

Ahram
Weekly

Thinking of think tanks

How can their role in developing countries become more efficient? **Reem Leila**

22.-28. Jan. 2005

attends an international conference for answers

The Cabinet Information and Decision Support Centre (IDSC) held a two-day international conference on the role of think tanks in developing countries, the first meeting of its kind in the region that brought together think tanks from the developed and developing world.

The 17-18 January conference, called Challenges and Solutions, believed North and South to be the key policy actors of all societies, and the conference a neutral forum to discuss common challenges, propose solutions and share practices concerning the hot policy issues facing the developing world, such as evidence-based decision-making and good governance, child poverty, inequality, and food security.

IDSC chairman Maged Othman told the gathering that Egypt was a strategic centre in the Middle East, Africa and among the developing countries due to its very long history in supporting these regions, as it has been following a strategy based on several elements in order to help enhance the status of developing countries by maintaining respect for the sovereignty of developing countries; building strong ties with the developing world based on mutual respect to meet contemporary challenges arising from global contexts; and boosting the development process in developing countries to enable them to compete in the world market economy.

Organised by the IDSC, a governmental think tank affiliated to the Cabinet, "this conference reflects the government's belief in the important role of think tanks in an increasingly complex world, where political, economic, social and cultural spheres interrelate and intersect in an unprecedented way," Othman said.

Participants stressed that think tanks have played a major role in formulating policies, generating future scenarios and spreading ideas which have dra-

matically changed the world. The recent aggression launched by Israel on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip largely threatens peace and diminishes opportunities for mutual understanding. It underscores the dire need for "a greater role of think tanks in bridging the gap between conflicting parties, and bringing about more balanced solutions that recognise people's rights," said Ismail Serageddin, director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

The growing role of think tanks is closely associated with a number of factors, the most important of which is the emergence of a number of challenges that face decision-makers around the world.

Edgar Goell, German consultant for the Future Studies Centre, said funding was one of the most significant challenges facing think tanks all over the world, in addition to the insufficient qualified human resources to work in think tanks and the limited demand for and dissuasion of investment in scientific research, creating a repellent environment for researchers which reflects on the capacity of think tanks especially in developing countries. Despite the challenges, Goell still believes "there are opportunities on the horizon that must be seized in order to make the role of think tanks in developing countries more efficient and effective." For think tanks to efficiently and effectively carry out their role they should, according to Goell, work out a very dynamic agenda and involve governmental institutions, civil society, and the private sector, as well as research institutions to comprehensively reflect the society's priorities.

Goell believes that different factors in the time dimension in modern societies is becoming more important than ever before. The necessity for decision-makers and citizens to understand that challenge and to find ways to deal with it is also becoming

more important and acute. "Usually think tanks are working on today's specific problems, their causes and some of their effects. But only a few think tanks have the capacity and experience to utilise knowledge and wide experience for future research," stated Goell.

The role of think tanks must not be confined to only formulating alternatives and solutions, but also to studying public opinion trends towards the government's different policies. "The IDSC has the first telephoned-based public opinion polling centre in the region which measures citizens' opinions regarding public policies and provides governmental institutions with feedback that is necessary for the re-formulation of programmes and resetting priorities," stated Othman.

In order for think tanks to carry out their role, they must adopt an effective strategy for international cooperation that seeks to monitor changes and development taking place in think tanks worldwide, "to exchange experience and knowledge, benefit from the best practices in the field, and provide support and advice for countries and institutions," said Mario Sander von Torklus, head of Division 125, Development Politics for North and South Issues, Federal Chancellery.

Think tanks are institutions engaged in the conduct and dissemination of relevant policy research and are not affiliated to the government, political parties or private sector. They are not a local chapter of an international or foreign research institution.

The independence of think tanks from political or financial pressure or even public opinion discontent, according to Torklus, is necessary for think tanks to perform their function of telling the truth to their constituencies about the best ways to deal with particular problems.