A SELECTIVE ANALYSIS OF POLICY-ORIENTED CENTRES: 
POTENTIAL LESSONS FOR THE RIO+ CENTRE (SUMMARY)

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Summary: This Policy Practice Brief presents an overview of an analysis of selected international policy centres conducted in 2013 to inform the planning, strategizing and governance structures of the World Centre for Sustainable Development (also known as the RIO+ Centre). It focuses on a number of operational as well as strategic elements to establishing a policy centre which can deliver cutting-edge thought leadership on key development challenges of the day, facilitate dialogue/debate to advance on action and enable coalition-building between key stakeholders. It reviews UN and non-UN entities, how they function, their audience and engagement strategies and identifies key lessons learned as they have established niche areas of influence, expanded and also have maintained high visibility and impact in the policy space.

Disclaimer: “The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations, including UNDP, or their Member States.”

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**INTRODUCTION**

The RIO+ Centre (also known as the World Centre for Sustainable Development), a partnership between the Brazilian Government and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), undertook an initial scoping assessment of international centres focused on research, advocacy/promotion and capacity building. The RIO+ Centre is the sixth Global Centre established by the United Nations Development Programme in the last ten years and represents a new modality (or form) of engagement and partnership with developing and emerging countries for the UNDP.

At a global level, think tanks occupy a clear and potentially influential space in directing and framing global environmental policy. The last 10-20 years have seen a significant expansion of policy-oriented centres, also referred to generally as think tanks, with one particular analysis (the Global Go-To Think Tank Index Report for 2012, later referred to as the GTTT) suggesting that 2000 exist just in the US alone. A list of recent articles for all key think tanks, from most recent to oldest¹, the GTTT, and a new Index by the Center for Global Development (CGD), suggest that the world of think tanks is still largely Northern-driven, though this is changing. Specifically, the GTTT suggests that 43 per cent of all think tanks are in the South—i.e. outside of the US and Europe. Within the Southern members of the G20² alone, there are estimated to be some 1000+ think tanks (GTTT, 2012).

This expansion in the Global South has been driven by a number of factors; increasing demand for knowledge on policy innovation in the South as well as for increased knowledge transfer between southern countries and for new models of participation and debate are amongst these. The successes of various models in rapidly reducing poverty and inequality, in service excellence, or in engagement with the private sector are also important drivers.

Still, the expectations for an effective policy think tank are diverse and usually multiple in nature, among them - high policy influence, relevance, and impact. Dr John C. Goodman (2005), the President of the National Council for Policy Analysis in the US, argues think

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² These are Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa and Turkey.
tanks ought to be “idea factories” as well as “organizations without walls,” suggesting creativity, no boundaries and the ability to bring diverse views together. A public policy think tank is distinguishable, he asserts, by its focus on government policies, usually for the purpose of improvement of the creation of viable alternatives.

Other relevant definitions for framing the possible niche area of the RIO+ Centre include:

- McGann (2007): “public policy research, analysis and engagement institutions that generate policy-oriented research, analysis and advice on domestic and international issues that enables policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy issues”.
- UNDP (2003): suggests that they should engage on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy. This definition specifically defines them as a “bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies” (UNDP, 2003:6).
- Stone (2007): further argues for their independence as an important value and operational context for a policy-influencing role.

There is general agreement across these definitions on the importance of (1) timely and accessible policy-oriented research and (2) effective engagement with policymakers, the press, and the public on critical issues. Thus, a dual policy analysis and policy influence role clearly emerges. Accordingly, our scope considers this broad concept in the context of the “policy-oriented centre”, going beyond the strict notions of a largely research-driven agenda denoted by the term ‘think tank’. It implicitly acknowledges that either research or advocacy could be the driving force behind the actions of the Centre and its engagement with the policy discourse.

In taking the advice of Joseph Stiglitz that such entities must “scan globally and act locally,” how can the RIO+ be influential and effective in today’s complex and crowded global and national policy environment?

