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

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**Abstract**

This article offers an institutional and sociological analysis of knowledge generation and dissemination for policy in Bangladesh. Because institutions participating in knowledge generation remain largely under-studied, the article focuses on analysing the *means* and *challenges* to knowledge creation, and the complex agency and power relations amongst and within think-tanks and universities. I find that the scarcity of domestic financial resources and the political co-option of think-tanks and universities weaken academic freedom, fragment the knowledge creation process and contribute to depoliticising research. Research-to-policy linkages are engineered through the personalised networks of a few strategic individuals.

Keywords: Research; Think-tanks; Civil society; Governance and public policy; Bangladesh.

# Introduction

Over the last few years in Bangladesh there have been increasing concerns about the government reducing the space for civil society. After considerable political turmoil and bi-partisan violence in the country in 2013 (when the fieldwork for this study was conducted), several newspapers reported on the political pressures exerted on NGOs, judiciary and police forces, universities, media and activists, describing a loss of independence and autonomy (Guardian 2015) instigating an “existential crisis” of the civil society they embody (Daily Star 2015). The Daily Star in an article titled "Civil society stance comes under fire" publishedon January 5th 2014 the Information Commissioner describes civil society organisations as “run by money from the development partners” asking, “Which citizens do they represent? And whose voices are they raising?”. The incapacity or unwillingness of a regime to secure or enable space for civil society actors can jeopardise citizens’ freedom and be a symptom of a nascent authoritarian governance (van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012). Habermas (1996, 367) views civil society actors as “attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distil and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere” however states themselves often see civil society as counter-powers threatening their own authority. Examining the range of social, economic, and political institutions active in civil society is important to uncover underlying societal power struggles amongst non-state institutions in a society. In other contexts such as Thailand and Chile the building of democracy through political struggles was directed by civil society actors such as think-tanks and universities. If the recent demonstrations at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi early 2016 have proven one thing, it is that universities remain vital spaces for political dialogue and contestation.

To date studies on civil society in Bangladesh have largely focused on exploring the role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) since 1971 in directly providing resources and services to the poor and in facilitating or impeding democratisation (Blair 2001). Though NGOs were prominent in the development discourse from the 1990s onwards, they in my view, cannot be equated with the wide “intermediate associational realm between the state and family” (White 1994, 379) that is *shushil shamaj* (the “gentle society” in Bangla). In Bangladesh public universities played key roles in the historical ideological and cultural struggles of 1971 and against Ershad’s ruling in 1981 and in 1990 (Maniruzzaman 1992). Yet, despite their engagement as a dynamic subset of civil society, universities continue to be overlooked by the literature together with the more recent proliferation of think-tanks.

Alongside their control of the police and armed forces, the government of Bangladesh’s power is maintained through controlling knowledge. The regime’s broadcasting policies and editorial guidance are feared to curb the freedom of the press when the capacity of civil society to influence policy is questioned (Daily Star 2014). Producing and disseminating knowledge is a highly political enterprise that involves a myriad of public and private stakeholders, and this is a topic for study in itself. In this article I use Ackoff’s (1989) definition of knowledge as “know-how”, and as that which makes possible the transformation of information into instructions. I distinguish it from data and information in that data are the products of observation of objects, events and their environment, that it useless until it adopts a useable or relevant form (Rowley 2007). Though endowed with similar descriptive features, information is functionally different from data in that it answers questions by exploiting data.

This paper is a modest attempt to explore the political economy of some of the under-studied institutions that constitute civil society and which hold a function of producing knowledge. I focus on two forms of institution, namely think-tanks and universities, and on how their capacity to produce knowledge is conditioned by their socio-political context. Grounded in original primary data collected in 2013 and a review of secondary literature on the theoretical role of civil society for governance and on Bangladesh’s political culture and structure, I present the argument that there is a genuine struggle for think-tanks and universities to preserve their impartiality, independence, and efficiency as they heavily rely on institutional politics, political power, individual and personalised relationships.

