and intelligence services in democracies.

Civil-military Relations and Nation-building

Demonstrate the utility of the military, as an institution, in creating a common sense

of citizenship, melting down tribal and ethnic barriers, and creating a national self-consciousness. Also examine preventive strategies to ensure militaries are not a destabilising force in African societies.

An 'African Security Concept'

Devise a common language and terms of reference on African security. This is all the more vital given that within Africa, 'security' is a deeply contested concept.

Security-Development Links

Map the interconnectivity of 'hard' and 'soft' security issues in national development, and develop appropriate, non-kinetic solutions to security challenges.

Dialogue with Civil Society

Promote robust debate and engagement between civil society and government on defence and security issues, and by doing so give the public a greater stake in national policies.

Group Two: Development Advisory Best Practice

Ann Bernstein opened her presentation by stating that there needs to be a clear definition of terms: there is a distinction between a research institute and a think tank and there is a spectrum of roles between the two. There are three things in particular which think tanks must be mindful of: the inseparability of policy from politics; appropriate methods of communication; and the environment in which they work.

Policy is Political

The policy business is inherently political. It is critical to think about how policy will play out in the political arena, whether or not one's institute is party-political.

Effective Communication

Institutions need to be very clear what they want to say, why, how and to whom, and to achieve what exactly. There are multiple levels of communication, ranging from media soundbites to full-length reports. Developing countries present a particular challenge: one needs to decide on a mass strategy or a leadership one. Coherence between aims and methods may therefore require innovative strategies to influence cabinets and ministers. And developing appropriate solutions requires think tanks to listen, as well as talk.

A factor to bear in mind concerns how the think tank communicates. What might be appropriate for a sophisticated elite audience (say of leading business people) would be totally inappropriate for a different kind of audience. Think tanks need to be clear on how they communicate their ideas in the most constructive way. An authoritative lecture style might work well with some audiences and go down terribly with a community audience in a poor area. The challenge is not to change the essence of the message or policy proposal or insight, but to communicate it in ways that are accessible to different kinds of audiences

Know your Environment

Equally importantly, think tanks must adapt to the country within which they work. For

example, in South Africa at transition, the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) decided that the new government required time to settle in and that head-on policy debate would not be very constructive. The CDE's work was therefore geared towards factual research and analysis and ensuring that it was seen as a national resource which could help the new government achieve its aims – demographic research, for example. In time, as the new government settled in, a more direct engagement around policy options could be embarked upon. After some five years it became apparent that the role of parliament was diminishing as a centre for effective policy debate and serious exchange, and so much more attention was paid to the executive in Pretoria rather than the legislature in Cape Town.

There is no substitute for a country-specific approach. Think tanks must understand local dynamics – politics, styles, sensitivities, power brokers and other sources of influence. Tactics must be suited to context, and institutions must be flexible and nimble to adapt to changing environments and to seize new opportunities.

South African Case Study

The CDE is an independent policy think tank, with its core funding from business. Its focus is on issues in the national and public interest of South Africa. Ann Bernstein highlighted one of the conundrums of relations with government: there is a delicate balance between independence and irrelevance.

Communication must be tailored to best promote the debate and influence the national conversation on the issues. Of course, this means that the solutions must also be tailored to the individual context.

The media is very important. The most appropriate kind, from written to TV to radio, will depend on the audience one is trying to reach. Think tanks need also to listen. They do not know everything and can learn from people and interests who see the world differently from academics. Considerable attention needs to be paid on how best to communicate

complicated policy issues to ensure a constructive and useful public debate on the fundamental issues rather than ‘red herrings’.

In the specific case of South Africa, as the country opened up, CDE had to develop a number of different ways of communicating and sharing its ideas. How to talk to new MPs – many from rural areas or poor townships? How to talk to highly educated bureaucrats often educated in non-democratic systems? How to communicate with civic leaders often emerging from a period of intense struggle? And so on.

Organisations can be important players in policy change. By influencing businesses on the importance of a particular issue, private sector leaders will go on to mention this during their interaction with political leadership. This also provides a tool against reflexive government criticism, as think tanks can stress that the suggested policies are desired by business.

The presentation concluded with a summary of lessons that can be applied to other African contexts:

- Policy is inherently political; not party political but intimately related to politics around issues
- Appropriate communication requires understanding the environment and the audience one is trying to reach
- International best practice can be used to nudge national conversations but this has to be used in strategic ways to have real effect in domestic debates.