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http://www.ncpa.org/pub/what-is-a-think-tank
This assessment begins to answer this question by examining a select number of policy-oriented centres in the North and the South. This rapid assessment is also shaped by a practical approach in order to better understand the diversity of ways in which centres fulfil this dual mandate. This means that the analysis focused more on centres for which some basic information was already available and which had already been deemed to be high performing. Close attention is paid to how the centres are structured to do so at both global and local levels including staff, funding, outreach as well as the types of publications produced and the frequency.

This report is by no means exhaustive and is intended largely to inform a broader and deeper internal discussion. The structure of the overall report is as follows:

- The Approach: Scope of the Assessment and methodology
- Detailed findings
- Conclusions
- Recommendations
- References and websites utilised as the primary source of the data and information collected
- Appendices including Summary Data Tables

THE APPROACH

This assessment of selected policy centres has been undertaken by the RIO + Centre to inform the further shaping of its operational and substantive work in the first year of operation and prepared internally, largely through a web-based desk study. The objective is a brief landscape scan to understand, in broad terms, experience and practice in areas of structure, governance, partnerships, and funding, which also define the product base.

Methodology: The study was mainly desk-based with information and data collected from institutional websites. In addition, email follow-ups on specific questions were undertaken for 3 institutions; feedback was received from only one of these three. Three main areas of interest, structure, products, and governance, were further broken down into specific questions as shown in Table 1. Additionally, a sample of emerging metrics for measuring influence and impact were used for collecting additional information on the centres including their global presence and reach. This was helpful in understanding influence and impact at a generic level.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Products</th>
<th>Governance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• How many people work for the organization?</td>
<td>• What is the main work carried out by the organization?</td>
<td>• Is there a board of directors and who comprises its membership? Is membership individual or institutional?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Is there an office presence in multiple locations, i.e., multiple offices?</td>
<td>• What reports are produced and how often?</td>
<td>• How many people are on the board and is there also geographic or other representation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who funds the operations and work of the institution?</td>
<td>• What meetings and what kinds of meetings are held?</td>
<td>• How often do the board or other bodies meet? Is there also an advisory board?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Who is the target audience and does it differ?</td>
<td>• Who is the Chair and what is their role in the institution itself, if any?</td>
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<td>• Is training part of the work and in what context?</td>
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Table 1. Questions regarding three main areas of interest

**Selection Criteria:** centres were identified based on the following: (1) an operational reality similar to that of the Rio + Centre, that is, a mixed UN or UNDP/host government partnership; (2) regional leadership role on a key policy topic (for instance, the Africa Climate Policy Centre (ACPC); (3) rankings in global indices, such as the GTTT, Prospect Magazine, or the CGD Index, including perceived success in influencing policy; and (4) a staff size of 100 persons (given that this is expected to be the maximum staff complement of the RIO+ Centre). A combination of these criteria combined with an effort to ensure a good mix of experiences determined the final selection.

In the context of this assessment, the term UNDP Centre relates to a UNDP Centre of Excellence based on a partnership mainly between UNDP and a host government; Other UN Centre relates to centres that are partnerships between other UN agencies (as in non-UNDP) and a host government. Two (2) of these were further distinguished from the others because of their location in a university setting. Independent/Non-UN denotes those centres that are generally independent of a UN agency or specific government although both UN agencies and governments may fund their operations.

A total of 23 institutions were identified based on these criteria and categorized in the following groups (see Table 2).

The head quarters of these institutions are located in a wide range of countries between the North and South, and newer ones are particularly focused on emerging economies.
In the North, centres are based largely in the UK (3), the US (2), Switzerland (2), South Korea (2), Japan (1), Canada (1) and Finland (1). In the South, centres are located in Turkey (1), Singapore (1), Ethiopia (1), South Africa (1), India (1), China (2) and Brazil (2). Collectively, according to available information, they represent US$500 million in annual funds available for development research and research advocacy.