The paper is organised as follows. After introducing the methodology adopted for this research, I discuss the emergence of the theoretical ‘good governance’ functions of think-tanks and universities in the Western development discourse. Then, by introducing the practice of patronage in Bangladesh, the article presents the political culture and social structure of politics in Bangladesh. Putting the two together and based on primary data, I argue that the role of universities in the process of knowledge production is weak and question the capacity of think-tanks to fill the knowledge gap. I demonstrate how the reliance of research on external funds affects think-tanks’ autonomy and fragments the research process. These prominent forces shape institutions that respond to policies rather than precede them. The final section questions the effects of institutional challenges and personal opportunities for knowledge, policy processes and governance.

# Methodology

The primary research upon which this article is based was conducted in Dhaka from September to November 2013 as part of a regional study commissioned by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The research focused on understanding underlying power relationships amongst universities and think-tanks and their impact on policy processes. I conducted data collection, data analysis and the write up of key findings about the specific challenges and opportunities these institutions face as they attempt to produce knowledge and/or influence policy. Twelve institutions were covered, chosen for representing the most prominent institutions in the country. The primary data comprises twenty-one audio-recorded in-depth semi-structured interviews with twenty-one key respondents at think-tanks and/or universities. Many of these individuals are referred to in the media and in academic literature as public intellectuals widely recognised for their expertise in their respective fields. Institutional affiliations and names of the respondents are listed in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1

Although my initial intention was to include institutions which were not Dhaka-based most key institutions had some professional base in Dhaka providing them access to centralised economic and political networks. Furthermore, the data collection coincided with a particularly volatile period preceding national parliamentary elections. Late 2013 was replete with violent *hartals* (strikes) restricting mobility. Although this context partly affected the design of the fieldwork (number of interviews and geographic coverage), it was not detrimental to the quality and relevance of the data.

# Think-tanks and universities: critical and instrumental

This section shows how, in theory, both think-tanks and universities have an instrumental and critical role to play in the institutionalisation of good governance and in actively influencing political processes.

## Civil society as a governance instrument

In the early 1990s, international development agencies prioritised the good governance agenda as an important policy leverage tool that helped re-balance some of the extremes of the previous market-based liberalisation focus. In the development discourse, a consensus emerged between aid agencies, scholars and development partners, recognising the importance of engaging with national governments in order for development practice and policy to be more sustainable and effective. Donors supported developing countries under specific governance conditions including transparency of public administration, enforcement of human rights and public sector reform.

Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on one hand, and the external support for civil society on the other reflect the concretisation of this mainstreamed development discourse into policy and practices. PRSPs and SDGs intend to prevent aid within developing countries from being fragmented and inefficient through multi-sectorial downstream approaches that interact directly at the macro-policy level and thus harmonise and strengthen developmental targets (Parnini 2009). Pressing for poverty reduction tools and targets demonstrated development partners’ intention to make governments aware of their responsibilities and commitment towards target achievements. Additionally, the support to civil society was thought to help combat inefficiencies and help build and maintain democratic processes. As the number of research organisations increased in developing countries (NGO research wings, research institutes, think-tanks and universities) these arrangements, it is argued, had the potential to strengthen governments’ and public administrations’ accountability to citizens.

The swathe of Western initiatives to support civil society is underpinned by an instrumental conceptualisation of civil society grounded in prescriptive notion of what civil society is, namely that it remains free from the state and supports a particular normative and positive agenda (Blair 1998). This led efforts to strengthen it where it was considered to be “weak” (Lewis 2004). It has however been argued that these characterisations fail to recognise the complex and diverse nature of actors constituting civil society (Devine 2003), representing competing interests. Moreover civil society is often embedded within political structures through historical family, kinship and factional ties which can blur the lines between civil society, the state and wider society including the private and third sector (Kaldor 2003).