There are important general lessons to be learnt from think tanks all over the world. These need then to be adapted and thought about for their relevance in a particular developing country. Think tanks can play an important role in societies – the battle of ideas matters. Their work has to be tailored to each society or region and must be policy relevant. Expenditure on research and policy ideas needs always to be assessed for its impact on society. There are many think tanks and research institutes which have little impact at all. If that is the case, the argument for spending valuable social resources

on their activities has to be weighed against what else could be done with this money to promote development.

The response by **Joseph Siegle** focused on strengthening and institutionalising African thinking about its own challenges. While there has been progress on African development, including the highest levels of sustained growth over the last decade, there remains a sense of desperation and failure.

To be sure, there are problems within the field of development: there is little cross-institutional knowledge sharing and much ‘reinventing of the wheel’. Much work is vertically structured and project-oriented – few horizontal linkages exist that spread information across organisations and sectors. More thoughtful analysis, available to organisations in the field, is needed. Further, relatively few organisations exist that combine both scholars and practitioners. Another key shortcoming is moving to scale. Developmental successes in Africa have often been project or site specific; they are difficult to replicate or expand to have a larger impact.

Development policy and thinking must be better integrated into coherent national and cross-sectoral frameworks. Narrow, sectoral frameworks to development are usually applied – but these create a gap in analysis when, for example, a water project also has health and environmental dimensions. A holistic approach is required – so even a sectoral focus must be aware of other considerations and integrate them into its models.

Given the individual goals of various organisations, it is important to rein them in and direct them through a national development strategy. This framework must be domestically owned, although international entities can certainly feed into the process in a useful way. Co-ordination of action and sharing of information are essential for a complementary approach.

There are grounds for optimism. Political space in Africa has opened over the last ten years, and it is

now a more opportune place to have these debates and discussions. The time may now be ripe to push for indigenous African think tank capacity. The need is clear: the challenges of development are more complicated than ever. But on the positive side, there are more models of development available. And there is more willingness to use the private sector as a driver of change, rather than just simply NGOs. Think tanks, in this environment, can tap the wealth of experience that has already been generated. From this, they can *build* on the lessons of the past rather than recapitulating the mistakes of previous years.

Discussion

The underlying aim of both foreign and domestic advisory endeavours is to help Africa develop competitive economies and responsible institutions. But there has also been a wider clamour for 'African solutions to African problems'. From both the presentations and discussion, two main sets of questions were tackled.

First: how are indigenous institutions created and promoted? What are the ingredients of a successful think tank working in African contexts?

Second: given the global asymmetry of expertise and resources, it is inevitable that foreign institutions or personnel will come to play some role in African policy development. How might such involvement be profitably and sustainably harvested?

The need for analytical and reflective capability is clear. As Dr Siegle argued in his presentation, many old questions resurface again and again. One of the hindrances is the sheer volume of information – small project teams and staffs simply cannot digest the mountain of knowledge and experience available. But despite this need for a bank of thoughtful analysis, relatively few organisations exist in Africa where the experience of practitioners and scholars is combined.

African Solutions

The first part of the discussion elaborated some

general principles of operation for African think tanks, building in particular on Ann Bernstein's presentation. Contextual understanding is vital for successful operation. If an institution seeks influence, it must operate with tact and deftness.

This is no less the case in development which has often been held as a purely technical field. But many of the bottlenecks in development are political in nature. And there are always political – and cross-sectoral – implications of development projects.

There is also the question of sensitivity to the concerns of African businesses. Despite forming a ready pool of funding and local demand, the businessman speaks a different language to the think tank, participants from the private sector argued. They do not like unnecessary risks and prefer quantifiable outcomes. Therefore think tanks need to give another kind of pitch for their custom, one that stresses their specific utility to business. Conceptual research is less worthwhile for the private sector than specific, workable policy recommendations. Think tanks should be alert to this and market themselves as an outlet for risk capital (money business could afford to lose) to generate creative thinking, experiment with different models and test existing models before going to larger-scale use.

Returning to the issue of coherent national development frameworks, it was agreed that they help foster a complementary approach. However, there is an uneasy tension between the need for some sort of co-ordinated approach nationally and the role of think tanks challenging governments and maintaining independence.

