

Operational Mechanisms and Decision-Making Influence Pathways of High-Level Foreign University Think Tanks: A Case Study of the Manchester Institute of Innovation Research, University of Manchester (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Building new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics has become an important strategic initiative for advancing the modernization of the national governance system and governance capabilities. As a significant marker of higher education quality, university think tanks have become one of the core forces in new-type think tank construction. The essence of new-type university think tanks lies in innovative concepts, organizational forms, and operational models; therefore, drawing upon the successful experiences of foreign university think tank construction holds important practical significance. [Method/Process] This paper takes the Manchester Institute of Innovation Research at the University of Manchester, UK as a case study. It first outlines the institute's profile and development history, then systematically analyzes the research subject from three dimensions: management system, organizational operation mechanism, and decision-making influence pathways. [Results/Conclusion] The study summarizes six key success factors of the Manchester Institute of Innovation Research at the University of Manchester, providing references for the construction of university think tanks in China.

Full Text

Abstract

This paper examines the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in the context of global development, investigating its operational mechanisms, research directions, and practical activities to provide references for development and cooperation in developing countries. Using a case study approach, we collected

data through literature review and website investigation, citing primary publications from ODI and referring to authoritative global think tank rankings to present a comprehensive overview. The findings reveal that ODI operates with independence, professionalism, transparency, and accountability. Its research concentrates on economics, social protection, agriculture, water resources, climate change, and humanitarian issues, primarily serving developing countries by providing high-quality research, policy advice, consulting services, and customized training. Additionally, ODI has established a Fellowship Scheme that cultivates talented graduates in economics and statistics for developing countries, contributing to local public affairs development.

Keywords: Overseas Development Institute; think tank; development; developing countries

1 Research Background

In an era of deepening globalization, countries and regions are increasingly interconnected through cross-border flows of goods, capital, and information, making isolated development impossible. While globalization has accelerated growth, it has not benefited all citizens equally, exacerbating wealth disparities and undermining public trust in institutions. Politically, it has intensified regional conflicts, corruption, and authoritarianism, while environmentally, climate change has created ecological and resource crises that threaten sustainable development. In response to these challenges, the international community adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, comprising 17 goals and 169 targets that address poverty eradication, economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. China has integrated these global objectives into its national strategy, committing to “decisively win the battle against poverty” and promote ecological civilization while actively participating in global governance through initiatives like the Belt and Road. However, effectively addressing these complex issues requires scientific decision-making and robust policy research, making think tanks indispensable. Since the 18th Party Congress, China has emphasized “scientific and democratic decision-making” and the need to “strengthen new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics,” ushering in a “think tank era” for public policy research. As China’s think tanks are still in their infancy, learning from established international institutions like ODI—whose mission centers on development research and evidence-based solutions—provides valuable insights for China’s overseas development strategies and think tank construction.

2 ODI’s Mission, Philosophy, and Strategic Goals

2.1 Establishment and Mission

ODI was founded in 1960 against the backdrop of decolonization sweeping Africa and the developing world. As former colonies gained independence, Britain sought to maintain influence through new forms of engagement, particularly in

addressing poverty and economic development challenges. Established with support from the Ford Foundation and Cambridge economists, ODI was initially led by prominent figures including William Clark, former editor of *The Observer* and private secretary to Prime Minister Anthony Eden, and Leslie Rowan, who later became a senior official in Britain's Overseas Development Administration. This close connection to the British government reflected ODI's role in promoting UK foreign policy interests while researching aid effectiveness and development strategies. Early research focused on British aid approaches compared to those of the US, France, Germany, and Japan, particularly in Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia, ensuring alignment with market economies and political freedoms. By the mid-1980s, ODI had evolved into an independent institute dedicated to reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development in low-income countries, guided by the conviction that it has "both the capacity and responsibility to make a difference and eliminate suffering."

Today, ODI ranks 33rd among global think tanks and 25th among 124 top European institutions, holding significant influence in international development. Its mission is to formulate, advocate, and implement policies that address global development challenges, support climate action, and eradicate extreme inequality through high-quality applied research and policy engagement.

2.2 Guiding Principles

ODI operates according to six core principles. First, it maintains independence, ensuring its research and policy recommendations remain free from donor influence. Second, it upholds quality, delivering rigorous research and public policy advice. Third, it promotes fairness, diversity, and equality, treating all staff and collaborators with respect. Fourth, it fosters collaboration, building strong internal and external relationships to achieve greater impact. Fifth, it practices transparency, publicly disclosing financial information and research processes to funders and partners. Sixth, it pursues sustainability, using resources responsibly and protecting the ecological environment.

2.3 Strategic Development Goals

ODI's 2014-2017 strategic plan outlines five key objectives: (1) eliminating poverty by strengthening analytical capacity and promoting global cooperation between public and private sectors; (2) addressing climate change by supporting climate-compatible development policies and green economic transitions; (3) protecting citizens from conflict, disasters, and insecurity by building more effective humanitarian response systems; (4) building peaceful and inclusive institutions through governance reforms that improve public policy and service delivery; and (5) promoting sustainable growth by influencing international trade and financial rules to benefit developing countries.