## On the neutrality of think-tanks and universities

In the North American context, think-tanks emerged in the mid-1950s as “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, 4), a definition closely aligned with notions of civil society more generally. The non-governmental characteristic of think-tanks does not imply that institutions receiving funds from governmental sources do not qualify as think-tanks *per se*, but highlights their relative level of independence from state structures.

The function of think-tanks can be perceived as both apolitical and political as they engage in the “study of public policy” which “organise and transform issues and ideas into policy debates” (Abelson 2009, 4). Think-tanks are instrumental to good governance when they are able to represent a critical voice in policy-making*.* In Western countries the inclusion of think-tanks and prominent NGOs within policy-making, previously excluded by major political actors, changed the way governments make evidence-based policy decisions (Harsh, Mbatia, and Shrum 2010). According to some authors, this interaction and engagement resulted in more accountable and democratic forms of governance with think-tanks being seen as representing citizens’ interests and promoting transparency (Pautz 2011). In line with the civil society agenda, in the early 2000s international development agencies (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, International Development Association and the United Nations) started supporting the development of think-tanks in developing countries. The perceived effectiveness of think-tanks relies on their ability to produce rigorous unbiased work, without which their engagement in public debate and advocacy can be undermined.

The role of universities in the research to policy link remains understudied. One reason for this may be that they are often perceived as neutral actors located outside the contested civil society arena. In the literature and in society, universities are perceived as “keepers” and “creators of knowledge” which seek “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, x). Bertucci, Borges-Herrero, and Fuentes-Julio (2014) found that universities in Latin America and in North America play an important role in influencing Inter-American policy processes through effective interactions and scholarly outputs. Donor support to universities started in the 1980s based on the assumption that universities’ added value in quality control and autonomy (Peters 2003) which can strengthen knowledge production in a country, and without which evidence-based policies cannot take place.

# Patronage: pervasive political culture and historical social structure

Understanding how knowledge is created and the role institutions play in it requires a deep understanding of the political structure and culture of a country. This conditions how stakeholders respond to challenges and manipulate opportunities. This section presents a brief historical overview of the political culture in state and civil society institutions in Bangladesh.

## Politicised public administration

Since achieving independence in 1971, Bangladesh’s public administration and political institutions have transformed. Successive coups d’état, violent political changes and confrontations combined with military interventions profoundly affected the way in which power is exercised by the government and its legitimacy (Huque 2011, 63). Public administration and bureaucracy since the British and West Pakistan periods have suffered from high levels of politicisation which threatens the accountability of public administrative systems (Huque and Rahman 2003).

Corruption, a lack of transparency, elitism, political cronyism, factionalism, patronage and clientelism in times of natural disasters, famines and economic stagnation, have contributed to building an ineffective bureaucracy and in slowing down the country’s recovery from the war (Srivastava 2011). For many years, allegiance to the ruling party has been an important criterion to recruit and appoint civil servants to positions of power, obtain rapid promotions and favours from other bureaucrats, before performance, experience or merit (Zafarullah and Rahman 2008). This created a culture of patronage within major public administrations and the cabinet which transformed the “state machinery including law enforcement and the judiciary […] into politicised instruments of the ruling party” (Sarker 2008, 1423). Some scholars argue that self-serving civil servants pursuing personal interests still dominate these opaque micro-bureaucratic public administrations (Huque and Rahman 2003).

The culture of patronage ingrained elitism within public institutions. A small and exclusive group of public servants enjoy and exploit the advantages of having a political function. Elite members are aware of the benefits of belonging to this group and share the interest of preserving their power and status. According to Zafarullah, in Bangladesh it is characterised by power “abuses”, “malevolence”, “venality” and “malfeasance” (2007, 169) and creates opportunities for informal and clientelistic governance. This emerges in situations where state actors provide favours to some members of society in a way that enables them to pursue their personal (often political, social and economic) interests. Such informal processes can lead to “the abuse of public office for private gain”: corruption (Huque 2011, 51-54). The latter hinders administration performance, the fairness of governance structures and public resource allocation.

