

The Mission, Operational Mechanisms, and Development Trends of the Overseas Development Institute: Postprint

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Date: 2018-08-14T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Against the backdrop of globalization, this study examines the operational mechanisms, research orientations, and practical activities of the UK' s Overseas Development Institute, aiming to provide references and insights for research on development and cooperation issues in developing countries. [Method/Process] Adopting a case study methodology, data were collected primarily through literature and website investigations, citing firsthand publications and related research reports released by the Overseas Development Institute, while also referencing internationally authoritative think tank ranking reports to examine its history and current status. [Results/Conclusion] The Overseas Development Institute operates independently, professionally, and transparently, with accountability mechanisms in place. Its research focuses on economics, social protection, agriculture, water resources, climate, humanitarianism, and other domains, primarily serving developing countries. It provides high-quality research, policy recommendations, consulting services, and customized training, and has established a fellowship program to cultivate outstanding graduate students in economics and statistics for developing countries, dedicated to advancing local public sector development.

Full Text

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Against the backdrop of globalization, this paper examines the operational mechanisms, research directions, and practical activities of the UK' s Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to provide references for development and cooperation studies in developing countries. [Method/Process] Using case study methodology, the paper collects data

through literature review and website investigation, citing first-hand publications and research reports released by ODI, while also referring to authoritative international think tank ranking reports to present a comprehensive view of ODI's history and current status. **[Result/Conclusion]** ODI operates independently, professionally, and transparently with robust accountability mechanisms. Its research focuses on economics, social protection, agriculture, water resources, climate change, and humanitarianism, primarily serving developing countries by providing high-quality research, policy advice, consulting services, and customized training. Additionally, it has established a Fellowship Scheme to cultivate outstanding economics and statistics graduates for developing countries.

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

1 Research Background

In the context of accelerating globalization, countries and regions worldwide are increasingly interconnected, making isolated development impossible. However, globalization has not benefited all citizens equally, with widening wealth gaps, declining public trust in institutions, and emerging challenges such as climate change, resource scarcity, and social conflicts. In response to these complex issues, the international community adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, establishing 17 Sustainable Development Goals with 169 specific targets covering poverty eradication, economic growth, education, gender equality, and environmental protection.

China is actively integrating into global development, proposing initiatives such as the “Belt and Road” and “Going Global” strategies while seeking to provide Chinese solutions to global challenges. To better navigate these processes and address various development issues, China needs to draw widely from external experiences. Since the 18th Party Congress, China has emphasized “scientific and democratic decision-making” and the important role of think tanks. The 2015 “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” marked China's entry into a “think tank era.” As Chinese think tanks are still in their early stages, they can benefit significantly from international best practices.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI), a UK-based think tank dedicated to international development, provides a valuable reference model. Through high-quality applied research, policy advocacy, and international cooperation, ODI offers evidence-based solutions to global development challenges. This paper systematically introduces and analyzes ODI's history, mission, philosophy, organizational structure, and research areas to provide insights for China's think tank construction and international development cooperation.

2 ODI's Mission, Philosophy, and Strategic Objectives

2.1 Establishment and Mission

Founded in 1960 and currently located at 203 Blackfriars Road, London, ODI was established with funding from the Ford Foundation. Its founding members included prominent British political and business elites, such as William Clark, former foreign correspondent for *The Observer* and press secretary to Prime Minister Anthony Eden, and Leslie Rowan, a distinguished economist who served as private secretary to Prime Ministers Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee. Andrew Cohen, another founding member, later became a senior official in the UK's Overseas Development Administration. These close connections to the UK government gave ODI a natural alignment with British foreign policy interests and influence from its inception.

During the 1960s-1980s, ODI's research priorities focused on aid effectiveness, examining how aid from major donors (the UK, France, Germany, Japan, and the US) impacted recipient countries and regions in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Since the mid-1980s, ODI has evolved into an independent, professional, and transparent organization committed to reducing poverty and suffering in developing countries and promoting sustainable development. Its mission is to “create solutions to global challenges through high-quality applied research, policy engagement, and partnerships.”