Another identified problem – and, indeed, opportunity – was the capability gap in Africa. Zimbabwe was given as a relevant case study. The lack of capacity relates to both the public and private sectors; businesses too are unsure how to articulate their vision and influence policy. Government, on the other hand, lacks basic skills such as competitive tender processes. So here think tanks can creatively help fill a void, creating

both a useful role for themselves in the short term but also fostering actual development in the long term. Care, however, must be taken to avoid creating a substitution effect whereby think tanks are relied on for basic state policy functions.

One practitioner elaborated on the government capability gap from their own experience. A minister is very busy and understaffed. The civil service may be educated and capable, but they will also be bureaucratic – and thus, frustratingly for the think tank, they will function as the ‘gatekeeper’. There is no open door policy to ministerial leaders. However, this obstructs the work of the high-level leader as well: they may therefore seek back channels of communication and private interaction. This is a useful way in for think tanks. Further, the high-level minister is not always the correct person to contact: on technical issues, for example, the lower level staffers who actually implement policy may be a more fruitful target.

Foreign Resources

Discussion of the value of foreign involvement formed around the consideration that outsiders do four things well:

- Provide resources – as long as it is combined with understanding
- Raise ideas and broaden intellectual horizons
- Protect domestic policy space, constraining government from suppressing ideas
- Bring in comparative best practice

It is difficult to escape the issue of funding. For new advisory institutions, there is a temptation to seek donor funding as a matter of course, and then do the good work. But it is dangerous to rely on a bulk of foreign donor assistance; the risk is of outside interests undermining the value and contextual approach of the work produced. However, outside funding can be part of a managed growth strategy as long as there is a clear goal of non-reliance.

In countries with no history of open discussion, international networks can be of tremendous

use for fledgling young domestic institutions. Mentoring and collaboration can preserve the unique indigenous voice while providing invaluable insight into the logistical challenges of think tank operation, as well as the global debates and experiences on policy. When trying to harness donor funding, sound financial practice and transparency is essential. Foreign mentoring can assist with the building of this capacity within think tanks themselves, and help provide the conditions for take-off of domestic institutions.

Structured relationships with foreign experts can also provide key insights into international best practice. Here too there must be a cautious approach, however: the value-added comes from comparative lessons, not lecturing on local context. The product is the extraction of mutually applicable experience from foreign case studies – not foreign pontificating on local circumstances.

The discussion also considered the worth of regional institutions and cross-border partnerships. There was some scepticism: in terms of ambition, it may not be a realistic aim. Regional expansion naturally increases geographical focus – but stretches issue focus.

On the other hand, some examples of the utility of such a regional approach – particularly in terms of networks and mentoring – were articulated. In East Asia, capacity-building reform has been initiated by informal foreign partnerships. Technical skills were imported through natives working abroad. This approach combines the benefit of international best practice but filtered through an indigenous lens and thus applied with appropriate regard for local political context.

Recommendations

Some tentative recommendations for African institutions could be determined from the day’s session on development. They must, of course, be further dissected and refined. Nevertheless, they form a nucleus of discussion and an initial outline of development advisory best practice.

Meet a Need

Demand is essential. Institutions can only survive if there is real domestic impetus for their work.

Find Opportunity Space

The most pressing need for such think tanks and advisory institutions is in the 'middle ground' of political ecologies between the closed, autocratic societies and the vibrant, open and pluralistic regimes.

Grab Hold

Young institutions can take two alternative approaches to establish themselves.

They can work on the inside track, and cultivate influential contacts. This may require – in the short-term – a pragmatic accommodation of the principle of speak-truth-to-power. But this is not a straightforward accommodation – it is a tension to be carefully managed.

Otherwise, the outsider track can be taken. Think tanks can work to influence opinion more generally in non-controversial issue areas, expand public discourse and steer the direction of policy.

Business is also a potential source of succour for emerging advisory institutions. But the private sector has its own sets of wants and needs: institutions must pitch business-relevant proposals, or they will fall on deaf ears.

Work Effectively

Whether foreign or domestic, no institution will survive if it is not aware of the limits to action within its ecology.

Each society presents its own challenges. Communication must be smart, and target the right people. Opportunities exist for local think tanks to take broad conceptual ideas from elsewhere and adapt them to the local context and advocate them in terms to which domestic constituencies can relate.

Young institutions in closed or opening societies must avoid provoking government reaction in the short-term.