## Patronage and civil society

Pervasive patronage also exists between state and civil society actors, and according to some authors, it underpins policymaking processes (Parnini 2006, 190-191). Bangladesh’s state’s structures are based on long-established and complex webs of patron/client relationships which extend outside the state structure *per se* (Kochanek 2000, 549). Studies report that public bureaucracy’s inertia, alienation, bureaucratic intransigence, politicisation and alienation are the major obstacles to better interaction between state and non-state actors and major causes for the miscarriages of important national reforms (Zafarullah and Rahman 2008).

Bangladesh’s vibrant civil society includes NGOs, indigenous community groups, cooperatives, professional bodies, trade unions, think-tanks and the media. After 1971, NGOs were heavily involved in rehabilitation efforts in the country and continued growing throughout the 1970s and 1980s. From the 1990s, NGOs have been at the centre of poverty reduction and democracy building initiatives. Civil society organisations that were at the forefront of good governance programmes are now however frequently depicted as incapable of freeing themselves from the dominating politicisation and patronage culture (Devine 2006, Blair 2001, 185). Caught between public administration’s disregard, their motivation for defending their interests and values, civil society organisations have, over the years, turned to donors (and donors to them), in an attempt to remain independent. What then is the place of universities and think-tanks in relation to the government and the political culture of patronage?

# Universities in the knowledge society: a state of inertia

A majority of respondents identified the intellectual significance of universities as embodied in their faculty members but described universities’ contribution to knowledge as “inert”. This section examines why this is the case and presents primary data that indicates how the structures and incentives constrain universities’ involvement with the knowledge society. The notion of a knowledge society refers to a space within which self-determining institutions set their own research agendas and conduct research, independently, based on their own intellectual interests. I argue that well-established public universities with high-quality faculty suffer from high degrees of politicisation, while private universities suffer from commercial pressures that weaken their contribution to knowledge.

## Political loyalism and enmity at universities

The country’s first university, Dhaka University, was founded in 1921, and its second, Rajshahi University, in 1953. By 1985 there were six public universities[[1]](#endnote-1), and more than twenty years after the Private University Act (1992), the country has 34 public and 76 private universities (UCG 2013). The multiplication of private universities emulates from and responds to the rising middle-class’ educational needs, and the pressures and challenges to producing knowledge greatly differ significantly between public and private universities.

Public universities and the government have extremely close ties in Bangladesh. These are not however connected to knowledge creation or informing public policy, but relate to the faculty’s attachment to party politics. Public universities maintain their reputation as the best education institutions in the country alongside their reputation for being dangerously politicised. Few public universities benefit from international recognition, the most respected being Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) and Dhaka University (once known as “the Oxford of the East”). Within these the level of politicisation is found to be so serious that it reportedly significantly affects the internal functioning of universities and the academic freedom of teachers.

The way in which party politics intersects with university life differs from campus to campus. Most fundamentally, public universities are important bastions of power for political parties. Public university teachers are generally politically affiliated, openly or otherwise, with a party (and often a particular faction of that party), and some are well-known political activists. One example of this is the significance of political affiliations during teachers’ association elections. Teachers are members of colour-coded panels, which symbolise their attachment to particular political party (blue, white or pink panels for AL, BNP or left-leaning parties, respectively, at Dhaka University). Students are incentivised to be politically active within the student bodies of the national political parties called the *Jubo* (youth) and *chatro* (student) *league* under theAwami League and Bangladesh *Jatiotabadi Chatra Dal* under the BNP party and *Islami* *Chhatra Shibir* under the Jamaat-e-islami party. Student wings are perceived by political parties as platforms to develop future political leaders with students serving as political workers, and many going on to careers within the respective parties. Student wings are according to our group of respondents infamous for their violent means of recruitment and confrontation. Politically involved teachers and students were often described by respondents as having little interest in academic research or in representing students’ interest but merely play the role of extensions of the rivalries between national factional politics.

