

Knowledge creation in Bangladesh: institutional challenges and personal opportunities within civil society

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'CIVIL SOCIETY' IN DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

- Market-based liberalization focus

1990s: 'Good governance' agenda

- Civil society – state counter-power

A 'space' where citizens interact with the state to bring about change/transformation.

- Within International Development it is understood in the Liberal tradition.

Independent from the state (and the market) but conceptually strongly embedded within it.

- An indicator of 'modernism'- inherently 'good'.
 - Gatekeeper against authoritarian state rule.
 - Improves accountability.

- **Democratization**

In Bangladesh

- Focused on the study of organisations or movements: primarily NGOs.
- Critical voices examine the disconnect between the rhetoric of civil society and the practices of organisations populating it (Wood, 1994; White, 1999; Devine, 2006).
- Points to the problematic normative understanding of civil society and its ability to represent the interests of the poor in a legitimate manner.
- Does the Liberal conceptualisation of civil society capture the dynamics of social change and transformation?

METHODOLOGY

- Regional study
- Qualitative approach
- No landscaping study
- 21 in-depth interviews of selected senior researchers and public figures in the civil society
- Dhaka-centered (limitation)
- Late 2013: Political unrest

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVES

What are the relationships between think tanks and universities in Bangladesh and how do they influence policy?

Objectives

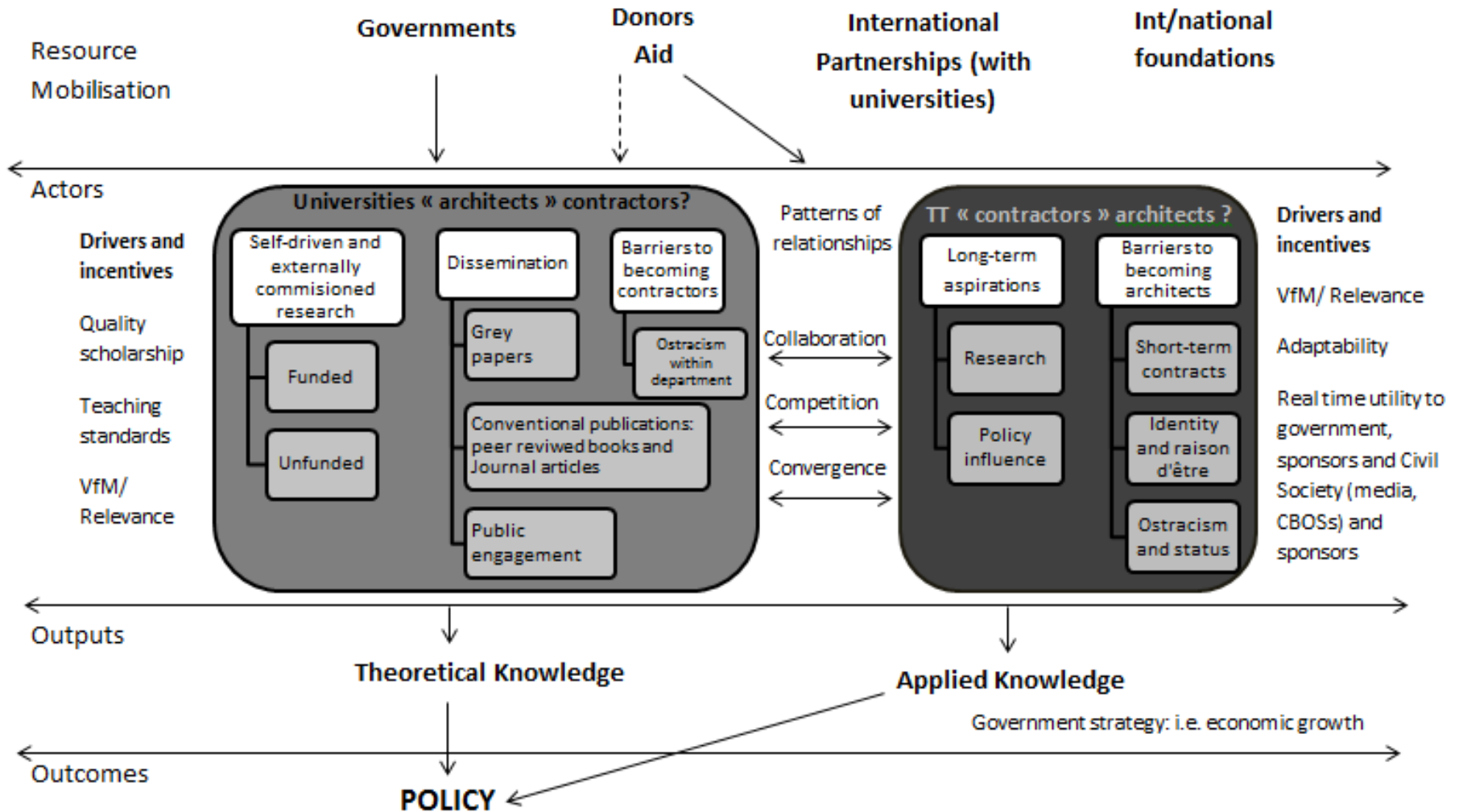
1- to understand within the context, what issues encourage or discourage certain forms of relationships