A key added value of think tanks and advisory bodies is cross-sectoral awareness and an appreciation of prior experience. Old mistakes should not be repeated. Accumulated knowledge should inform new, effective policy.

Manage Foreign Input

International inputs are a sensitive area. Local ownership is crucial. But it is foolish to disregard the useful products – institutional best practice, breadth and depth of experience and money – that outside sources can provide.

African partners, on a regional basis, could also help develop networks of development experts and practitioners who face similar challenges and share some level of experience on a continental level.

Retain Independence

Always guard the fundamental degree of independence that assure legitimacy and credibility. Institutions must always be wary of government or donor 'capture' and the subsequent loss of credibility in the eyes of wider society.

Day Four – 17 May 2009

Summary Session: Towards Advisory Best Practice?

Barry Desker returned to the classification of think tanks he provided in the earlier session. In the African context, how does the composition and operation of a think tank condition output? There appears to be less use for think tanks attached to academic institutions. Their output is measured in terms of books, articles and other lengthy publications. But these seem to be less relevant in the African context.

Conversely, contract research institutions focus upon specified needs and must therefore provide policy recommendations. For advocacy think tanks, media coverage and message delivery are essential.

Government-linked think tanks provide opportunities for staff from the administration to reflect without the stresses of day-to-day decision-making. In this way, they can provide fresh inputs into the policy-making process. Government can then take broader views that would otherwise have been the case.

He highlighted two specific problems of which think tanks must be mindful. A reliance on academic staff is undesirable – they often are disconnected from the realities of the outside world. And more generally, there is a tension between the ideal of speaking truth to power and the sensitivity of government positions.

To sum up, Professor Desker offered some ideas for the vision and mission of African think tanks and advisory institutions – and demarcated the appropriate modes of operation for foreign organisations.

African institutions must have a clear focus and be entrepreneurial in their marketing; they must be results based, and outsource logistical functions that distract from intellectual output; and they must constantly evaluate the use of their resources.

Outsiders can be useful as advisers; if part of a balanced portfolio, a good source of funding; if trusted, provide a means of mediation with other outsider organisations; and provide access to, and networking with, the international community.

For regional or international think tanks, outsiders can play even more of a role. They can offer a breadth of expertise and credibility in the international issues that such institutions naturally cover. In addition, foreigners can be more critical of domestic events and provide useful bandwidth into the international network of think tanks and academia.

Christopher Clapham stressed, above all else, product as the overriding concern of think tanks. Their existence depends upon high quality research and analysis. Their fundamental purpose is to provide policy-relevant conclusions based on thorough understanding of the issues, coherent principles, and understanding of what is practicable and manageable in their context. Secondary to this is dissemination of the product for the required impact.

Research and analysis is desperately needed across the whole range of public policy in Africa – perhaps most particularly in social and development policy. And this product must come from within these countries. Although foreigners have an important augmentative role, only insiders have the levels of understanding, legitimacy and capacity to implement that are required.

Unfortunately the task is not straightforward. Despite the mantra of ‘African solutions of African problems’ having been around for half a century, progress towards such solutions has been lacking. It can even be argued that the central failure of African development has been intellectual: on other continents, progress was preceded by a critical mass of policy thinkers aware of their local context but adapting the lessons of development elsewhere and forming political coalitions to effect

it. Such policy thinkers are unlikely to be found in governments or African academia. The think tank sector therefore occupies an absolutely critical position in providing the intellectual basis for Africa's renewal.

African Priorities

Recognising the limited space in which African think tanks work, there are three priorities.

Issue areas where there is space for working must be sought out. Once proposals have been successfully advanced and implemented in one area, further areas previously too sensitive to approach can open up.

Think tanks need to decide to whom their proposals are directed. In closed systems, the only consumer will be government. But wherever practicable, ideas should be oriented towards the wider public. Often the most promising opportunities will arise when a new government takes over and is eager to seek advice to help it surmount previously intractable problems. Though any think tank is bound to approach its work under assumptions that favour closer relations with one political group or another, it is important not to become more bound to a particular group than circumstances require.

Thirdly, institutions need to select the most appropriate means of communication. This will be conditioned by the nature of the intended audience – from close personal contact with key decision-makers to open lobbying of publics. But ideas should always be spread as widely as the environment allows.

Outsider Roles

External actors, given caveats outlined in previous discussions, do have an important role – provided they work in collaboration with, and in implicit subordination to, local actors.