Public universities shelter strong faculty capacity, yet their top-down enforcement of political loyalism create an incentive structure that discourages academics from focusing of conducting original research. Their top-town management structure discriminates against employees affiliated with political parties other than that in power and enforces a hegemonic and pervasive culture of political loyalism that obstructs academic freedom. One respondent explained that it is the dynamics of political loyalism and enmity which causes “academic mediocrity through preferential recruitment, unconditional promotion and posting practices based on personal political affiliations” rather than merit and academic records. Others explained that teachers considered outside this closed network of political loyalism suffer from higher teaching and administrative workloads, non-cooperative or distrusting behaviour from colleagues, smaller offices, less teaching equipment and even less stationery. The encroachment of party politics thus undermines knowledge production by discouraging teachers from conducting research and from publishing original work, which is left undervalued within their institutions.

## The chicken and the egg

A connected problem that can be seen as either a cause or an outcome of politicisation is the general low wages and research capacity of university staff (though this has notable exceptions). The quality of knowledge suffers as the financial resources allocated for research is low. One respondent, described a “chicken and egg situation” in that the universities do not have sufficient funds to finance research, while at the same time their staff members do not get funding because their capacities to produce good quality research proposals and obtain research grants is poor. Salaries for public universities’ staff members are relatively low (though they vary significantly according to experience and status) and reportedly allow little time for research besides teaching activities. As a result, staff members who have intentions of creating knowledge often quit universities where they have little prospect of promotion or intellectual stimulation, to join the private sector, private universities or the development sector, which tend to enforce more meritocratic structures.

In private universities, according to many respondents, the observations highlighted above are fewer because teachers are better paid (due in part to higher tuition fees) and the accountability systems are stronger than in public universities because of a greater emphasis on the commercial bottom-line. Respondents explained that private universities are principally preoccupied with their financial bottom-line and apply a market-based expansion strategy akin to private corporations. In general, the perception of respondents is that compared to public universities, private universities remain relatively independent from party politics, with some private universities banning political activities on campuses, for both students and teachers.

This is not however to argue that universities produce no knowledge at all. Factors above only explain why private and public universities, as institutions, have few visible research outputs contributing to knowledge. Globally within knowledge society it is academic publications in international journals that reflect the quality of the research output. However few university teachers (often in public universities) publish outside national Bangladeshi academics journals, and most aspire to publish their work in their university’s internal journal with lower quality standards and faster review systems compared to international peer-reviewed journals. Many respondents reported that the quality of the knowledge outputs and the instruments in place to maintain it are non-existent or inadequate (with rare exceptions).

Universities as institutions face financial constraints, which they tackle through private contracting and consultancies. A large number of university-based respondents warned that through having regular consultancy contracts sponsored by private actors, knowledge institutions might be tempted to transform into consultancy firms. Universities offer their services to private actors, such as banks for example, for recruitment purposes, organising exams and training courses. A few specialised universities or departments are sub-contracted by donor agencies to conduct short-term research work on pre-defined themes. Although respondents recognised the importance of being in touch with practice*,* they also warned of the dangers of consultancies. It reflects a shift of universities’ priorities towards mobilising more financial resources, a pursuit that can be “ruthless” as a number described it. This, left unsupervised or unregulated, can jeopardise the intellectual faculty of universities and their availability.

# Think-tanks, are they really?

This section argues that few think-tanks are actively and independently contributing to the knowledge society. As institutions they face trade-offs in their pursuit of autonomy that push them to either depoliticise their engagement and become consultancy-type entities on an information trade market (jeopardising their political engagement), rely on their informal and personalised relationships with state actors (running the risk of becoming themselves political instruments), or rely on donor funding (weakening their autonomy).

## Can think-tanks think?

Many respondents portrayed a significant limitation in the agendas and research of think-tanks, and that this is rooted in their reliance on external funding, which in turn may hamper their capacity to think critically and produce knowledge.