Of the 23 centres included in this quick review, five (5) are UNDP Centres of Excellence, eight (8) are other UN Centres including two-University based centres, and ten (10) are classified as Other/Non-UN Centres.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNDP Centres</th>
<th>Other UN Centres</th>
<th>University-based (other UN)</th>
<th>Independent/Non-UN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth</td>
<td>• Africa Climate Policy Centre</td>
<td>• UNU-WIDER</td>
<td>• Amnesty International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• International Poverty Reduction Centre in China</td>
<td>• UN Centre for Regional Development (UNCRD)</td>
<td>• UNEP Risoe Centre on Energy, Climate Change and Sustainable Development (UNEP Risoe)</td>
<td>• Center for Global Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Istanbul International Center for Private Sector in Development (IICPSD)</td>
<td>• UN Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• CGIAR</td>
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<tr>
<td>• UNDP Seoul Policy Centre for Development Partnerships (UNDP Seoul)</td>
<td>• The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Chatham House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (UNDP/ Government of Singapore)</td>
<td>• UN Women Regional Centre of Excellence</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• WFP Centre of Excellence against Hunger</td>
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<td>• Food First</td>
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<td>• International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development</td>
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<td>• South African Institute of International Affairs</td>
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<td>• World Bank-China Knowledge Hub for Development</td>
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Table 2. Centres grouped by categorization criteria
KEY FINDINGS

Our findings were as follows:

General

- Three main types of approaches emerged: research driven (activities largely based on research); advocacy-driven (more advocacy-focused impact along with significant investment and comparatively more advocacy products than research products) and shared (similar emphasis on both advocacy- and research-based products). The 23 centres were largely even split across these categories, with research-driven and shared as the most common.

- Three of the centres are civil society-driven (IISD, FDSD and Food First). The large majority of centres are hosted by governments, particularly those that are based on a government-UN partnership. A smaller number are hosted by Universities within host countries.

- Sub-Saharan Africa is a common region of focus for all of the institutions assessed; one centre has a decentralized presence in the region. Still, others have been able to engage effectively in the region without a physical presence.

Structure and size

- The breadth of the activities of the Centres varied, in some cases significantly. Defined by the number of distinguishable work-streams, the largest group worked on a narrower field of 1-5 areas, and the second largest group on 10 or more (denoted as 10+). A smaller number worked at a medium-sized scale of 6-9 areas. Size was not necessarily a defining factor for the number of work-streams; indeed, some of the smaller centres had as many work-streams or areas as some much bigger centres (such as FDSD and IPC-IG or IPRCC).

- Three main groups emerged in terms of the size of organization, especially in the context of permanent staff. These were denoted accordingly: small (1-20 permanent staff); medium-sized (20-99), and large (100+). Most of the Centres fell into the first category (small) with the next-largest group being those with staff of 100+ persons.
Governance

- Governance varied amongst the Centres with a very small number being directed by a board of directors, usually those that are smaller grassroots-based entities. The most significant group are directed by a board—either a Project Board, Advisory Board or Council, which mainly serves as an approving authority for the annual work programme and the budget. A similarly significant number of the centres employ a one-tier governance structure while a smaller number employ a two-tier system. Of those using a two-tier system, the second advisory body served as a technical and substantive advisory mechanism to the Centre, particularly to the Director.

- There appear to be clear benefits for research/policy influence-based institutions that have a combination of a more general operation oversight mechanism as well as a more substantive advisory mechanism. For Chatham House, for example, this has proven to be beneficial particularly in addressing highly political and sensitive topics.

Products

- Product types included books, working papers, backgrounders, issues papers, summaries for policymakers, guidebooks, commentaries and blog posts, with most of the centres employing a dedicated research team. On average, centres produced 10-15 publications per annum.

- The Study Tour has generally proven to be an effective research/combined advocacy tool in the context of South-South Cooperation in terms of (1) positive feedback and (2) follow-up advisory services that can be provided. However, impact at the level of policy change remains more difficult to determine particularly as documentation and mapping of follow-up processes is not always easily available.

Funding

- Patterns in funding by type could also be distinguished. While only one Centre could be defined as significantly UN-dependent—due to a UN Endowment Fund—most UN and UNDP centres in the selection benefited from a shared partnership
between a UN agency and a host government. Fewer relied significantly on multi-donor funding including funding from multinational agencies, two relied on foundations, and only one relied on individual contributions. One other (Amnesty International) relied on a unique source of collective crowd-sourced funding from their national chapters.