They can be an excellent source of ideas. They have access to vital comparative insights into success and failure elsewhere. On occasion, they

can benefit from their externality by raising ideas which need to be put on the table, but which local actors cannot safely promote.

Foreign actors can also provide essential resources difficult or impossible to find domestically. Finance often has to come from outside, at least initially. Local start-ups must therefore to some extent rely on outsider resources. While this funding is useful, donors must always accept local conclusions and respect institutional autonomy.

Perhaps most importantly, external think tanks can provide valuable help as colleagues to indigenous organisations. Advice and mentoring in the initial phase of establishment, networking, peer review and technical assistance are all non-intrusive means of help that external institutions are well placed to provide. Personnel exchanges can contribute expertise to the work of domestic think tanks, and also give local employees the wider perspective gained from secondment.

Greg Mills provided an overview of some general trends that have emerged from the commonalities of successful institutions. There has been a large growth in the number and size of think tanks in Africa, both foreign and domestic, which bears examination. From this experience, positive techniques can be derived to inform the operation of think tanks in the future.

Donor funding for think tanks has become a key element of aid strategy; it also provides a soft form of good governance conditionality. While there has been a general reluctance of business to fund think tanks, the advisory sector very much functions as a business now with more interest from government. Think tanks have focused on elites – although it is important to achieve a balance with bottom-up approaches. There has also been a greater focus on broad concepts rather than specific policy, even though the links with academia have been diminishing (in Africa, pay is better in think tanks than universities). No 'revolving door' system exists.

Several techniques and requirements can be extrapolated from these lessons:

- Know the market for ideas and the audience
- Good data and analysis is essential, as hard statistics are lacking in Africa
- Clear strategies are needed
- Academia needs to be brought into the process; business emphasised; and both integrated into a 'quadrangle' of governments/multilateral organisations, business, think tanks and academia
- Cultivate personal entrances into policy corridors – be close to government, but not too close
- Both traditional and new media offer critical conduits for pressure
- Differentiate the product from others, and keep reports clear, concise and action-oriented.

An African Agenda

Issues must be carefully chosen by think tanks. They must also balance the demand for their services with the natural tendency for over-supply: the problems they purport to address must exist and also be feasibly addressed by them. Tactics and strategy must be differentiated to suit the political context of the issue area. Professionalisation and capacity-building of government services must be a priority in the work of think tanks.

The insider-outsider relationship, however, needs some further clarification. It is not a straightforward binary taxonomy. Many outsiders do indeed bring their own personal agendas. At the same time, they are also aware that governments are adept at 'playing the game': what they say they will do is not always what they do. Outsiders must doubly be aware of local context.

And insiders do not necessarily present a source of strength. As already discussed, there is little to no rotation between different elements of the policy ecology in African countries. In particular, few government personnel pass through research institutions to lend a practitioner's eye. As a result,

local think tanks in this system are weak in terms of policy prescription, despite their domestic base.

Further, there is a great tension between aid dependence, which remains a fact for many governments and local institutions, and the desire for domestic independence. While governments may desire indigenous capacity, they still rely on foreign resources to achieve this.

Discussion

The final session of the 2009 Dialogue spanned most of the pressing issues raised in the summary presentations. Three themes in particular dominated: think tank strategy, policy context, and the insider/outsider conundrum.

On strategy, one discussant challenged a point made in the presentations. In the case of Zimbabwe, it was argued, think tanks cannot simply start working on small issue areas. Instead, what is needed is a strategic vision to be articulated and then for policy recommendations to be crafted, for what is at stake is the very future of Zimbabwe's political and economic system. Others suggested that this set of transition challenges and circumstances do not apply just to Zimbabwe, but a whole host of other societies which are in the process of opening up. Issues of uncompetitiveness and poverty are common issues shared across the continent regardless of individual experiences.

This debate raised an even larger issue: what is the future for think tank strategies – and their policy content – given the current global economic recession? Enterprise-based approaches may indeed be critical, but now state power is on the rise in the global economy. This will become a battleground for many think tanks in their mission to shape a better future.

Another discussant said that while process is difficult to draw general conclusions from, with product this is easier. There is no doubt that the world has changed in the last sixteen months, with a decisive shift toward government intervention. This may create further tensions within the global

policy environment. So a defensive agenda may be on the cards for market-oriented think tanks across the continent (and indeed, the world). Old ideas presented in new language need to be combated. But there is also a need for an offensive agenda that seizes the initiative and does not just react to external circumstances.