Firstly, it is difficult to delineate what a think-tank is or ought to be in Bangladesh, and many respondents struggled with the definition provided above. Think-tanks’ missions differ from one founder to another, their role is often multifaceted and the quality of their work variable across sectors. The term think-tank in practice is used to refer to institutions ranging from advocacy-type organisations focused on drawing the public’s attention towards an issue of key importance to them, to consultancy-type organisations focused on gathering data and informing policy. Instead of getting lost in listing what divides think-tanks, I will focus here on the similarities they share.

Think-tanks generally experience significant financial trade-offs and have to compromise between their research interest and their capacity. Like NGOs active within civil society they are usually reliant on external funds and as such tied to “value for money” obligations. Although the emergence of think-tanks is a relatively recent phenomenon in Asia, only five countries have more think-tanks[[2]](#endnote-2) than Bangladesh (Rashid 2013, 2012). One can argue that, like NGOs, think-tanks are confronted with a paradox between their need to be financially sustainable and their need for political engagement and relevance (Devine 2003). A key finding here is that it is often not the availability of funds that is constraining, but the implications of accessing the funds for the autonomy of institutions. Most private independent think-tanks fund themselves through commissioned research work (for the Government of Bangladesh, external donors, bi-lateral agencies or large NGOs), and thereby abide to external stakeholders’ research agenda and have limited control over it. Relying on specific shorter-term donor-funded research projects to survive limits their autonomy to conduct research on specific issues and have control over the implementation and analysis of the research.

There are three main reasons why development partners contract think-tanks, and rarely universities, to conduct research. The first is that think-tanks have developed the capacity to bid for grants and contracts and have the capacity to mobilise researchers and required expertise. The second is that unlike universities, the relationships between think-tanks and donor agencies has become more familiar and often personalised. A third is that universities may be seen as political institutions. Respondents acknowledged that think-tanks can therefore be prolific in winning bids for projects and conducting the research yet, if they cannot maintain a certain degree of autonomy regarding their research agenda, they risk becoming consultancy firms moving from one research project to another with no clear agenda. This is in line with the work of Arocena and Sutz (2001) who described the rise of the “call for projects” phenomenon, exploring the effects that the demand-driven research funding apparatus has on universities in Latin America. Priorities focus on finding calls for proposals, preparing research grants applications, bidding, and delivering outputs.

Although often claiming to be participatory, the type of knowledge produced and research agenda pursued are heavily influenced by development agencies’ agenda (climate change, women’s rights, microfinance and poverty are primary examples). Commissioned outputs produced by think-tanks often require relatively minor data analysis work and little inductive knowledge production with limited analytical and critical work (commissioned to conduct programme impact assessments, policy effectiveness evaluations and programme related research for international donors and development agencies or government ministries). Distinguishing data from information from knowledge is essential because it emphasises the importance of knowledge as a creative, intellectual and long-term labour-intensive process with broad matters of the world.

Though valuable for programme implementation, this type of work is mainly instrumental. A prominent national economist interviewed argued that there was a lack of theoretical thinking since the 1960s and a diversion of knowledge production to meet both external funders’ requirements on one side and financial needs on the other. “Knowledge production is lagging behind” he reported. “Sponsors may have a different objective than the national objective. Sponsors may have the objective to study the impact of climate change and poverty but this might not be the most important research need”. Here, the funders’ interest is often to obtain rapid outputs, mainly reports, for which think-tanks are contracted. External funders design research projects against rigid time frames and budgets which do not allow think-tanks to develop in-house research capacities and push them to rely on part-time or casual researchers located outside and employed on contractual basis or sub-contract data collection and analysis to individuals or other institutions to deliver research output. Because of this spread of resources the identity of many think-tanks is dispersed and blurred. Most think-tanks have, as a result, low or poor publications quality standards and monitoring and do not incentivise their staff to publish. The Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies stands as a rare exception with its strict promotion rules based on staff members’ academic publications quantity and quality. This system by contrast was portrayed as incentivising staff members to conduct original research work and produce good quality research outputs.