- A minimum budget of US$ 2-3 million per year seems to lend itself to operational

![Box 2. CGD Funding Mix (CGD, 2012):](image)

capacity to deliver across multiple work-streams, brand recognition in niche areas and some effective reach at least at the scholarly and global public policy level. A minimum operating staff structure of 25+ appeared viable in this context.

Outreach

- There does seem to be a link between the diversity of products, advocacy products and outreach tools, and the overall reach an organization enjoys. Amnesty International had several outreach tools—more than 15 by our count—as compared to an average of 5 across the other centres. While UNRISD employed a less diverse set of tools, evidence suggests they have been very effective in reaching their primary audiences of the UN system and the research community.

- In addition, the Amnesty website is available in 4 languages. Food First is the only other Centre in this study that produces materials in a similar number of languages.

- Chatham House, by far, hosted the greatest number and highest frequency of events.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Though a limited analysis, a number of recommendations emerge for the Rio + Centre in the strategic thinking process to be conducted over the next few months. Two general elements are particularly important and provide critical intersections also with greater inclusive and sustainable development:

1. The increasing importance, within the context of South-South Cooperation, of the need to develop differing approaches for Middle Income Countries (MICs) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) as well as interest in the development of distinctive strategies for MIC-SSC exchange, and

2. The keen interest in inter-sectorial approaches by governments of the South.

Additionally, the following are noteworthy:

On structure and staff: A fit-for-purpose staff structure is the key lesson across the centres. A maximum staff of 100 can deliver significant impact at both the global and country level as is evidenced by the successes of the Center for Global Development, IIISD, ICTSD, IPRCC and UNU-WIDER through their niche areas, engagement and impact. A core staff complement that covers management and support for all of the key workstreams appears key, which should be supplemented by Research Fellows (general, Senior and or Distinguished) as well as interns. The IPRCC model of “Practice Staff”, which are usually PhD or post-doctoral students, could be an interesting model also for the Rio + Centre.

Most centres have successfully deployed a two-pronged strategy, showcasing their own research and also inviting and highlighting their capacity to attract research either from a diverse, representative group or from lead thinkers. This diversity is reflected in the publications of IPC-IG, Istanbul Center, UNRISD, CGD, FDSD, UNCRD, and Seoul Centre.

The other key factor appears to be investment in staffing for outreach that can support a wide-range of approaches including documentation in several languages as well as a state-of-the-art website. The IPC-IG model of in-house publications support and a network of editors and translators is an important consideration for the Rio + Centre, particularly when the need arises for documents to be produced quickly while also guaranteeing good quality. The ability to leverage this function in support of the dissemination of critical research findings from other sources, including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), could
allow the RIO+ Centre to play a critical role in expanding access to knowledge.

On Governance, the various models offer important lessons particularly the CGIAR model. The number of partners in no case employed a board of more than 25 persons, and often did not exceed 10-15 persons, including for those with extensive partnerships like Chatham House, SAIIA and CGIAR. Given the complex partnership framework implied for sustainable development, Board membership should, largely, be on a rotational basis, with terms of 2-3 years, and be defined by groups of common interests, such that a national and an international NGO would be represented separately, as well as representation from the national and international private sector, while the Government of Brazil would have a permanent representative. In addition, rotational representation from other geographic regions of the South would be included as well as for academia and the UN, except for UNDP, which would also have a permanent seat as a core partner. Observer positions could also be employed, for example, for donors. This would allow the Board to be lean, manageable and as independent as possible.

A separate advisory group, as is the case for a few of the institutions like the Chatham House, is recommended given the Centre’s likely heavy reliance on research for its credibility, legitimacy, and prestige. In this context, and given the diverse challenges facing the South, the politics therein and the need also for a differentiated approach on MICs versus LDCs, consideration may also be given to a Senior Adviser position (also by geographic representation or by substantive area), which could be based on the IPRCC model.