2- to explore the complex relationships between knowledge creation and policy-making.

THIS STUDY: KEY ACTORS

- Think tanks: “Non-governmental, not-for profit research organisations with substantial organisational autonomy from government and from societal interests such as firms, interest groups, and political parties” (McGann and Weaver, 2011).
- “Universities have always been keepers and creators of knowledge. They have sought to prepare new generations with the skills, cultural and scientific literacy, flexibility and capacity for critical inquiry and moral choice necessary to make their own contributions to society.” (Birgeneau, 2005).

INITIAL ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK



DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS 1

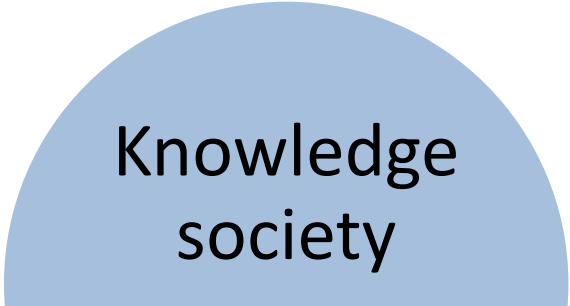
UNIVERSITIES LANDSCAPE IN BANGLADESH

- 76 private and 34 public universities with different core mission and challenges

Universities, as institutions do:

- Have private/public differences
- Have faculty capacities
- Some research (Originality? Quality?)
- Have low funding capacities
- Face internal political challenges
- Research “inertia”

“Teachers from public universities, of course do not receive enough funding from their universities to conduct research so they engage in teaching but not in public universities, they take some jobs in the private universities to supplement their income. It is not one, not two but three sometimes. And you will find that private universities advertise that they have public university teachers.”



Knowledge
society

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS 2

TT LANDSCAPE IN BANGLADESH

- 35 think tanks- loosely defined
- Centralized in Dhaka
- Highly dependent on donor funding
- Think tanks, as institutions do:
 - *Project research*
 - Publications (weak review systems- a few outliers)
 - Policy advocacy (dialogues, conferences, media events)
 - Trainings and seminars
 - Heavily influenced by diverse demand forces (donors and governments)
 - Struggling to maintain autonomy
 - Analytical capacity?

“Think tanks in Bangladesh, unlike other research institutes from outside Bangladesh cannot follow a clear research plan because they have insecure funding. They bid for research projects funding and then decide to conduct the project for the funder”

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS 3

UNIVERSITIES AND TT RELATIONSHIPS

Drivers to relationships between think tanks and universities

- From university staff: exposure, commissioned-projects, research interest, financial incentive → strategy of multiple affiliations (with think tanks and universities)
- From think tanks' perspective: expertise, status and recognition and potential recruitment