## Are think-tanks tanks?

After questioning think-tanks’ capacity to “think” I argue here that think-tanks are not self-contained institutions- that they are not “tanks”. The reason for this argument is two-fold. The first has to do with the permeability of their structure and the second with their personification.

In line with the findings of Arocena and Sutz (2001, 1230) in Latin America, think-tanks benefit from a migration from universities’ faculty who wish to escape their rigid structure to either establish their own independent think-tank or accumulate multiple contracts and positions outside their university. Think-tanks located outside universities and which do not have access to stable and predictable untied funding face financial and autonomy trade-offs which encourage them to rely on external collaborators; thus making their boundaries porous. Like “consultancy firms” they place themselves as clients of donors and the government’s interests. Civil society institutions such as NGOs, think-tanks have long benefitted from donor funding and established relationships and therefore represent an attractive opportunity. Providing trainings, courses, guest lectures or conducting consultancies for think-tanks enabled them to preserves their social status whilst supplementing their income and collaborative research experience and portfolio. Many accumulate several permanent institutional affiliations. University teachers represent valuable resources for think-tanks because they embody high quality expertise and rigour. Individual actors transcend sectorial boundaries and these movements between the knowledge and the civil society make the barriers between the two increasingly porous. Flexible contracting has the potential to enhance the quality of think-tanks’ research work and outputs. The gap in the knowledge society therefore, to some extent, serves the interest of the think-tanks which use the services of university professors and benefit from greater credibility in relation to donors, policy-makers and students and greater flexibility.

Reliance on highly personalised networks and informal relationships manifests an entrenchment of political patronage in governance processes that prevents the institutionalisation of good governance structures. The data collected indicates that the way in which think-tanks respond to the political context in which they operate leads to the elevation of a few experts to the detriment of the instrumental function of think-tanks. Think-tanks have to make themselves visible in the public sphere in order to convey messages to policy-makers and society at large. They need personalities who can embodied their policy messages and can instrumentalise their access to social networks within the formal and informal political institutions. Their dissemination strategy is therefore crucial to raising their profile in relation to donors and in making an issue accessible to citizens and important to policy-makers. The two ultimate recipients of that message require different languages and means of communication and therefore need think-tanks, or their key personality in the media, to be capable of managing these formal and informal communication channels whilst maintaining a rigorous and unbiased research agenda. Some respondents warned against the risk of transforming think-tanks into advocacy institutions that “prioritise self-promotion over their research and intellectual mission”. The advancement of key personalities therefore might be in conflict with the normative vision that think-tanks contribute to the institutionalisation of channels for policy-making.

# Policy-making and strong clientelistic networks

The political economy of civil society affects the nature of the interaction between civil society actors such as universities and think-tanks and policymaking processes. Because research at universities present few career opportunities for academics, they are contracted by think-tanks that struggle to build financially sustainability. Yet, their reliance on commissioned short-term output-based contracts confines them to pursuing a donor-driven agenda using deductive rather than inductive research. Their creativity and capacity to critique and challenge hegemonic discourses are thereby reduced. These dynamics fragments the research process and instrumentalises think-tanks by confining them to apolitical non-theoretical data-gathering work. Relationships amongst think-tanks and between them and university staff members rarely involve collaboration around policy dialogues and lobbying activities because faculty members are themselves careful to preserve their political image. It could be argued that as a result of the need for personal relations and the lack of strong institutional commitment, think-tanks are limited in their capacity to enact institutionalised influence on policymaking processes.

