



Supporting government policy making: Sharing South African and German think tank experiences on the UN Security Council

Introduction

Civil society organizations have a fundamental role to play in driving policy issues within their respective countries. South Africa's and Germany's current tenure on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has highlighted this role, particularly with regard to ways in which think tanks could play a pro-active role in supporting their respective governments, as well as ways in which to generate alternative policy options. The workshop convened by the South African Institute for International Affairs (SAIIA) and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF) provided the platform for think tanks to share the lessons of Germany and South Africa. It was part of a series of conferences and projects hosted by KAS, SAIIA, the Hanns Seidel Foundation (KAF) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) during the first year of Germany's and South Africa's non-permanent membership at the UNSC.

Opening & Welcome

Think tanks see their function as primarily undertaking work that has a more direct policy application. This raises questions that must constantly be interrogated, as well as look to how receptive the external environment is to the messages being delivered. The complex world we live in also necessitates a deeper consideration among policy makers of the type of interventions from think tanks that can help them navigate the 'avalanche of information'. For South Africa, the ability to cultivate a more substantively engaged interface between government and think tanks is very important. South Africa is being called upon to respond to global issues, but also to offer policy alternatives in a bold and assertive manner. There is no better forum to prove that than the UNSC.

Keynote Address

The keynote speaker emphasized that the relationship between think tanks and governments are not easy due to unequal relationships. Government officials want their policy decisions confirmed by think tanks rather than being questioned.

Another point of note was that of African related issues raised at the UNSC, which constitute over 2/3 of the UNSC agenda. This he emphasized

requires African Comprehensive resolutions despite weak African institutions.

Another point raised was the continuous abuse of the UN Charter by the UNSC in which the powerful countries benefit. The speaker provided a few examples to make his point and recommended that the role of think tanks was to conduct investigations on these types of issues and make informed decisions.

Session 1: Liaising with Government

This session examined the reciprocal role of think tanks and government agencies in developing relationships, strategies and decision-making processes at the UNSC. The South African speaker argued that the relationship between government and civil society is not a cordial one although efforts have been made to narrow the gap. Labour unions and business have more success at maintaining relations with government than think tanks. Unplanned crises are dealt with by engaging directly, privately and secretly, as well as by timely public discourses. Social media, talking to people in other countries and opinion surveys are undertaken to measure public opinion on the country's performance at the UNSC. Media coverage is treated with great caution as it has an inherent bias.

For the German think tank, liaising with government is easier. The think tank provides analysis on foreign policy issues. Primary clients are the Federal Government and the German Bundestag. While being federally funded, the institute attaches particular importance to maintaining independence in selecting its focus areas. "Liaising" with government proceeds via multiple channels: from confidential personal discussion, through research papers and analyses, up to conferences and joint research projects. Besides, there are staff exchanges with Federal Ministries. On the German UNSC tenure, many of those channels are being used and requested. However, there are not as many requests on UNSC as one may have expected given the topic's visibility. Potential reasons for this are, e.g., the fact that the daily work on the Council is executive in nature, where ministries have high internal expertise. Even more, the room for manoeuvre as an elected member is limited. Therefore, consulting has focused on how to enhance German latitude, e.g. with suggestions on strategic priority setting and potential partnerships on the UNSC

Session 2: Preparing to join the UNSC

This session explored the role of South African and German think tanks in assisting their governments with issues arising at the UNSC. Particular mention was made of communication structures such as the media and government systems. The speakers considered the following to be the main principles in assisting their governments: providing background expert information on global situations of conflict, presenting information on past and recent processes and procedures in the UN, defining a clear agenda for the two-year period, seconding experts to the UN missions and at each of the countries capital cities, engaging and collaborating with governments to formulate policy options and ways in which to bring the UNSC to take a specific course of action on issues, developing a personal

relationship with governments, the UNSC, and global research networks to pool resources, be independent, critical and objective in analysing government policies, to challenge conventional wisdom in the media, to assist governments break out of their 'silo' thinking, and to undertake field work related to government and UNSC issues that arise.

Session 3: Keeping abreast of Developments during the UNSC

Rapid developments at the UNSC require think tanks to keep pace, in this way contributing meaningful and timely interventions. Sourcing reliable information was possible through national government departments, particularly the UN Desk, undertaking research trips to the countries under discussion, as well as eliciting information from the UN office in New York, particularly UNSC reports. For the media, having embedded journalists in the countries under discussion as well as at the UN was another way to source raw material.

Particular challenges, however, hampered think tanks keeping abreast of developments. These were identified as: a lack of cooperation from governments, tight deadlines, the inability to source funding for trips, superficial news coverage, lack of clearance from governments and lack of trust in some NGOs. The recommendations of the session included: making use of special envoys intimately involved with the UNSC, writing short situational reports and ½ page policy recommendations to counter the minimal time spent on reading, and to collaborate with other think tanks to maximize each institutions strengths.

Summary and conclusion

The workshop explored existing practices of Germany and South Africa. It examined new and innovative ways to improve policy engagement with each government in a way that is timely, relevant, balanced and garners trust and confidence. It also explored the relationships between think tanks and ways in which to develop working partnerships. The outcome of the workshop was a recommendation to action a seminar of Germany's and South Africa's first year as non-permanent members at the UNSC.

Bilkis Omar, 25 August 2011, Pretoria