Some further questions were raised on the distinction between normative and objective orientations in think tank output. For objective institutions, what does it mean to truly understand a government agenda? In this regard, being plugged into the apparatus of state may be vital. But for institutions that tackle what ought to be – the normative mission – there are problems in such an approach. They nevertheless form a crucial component of building a democratic culture in which a vibrant exchange of visions and policies takes place.

But these thoughts on policy cannot take place in a domestic vacuum. Think tanks do not only provide a track to discuss, debate and refine; they also give a channel for foreign ideas and experience. Responsible governments will want local experts but also access to international networks. This is particularly the case in a globalised world where local decisions will likely have an external impact, and foreign issues will have an internal effect.

Utilising international networks and expertise can redress the intellectual gap between African government ministries and international organisations. African civil servants cannot compete with the vast analytical resources of foreign organisations such as the World Bank. Harnessing outsider resources and capability can therefore mitigate this asymmetry in negotiations.

Final Remarks

Jeffrey Herbst agreed that there was a new global policy environment in which enterprise-based think tanks had to work. But this challenge was accompanied by opportunity. The world wants African ideas, and with increasing capacity, Africa can set an agenda. Even though donors are often ignored, they are not necessarily a blockage to domestic initiatives. The aid still flows to the continent: so this money can also be part of the opportunity.

The capacity-building of states is going to be an essential part of development and there are initiatives in this sector. There is less accomplishment in the realm of economic policy where there is a paucity of interest despite the key opportunities that present themselves.

Another gap in analysis exists in military studies. At a time when African militaries play a larger role than ever before in international and regional peacekeeping missions, the study of their civil-military relations remains neglected. A further opportunity is given by the declining level of conflict overall on the continent. Perhaps now it is time for think tanks to foster regional collective security architectures.

The Asian example shows how domestic think tanks and advisory institutions can help poor states become drivers of the agenda. But this can only come through hard work and persistence. So while the challenges should not be downplayed, there are good grounds for optimism in the African case.

Participants

1. Aba Qainoo (Dr), KAS, Ghana
2. Adrian Enthoven (Dr), Executive-Director, Capricorn Int, SA
3. Adrian Johnson (Mr), RUSI, UK
4. Alberto Trejos (Dr), INCAE, Costa Rica
5. Ann Bernstein (Dr), CDE, SA
6. Anja Levysohn (Ms), Danish Embassy in SA, Denmark
7. Anthony Okara (Mr), AU Commission, Kenya
8. Antonio Cruz (Dr), DG Planning & Development, Mozambique
9. Barry Desker (Prof), RSIS, Singapore
10. Charles Harper (Dr), VP John Templeton Foundation, USA
11. Christopher Clapham (Prof), Cambridge University, UK
12. Christopher Coker (Prof), LSE, UK
13. Christopher Thompson (Mr), The Brenthurst Foundation, Zimbabwe
14. Daniel Stroux (Mr), KAS
15. Deane-Peter Baker (Dr), Institute for Security Studies, SA
16. Eleanor Kasrils (Ms), SA
17. Elizabeth Layla Kimkung (Ms), CEO Langata Kibera Foundation, Kenya
18. Eran Lerman (Dr), University of Tel Aviv, Israel
19. Eugenie R Aw (Dr), KAS, Senegal
20. Faith Malka (Ms), IPAR, Rwanda
21. Greg Mills (Dr), The Brenthurst Foundation, SA
22. Harvey Leared (Mr), Origen, Zimbabwe
23. Jao Perreira (Dr), Eduardo Mondlane U (KAS), Mozambique
24. Jeffrey Herbst (Prof), Miami University, US
25. Jonathan Oppenheimer (Mr), The Brenthurst Foundation/De Beers, SA
26. Josph Nyagah (The Hon), Minister of Cooperatives, Kenya
27. Joseph Siegle (Dr), ACSS, USA
28. Kent Hill (Dr), John Templeton Foundation and former USAID director, USA
29. Luke Nqwerume (Mr), CEO, Old Mutual, Zimbabwe
30. Malcolm Chalmers (Dr), RUSI, UK
31. Mark Bellamy (Amb), ACSS, USA
32. Mustapha Alani (Dr), Gulf Research Council, UAE
33. Neil Van Heerden (Dr), Former DG Foreign Affairs, SA
34. Nelson Ford (Mr), Former Under Secretary for the Army, USA
35. Norbert Mao (Dr), KAS
36. Ochieng Adala (Amb), ISS, Kenya
37. Patrick Mazimhaka (HE), Former Deputy Chair, AU Commission, Rwanda
38. Razeen Sally (Dr), ECIPE, Belgium
39. Rob Caskie (Mr), Fugitives' Drift Lodge, SA
40. Ronnie Kasrils (Mr), Former Minister of Intelligence, SA
41. Steve Stead (RAdm ret.), The Brenthurst Foundation, SA
42. Terence McNamee (Dr), RUSI, UK
43. Theresa Whelan (Ms), DASDI, Pentagon, US
44. Thompson Ayodele (Dr), IPPA, Nigeria
45. Toshiro Azawa (HE), Japanese Ambassador to SA, Japan
46. Werner Böhler (Dr), Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Germany
47. Yang Guang (Prof), CASS, PRC