The contribution think-tanks can make to policy is not only dependent on them. The government’s receptiveness to research-based advocacy can vary according to the type of issue raised and to the importance attached to the type of research conducted, especially if they have not commissioned it. Moreover, as the government is reluctant to open institutional routes for dialogue with them, most think-tanks move away from sensitive political matters to maintain good relations with policy-makers. From policy-makers’ point of view, observing think-tanks changing their identities and fragmenting their interests across a variety of themes following donor’s agenda weakens their credibility and policy leverage. Most think-tanks therefore limit their work to providing information to policy-makers on policies’ impact, and conduct little research and advocacy activities around other issues. However as a number of respondents noted “reports, policy notes, and flagship publications are produced and some are never read”. By conforming to the demands of the government they themselves become clients of a fragmented,iterative and often clientelistic policymaking process instead of building their institutional capacities. Judging whether the end justifies the means is beyond the scope of this paper.

# Conclusion

The existence of a vibrant civil society has been championed as an indicator of modernism, and is seen as particularly important for nascent and fragile democracies. The analysis of primary data collected from prominent individuals within think-tanks and universities challenges this argument. Universities’ potential contribution to knowledge is undermined by either significant financial constraints or by a pervasive culture of political loyalism. These are prevalent and have detrimental effects on the originality and quality of universities’ academic and research outputs. Because universities face financial limitations, research activities are mostly undertaken by think-tanks. They too face financial obstacles. A large number of think-tanks rely on output-based short-term projects commissioned by external agencies. This alienates them as institutions, restricting the nature of the research they produce and confining them to performing monitoring and evaluation activities, data or information gathering, and technical quantitative and *ex-post* assessments. While this may be instrumental to informing and providing an evidence-base for policy-makers it reduces their autonomy to pursue their own research agenda, invest in internal research capacity, and be critical of government policy.

The commercialisation of knowledge creation through think-tanks incentivises both universities and think-tanks to collaborate not as institutions but as individuals. Members of universities’ faculty benefit from short-term research work offered by think-tanks which provides them extra income, work experience, and exposure to donor agencies. These faculty members often accumulate affiliations to several think-tanks where they are valued for their technical expertise (report reviews, paper editing and methodological support) and for their prestigious social status. However this precarious and fragmented manner of producing knowledge serves a system that creates information, which is *ad-hoc,* responsive to policies rather than being one that precedes them. In this context, without a coherent research and policy agenda and without predictable and reliable capacities to finance it, think-tanks have limited opportunity to influence policy-making through formal and institutional means.

Think-tanks that aim to influence policy need to strike a balance between being politically connected and being independent. On the one hand, academic rigour and freedom are essential to high quality research and on the other hand influencing policy entails building personal relationships with policy-makers. In a context where networks of political loyalism prevail, think-tanks are therefore at risk of being co-opted by party politics. The data indicates that because connections between the government and certain individuals within think-tanks and universities are loyal and deeply personal these platforms struggle to influence government policy. Moreover the on-going fragmentation of the knowledge creation process across several institutions combined with the lack of institutional commitment between knowledge and policy institutions limits the room for being critical.

The analysis therefore suggests means by which think-tanks could uphold some of their political and normative functions in a non-alienating manner. Institutional experiences and respondents’ reflections on their personal experience indicate that the capacity of think-tanks to think and to organise themselves institutionally to influence policy can be strengthened through strong and long-lasting linkages with foreign universities. This confirms one conclusion of Brown and Gaventa (2008) on the necessity to build transnational research networks with multiple institutional constituencies. The opportunity to be more inductive and to drive the research and knowledge creation processes can contribute to reinforcing universities and think-tank’s *critical* and *instrumental* contribution to society. Recognising the significance of party politics, clientelism and personal relationships for both universities and think tanks nuances our understanding of the roles these civil society institutions can play in Bangladesh, questioning their capacity to remain independent from the state and represent a critical voice.

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1. Four general universities (Dhaka University Rajshahi University, Chittagong and Jahangir Nagar Universities which were established in the second half of 1960s), and two technical universities (University of Engineering and Technology BUET and Bangladesh Agricultural University, BAU) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. behind China, India, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea [↑](#endnote-ref-2)