3 Institutional Management

As an independent think tank, ODI employs over 230 staff members, including researchers, media professionals, and specialists, organized into 14 research departments covering areas such as development strategy, humanitarian policy, climate and energy, and governance . Governance is overseen by a nine-member board comprising representatives from academia, private enterprise, government, multilateral institutions, and NGOs. As a charitable organization, ODI is regulated by the UK Charity Commission and Companies House.

ODI's funding is diverse and robust, comprising donations, project grants, and publication revenues. In 2016-2017, total income reached £41.32 million, showing consistent growth [Figure 1: see original paper]. Major funders include DFID, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the World Bank, and numerous governments and international organizations [Figure 2: see original paper]. Transparency is ensured through compliance with the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), publishing project data in standardized formats, and making audited financial statements publicly available online.

4 Research Fields and Flagship Projects

4.1 Research Areas

ODI's research spans a comprehensive range of development topics, including climate adaptation, agriculture, energy, conflict and violence, migration, humanitarian policy, economic development, governance, poverty, inequality, and social protection . The institute prioritizes issues that intersect with global development challenges, particularly those affecting the most vulnerable populations.

4.2 Flagship Projects

Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED) is a DFID-funded initiative operating in the Sahel, East Africa, and Asia to enhance resilience to extreme weather and disasters. ODI leads knowledge management, data generation, and gender integration in climate programs.

Budget Strengthening Initiative (BSI), supported by DFID, aims to build more effective, transparent, and accountable financial systems in fragile and conflict-affected states. In 2015-2016, activities included improving budget management in Sierra Leone and Uganda, and strengthening public expenditure systems across seven countries.

Development Progress, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, measures and analyzes development achievements since 1990 using welfare indicators. Since 2011, it has studied 24 countries to understand how progress was achieved, producing reports such as *The Millennium Development Goals Report*

2013.

European Think Tanks Group (ETTG) is a consortium comprising ODI, the German Development Institute, the European Centre for Development Policy Management, and the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations. It aims to strengthen European development policy through high-quality independent research and cross-country collaboration.

Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC), established in 2011 with DFID, Irish Aid, and the European Commission, investigates state-building and livelihoods in conflict-affected countries including Afghanistan, DRC, Nepal, Pakistan, and Uganda.

Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN), founded in 1994, is an independent forum hosted by ODI's Humanitarian Policy Group. It connects over 130 organizations to share knowledge and improve humanitarian practice globally.

Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN), led by PwC and funded by DFID, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, supports climate-compatible development in developing countries through applied research and capacity building for climate negotiations.

New Climate Economy (NCE), the flagship project of the Global Commission on the Economy and Climate, partners with ODI to demonstrate that economic growth and climate action can be achieved simultaneously, with case studies in Colombia, Ethiopia, and Indonesia.

Pathways to Resilience in Semi-Arid Economies (PRISE) is a five-year research project exploring how semi-arid regions in Burkina Faso, Kenya, Pakistan, Senegal, Tajikistan, and Tanzania can achieve rapid, inclusive, and resilient development amid climate variability.

Other initiatives include the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), the Chronic Poverty Advisory Network (CPAN), and the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN).

5 Advocacy and Information Dissemination

ODI actively promotes its research through multiple channels to maximize policy impact. In 2015–2016, staff provided 122 briefings to UK government departments and 60 to international organizations, ensuring research informs decision-making processes. The institute hosts high-profile events featuring Nobel laureates and global leaders, such as the “Think Change” series, which offers platforms for in-depth analysis of development challenges.

ODI publishes extensively, including two peer-reviewed journals: *Development Policy Review* and *Disasters*. In 2015–2016, *Development Policy Review* downloads increased by 10% to over 10,000 institutions, while *Disasters* article downloads tripled. The institute maintains strong media presence, with experts appearing on BBC, CNBC, Al Jazeera, and in publications like *Financial Times*

and *The Guardian*. Social media engagement is robust, with 94,128 Twitter followers and 1,996,904 Facebook users reached in 2017, demonstrating expanding influence.

6 Researcher Fellowship Scheme

ODI's Fellowship Scheme, launched in 1963, exemplifies its commitment to capacity building in developing countries. The program places early-career economists and statisticians in government ministries and agencies for two-year assignments. Funded primarily by DFID, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Gates Foundation, the scheme has deployed over 1,000 fellows to Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Pacific regions. In 2016 alone, 62 fellows worked in 32 low- and middle-income countries.

Selection follows a rigorous process: application, interview, matching, and deployment. Candidates must hold postgraduate degrees in economics or statistics, demonstrate technical expertise, language skills (French, Portuguese, Swahili), and adaptability to new cultures. ODI conducts annual reviews to assess performance and match skills with recipient country needs. Fellows receive salaries equivalent to local civil servants, plus housing, travel, and insurance allowances. Upon completion, many join international organizations, NGOs, or remain in their host countries, creating a lasting impact on institutional capacity.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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