Programme

Thursday 14 May 2009

1100 Departure from Johannesburg
 1300 Arrival; settling in - possible game drive
 1715-1800 Drinks
 1800-1930 Dinner; Welcome - Greg Mills
 1930-2100 After-dinner talk - Rob Caskie: 'The Anglo-Zulu Wars'

Friday 15 May 2009 (Motse)

0700 Breakfast
 0830 **Session One: International Experiences**
 Chair: Patrick Mazimhaka
 Presenters: Malcolm Chalmers (RUSI/UK), Mustafa Alani (GRC/ME), Yang Guang (CASS/China), Razeen Sally (ECIPE/Europe)
 1045 Tea break
 1100 **Session Two: International Experiences**
 Chair: Nelson Ford
 Presenters: Mark Bellamy (ACSS/US), Barry Desker (RSIS/Singapore), Alberto Trejos (INCAE/Costa Rica)
 1315 Group Photo
 1315 Lunch
 1430 **Session Three: International and African Experiences**
 Chair: Joseph Nyagah
 Presenters: Eran Lerman (Israel/ME), Thompson Ayodele (IPPA/Nigeria), Deane-Peter Baker (ISS/South Africa), Greg Mills (Brenthurst/South Africa)
 1630 Tea and game drive
 1830 Pre-dinner talk - Neil van Heerden and Ronnis Kasrils: 'Comparing Two Eras: Government and Civil Society in SA before and after 1994'
 2000 Dinner, Boma

Saturday 16 May 2009

0700-0800 Breakfast
 0800-1230 Breakaway into two groups
 1030-1100 Tea break

Group One: Peace and Security Advisory Best Practice

Chair: Malcolm Chalmers, Boma
 Presenter: Christopher Coker (LSE/UK)
 Response: Theresa Whelan
 Followed by discussion

Group Two: Development Advisory Best Practice

Chair: Kent Hull, Motse
 Presenter: Ann Bernstein (CDE/South Africa)
 Response: Joe Siegle
 Followed by discussion

1230 Reconvene for short report back by two rapporteurs (Adrian Johnson and Terence McNamee)
 1300 Lunch
 Afternoon free/Game drives/Walk or drive to Dune for supper
 2030 Talk on Stars by Tswalu staff
 After-dinner drinks, Motse

Sunday 17 May 2009 (Lekgaba)

0700 Breakfast
 0815 Depart for Lekgaba
 0930 **Summary Session: Towards Advisory Best Practice?**
 Chair: Jeff Herbst
 Presenters: Greg Mills, Barry Desker, Christopher Clapham
 Conclusion
 1100 Brunch at Waterhole
 1130 Depart for Johannesburg
 1300 Arrival in Johannesburg
 1500

The Tswalu Dialogue

The Tswalu Dialogue was established in 2002 as a premier African forum to discuss issues of concern to continental development and security. It is hosted by Jonathan and Jennifer Oppenheimer and was, in 2009, organised by The Brenthurst Foundation in conjunction with the Commission of the African Union (AU), Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS), S Rajaratnam School for International Studies (RSIS), Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African studies at Tel Aviv University, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), and Business Leadership South Africa. It is supported by the Government of Denmark.

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Participants of the Eighth Tswalu Dialogue, 14-17 May 2009.