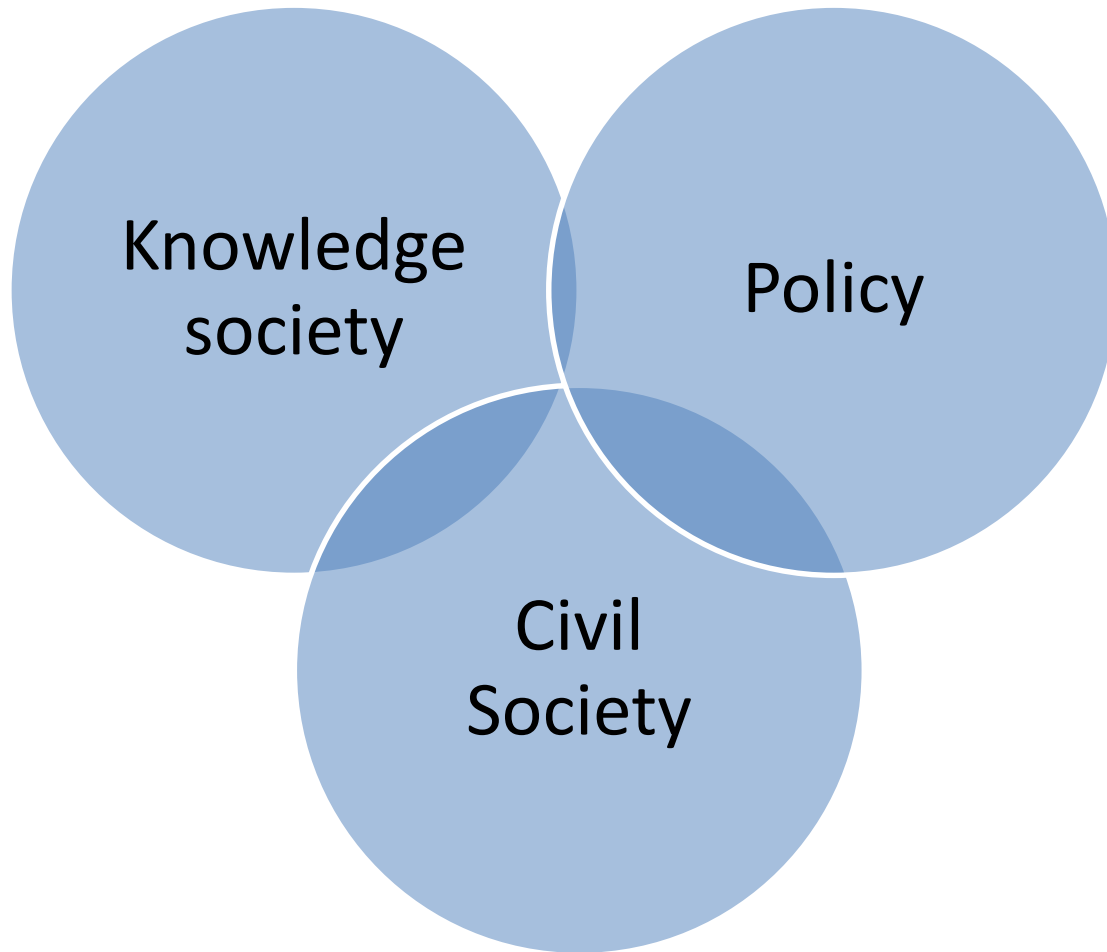
“Political loyalism is a key element within our public universities. Recruitment, promotion and posting, everything is happening based on loyalism. So the quality of the knowledge suffers and we are not investing in research. [...] People who have the quality and the intention of create knowledge go outside, for their livelihood and for their knowledge hunch also. So private sector and development sector give them opportunities. As a result knowledge production is not institutionalized.”

Commercialization of knowledge production?

UNIVERSITIES AND THINK TANKS RELATIONSHIPS

- Main characteristics of relationships:
 - Based on individuals' **personal** connections
 - Mutual benefits
 - Research input (methodology, data analysis or paper review)
 - Conference guest speaker / public advocate
- Barriers to and opportunities for effective/more collaboration:
 - Lack of **core funding** (sufficient, predictable and untied → autonomy)
 - Institutional barriers at university level (bureaucracy, conflicts, finance)
 - Need for more vision and leadership (possible conflict of interest at the advocacy level-competition)
 - Need for more autonomy and coherent investment in research capacities in relation to think tanks' mission and identity

ANALYTICAL DIAGRAM



IMPLICATIONS FOR KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND POLICY MAKING

- Fragmentation
- Output-focused think tanks
- Lack of ownership
- Goal displacement
- Consultancy type institutions
- *Projectization* of knowledge production
- Low longer-term strategic investment in research capacities
- Low autonomy
- Low institutionalization of the knowledge production and policy-making process
- Development of research wings under university umbrella (think tank function)

Weak “*think*” Weak “*tanks*”?

“In most of the cases the think tanks are trying to draw media attention because we think that policy advocacy is very useful, I think sometimes this is misguided. Think tanks try hard to hit the headlines of the newspapers rather than the content of the research”.

“These mechanisms do not create institutions, does not create sustained capacity, so in order to have institutions with sustained capacity, you need to have built that institution with a proper portfolio with appropriate predictable funding”

CONCLUSIONS

Need to further problematise:

1. the relationship between the means of development assistance and civil society organisations (risks of instrumentalisation of civil society)
2. the relationship between the existence of a 'vibrant civil society' and improved accountability and democratisation processes
3. opportunities for producing independent, high quality, domestically-owned knowledge that can bring about policy changes

Thank you

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