On Products: the Centre could employ a double or triple strategy combining pure research products with advocacy products and materials shaped to engage as wide an audience as possible. A purely research focus alone would make it difficult to engage with the general public and policy-makers. Employing tools such as one-pagers and policy briefs, blog posts as well as engagement of the public in the global policy discourse are likely to allow the Centre to (1) stand out and apart in some key areas and (2) engage simultaneously with its four key strategic types of partners: government, academia, civil society and the private sector. Lessons from UNRISD, CGD and IPC-IG on the research-policy interface and from Amnesty International and CGIAR on outreach to specific audiences, as well as from IISD on engaging with a global network of interests, are most relevant in this context.

The unique products identified by Amnesty (the AI candle) and the software platform
of the UN Women RCoE are potential starting points for Rio+ innovation thinking as are unique products of Food First (Study Tours with a difference) and IISD (the Impact Centre).

One possible profile for the RIO+ Centre would be as follows:

- **Budget:** Minimum of 2-5 million annually
- **Staff:** 20-30 core staff and a broader complement of interns, Fellows, etc. However, smaller can also be effective for a limited agenda – see FDSD and Food First.
- **Thematic areas:** 5-7 core work-streams maximum with 2-3 major interventions of limited duration.
- **Advocacy:** Integrated into the core team. At least 1-2 persons and significant investment. Blogs would be important for engagement as well as visibility as would multiple languages.
- **Visibility:** Annual events (1 - 2) which define and give prominence to the work of the Centre and its core agenda. Linked to high-level and innovative partnerships.

Moreover, pooling the relative capacities of the existing UNDP Centres, as in the case of a CGIAR, towards a transformative vision of sustainable development, warrants further consideration. This could offer a unique platform for delivery and influence.
REFERENCES


REFERENCES cont’d

The following websites, in alphabetical order, were accessed during the period May 17th to July 12th to carry out the analysis contained in this Policy Practice Brief:

Africa Climate Policy Centre – www.uneca.org/acpc
Amnesty International – www.amnesty.org/
Center for Global Development - www.cgdev.org/
CGIAR - www.cgiar.org/
Chatham House - http://www.chathamhouse.org/
Food First - www.foodfirst.org/en/
International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development - www.ictsd.org/
International Institute for Sustainable Development - www.iisd.org/
Istanbul International Center for Private Sector in Development (IICPSD) - http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/partners/private_sector/iicpsd/
International Policy Center on Inclusive Growth - http://www.ipc-undp.org/pages/newsite/menu/about/introduction.jsp?active=0
The Brookings Institution - http://www.brookings.edu/
UN Center for Regional Development (UNCRD) - http://www.unccd.or.jp/ and/or (http://www.unccd.or.jp/events/130602.htm
UNEP Risoe Center on Energy, Climate Change and Sustainable Development (UNEP Risoe) - http://www.uneprisoe.org/default.aspx
UN Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD) - http://www.unosd.org/index.php?page=view&type=13&nr=9&menu=177
The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) – www.unrisd.org/
REFERENCES cont’d

The United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) - http://www.wider.unu.edu/

UNDP Global Center for Public Service Excellence (Singapore) - http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/capacitybuilding/publicservice.html

UN Women Regional Center of Excellence - http://www.womenchangemakers.net/

WFP Centre of Excellent Center of Hunger - http://www.wfp.org/centre-of-excellence-hunger


World Resources Institute (WRI) – www.wri.org/

Selected Facebook pages

- WFP Centre of Excellence on Hunger: https://www.facebook.com/ WFPCEAHBrazil
- UN Women RCOE: https://www.facebook.com/womenchangemakers.net
- https://www.facebook.com/GCPSE (Singapore Center)
- https://www.facebook.com/UNDPSPC (Seoul Policy Center)
Author

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The World Centre for Sustainable Development (RIO+ Centre)

One of the most important legacies of the Conference was the launching, during the High-Level Segment of the Conference, of the “World Centre for Sustainable Development - RIO+”. Established on June 24th, 2013, the RIO+ Centre works to reaffirm and make actionable the inextricable link between social, economic and environmental policies for the achievement of sustainable development and human well-being.