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How deeply should think tanks engage with public for influencing policy?

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[The South Asian Comms Platform currently includes communicators from India and Bangladesh. We aim to build a network of communicators across South Asia to better communicate research and policy issues. We urge others to join us in this endeavor.]

How deeply should think tanks engage with the larger ‘public’ in policy matters? This was a recent topic of a discussion amongst South Asian Comms Platform members, an informal group of communicators who come together every two months to share experiences in an effort to learn from one another.

Broadly, we defined the public to include citizens who are affected by policy and agreed that it could be anyone and everyone. It also includes citizens who are not only aware but who also actively participate in the policymaking process. In this case, the public fall out of the immediate stakeholder group (communities and policymakers think tanks directly work with). The discussion focused on whether communicating to the ‘public’ should be on the agenda of think tanks, and the merits and demerits of some of the approaches think tanks currently use. These questions were considered in the perspective of the two countries (India and Bangladesh, where the communicators are currently from), where the information trickle-down is slower compared to developed countries due to numerous developmental challenges. Participants at the discussion agreed that the ‘public’ was still too large a group to target communication at, and it needed to be further segregated according to ‘interest’.

To put the discussion in perspective: communicating to influence policy on building integrated photovoltaics should not only include research reports, policy briefs and journal articles, but also op-eds, blogs, videos, podcasts, events and discussions. Think tanks should strive to initiate conversations on this topic on social media. The target audience should not only be policymakers, funders of projects, industries, but also communities of people that the policy is likely to affect. The idea is that by making information on policy issues easily available, the public can not only make behavioural changes (eg. using solar, findings tools to make decisions on solar) but also effect policy dialogues within communities. Can we empower the public to influence policy, as any fully functioning democracy aspires to? Is this a role that think tanks would want to take on?

The conversation then led to a very interesting discussion on the merits and demerits of approaches of engaging with the public. The consensus at the discussion

was that communication should be targeted at interested/relevant persons within the larger 'public', but think tanks, depending on the scope of each project, would take a call on how broad the engagement should be.

A few tips that think tanks can incorporate to increase their reach to the public include:

Communication strategies

At the onset of the project, target some communication towards the public. Encourage researchers to write opinion articles in newspapers and discuss policy issues on blogs that are open to the public. Don't just announce events or publication of reports on social media, but also encourage readers to respond to the issues discussed. You can organise a twitter chat with the researchers! Think tanks will gain from communicating to the public considering the wider reach of their communication outputs. Due to the active dialogues on social media platforms and open debate platforms and public hearings, the public can be both the stick and the carrot in terms of ensuring policy decisions are evidence-based and in a way, hold policymakers accountable for the decisions they are making.

Diversity of communication, simplicity of language

Simplicity and brevity are key to ensuring that your research is understood: this is true for both policymakers (who have lesser time and are not always experts in the subject) as well as the public. Ensure that the methodology used is clearly written/communicated so that the research is not misunderstood. At CSTEP, for instance, researchers are encouraged to reduce jargon, use adequate visuals to support descriptions, write in active voice and use simple, direct and short sentences to improve readability of documents. We have also made a conscious effort to reduce the size of documents and ensure executive summaries effectively communicate the research idea.

In addition, think tanks should aim to produce and publish diverse communication outputs on multiple platforms for it to reach more people. It is definitely worthwhile to consider writing in local languages and engaging with the vernacular media as well. Many communication outputs can be re-purposed; larger research reports can be repurposed into multiple, smaller policy-briefs or media articles. It is now essential that communication include audio and visual content and many think tanks are engaging with production houses to create this content.

Engage with an emerging public

An interesting idea that emerged during the discussion was to engage with the 'emerging public': students and youngsters who may influence policy in the near future. While providing internships is one common and popular way to go, think tanks should explore other avenues, such as conferences and events, interactive workshops targeting youngsters, etc. to engage with this emerging public.

Engaging more proactively with the public can have benefits for think tanks. An informed public can help ensure accountability and keep the policy discussion moving even when policymakers are transferred or when governments change. It can contribute towards building a culture of evidence and research backed policymaking process.

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