ODI ranks 33rd among 7,815 think tanks worldwide and 25th among 61 top think tanks in Western Europe. In the global development research field, it ranks 14th, demonstrating its strong international influence and prominent position in development studies.

2.2 Guiding Principles

ODI operates according to six core principles:

1. **Independence:** Maintaining intellectual independence in research and policy engagement, free from donor influence.
2. **Quality:** Ensuring research, policy recommendations, and public affairs work meet the highest standards.
3. **Fairness, Diversity, and Equality:** Treating all staff and collaborators with fairness and respect.
4. **Collaboration:** Building strong internal and external relationships to achieve greater impact.
5. **Transparency and Accountability:** Publicly disclosing funding sources, financial information, and research processes to donors, researchers, and partners.
6. **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. **Eliminate Extreme Poverty:** Support the implementation of post-2015 development goals by identifying solutions to poverty and inequality, promoting global cooperation, and strengthening public-private partnerships.
2. **Address Climate Change:** Provide best practices for social protection; reform fossil fuel subsidies; promote green economic transitions; and support climate-compatible development policies in least-developed countries.
3. **Protect Citizens from Conflict and Disasters:** Develop more effective and inclusive humanitarian response systems, strengthen social resilience, and reduce large-scale conflict and violence, with special attention to gender-based violence.
4. **Build Effective and Inclusive Institutions:** Focus on institutional development through political reform and public policy improvement rather than direct institution-building, enhancing government capacity to deliver services and social protection.
5. **Transform Economies for Sustainable Development:** Promote productivity growth, job creation, and high-quality investment through improved international trade and financial rules that benefit developing countries.

3 Organizational Management

As an independent think tank, ODI employs over 230 staff members, including researchers, media professionals, and specialists. The institute is governed by a Board of nine members drawn from academia, private enterprises, government departments, multilateral organizations, and NGOs. ODI operates as a charitable organization subject to joint regulation by the UK Charity Commission and Companies House.

ODI comprises 14 research departments covering development strategy and finance, growth and poverty, humanitarian policy, agricultural development, climate and energy, politics and governance, public finance and institutions, social protection, water policy, and other specialized areas .

ODI's funding is diverse and robust, sourced from foundations, NGOs, private corporations, government departments, and multilateral institutions. In the fiscal year 2016-2017, ODI's total income reached approximately £41.32 million, comprising grants, project funds, and publication revenues, showing consistent growth [Figure 1: see original paper]. Major donors include DFID, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the European Commission, and the World Bank .

ODI maintains exceptional financial transparency. Under the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), it publishes all project data in standardized XML formats. Annual audited financial statements are publicly available through the Charity Commission and Companies House websites, ensuring full

accountability to stakeholders [Figure 2: see original paper].

4 Research Areas and Flagship Programs

4.1 Research Areas

ODI's research and policy work spans a wide range of topics organized into five thematic clusters: climate, environment and natural resources; conflict, risk and humanitarian issues; economics, finance and aid; governance, politics and institutions; and poverty, inequality and social policy .

4.2 Flagship Programs

During 2015-2016, ODI led or partnered in numerous flagship initiatives:

1. **BRACED (Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters):** A DFID-funded program improving resilience to climate extremes and disasters in the Sahel, East Africa, and Asia. ODI's role includes knowledge management, data generation, and gender-sensitive policy integration.
2. **BSI (Budget Strengthening Initiative):** Supporting fragile and conflict-affected states to build more effective, transparent, and accountable public financial management systems. The program operates in countries including Uganda, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.
3. **Development Progress:** A Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-funded project measuring development progress since 1990 using welfare indicators. Since 2011, it has studied 24 countries to understand how development gains were achieved.
4. **ETTG (European Think Tanks Group):** A consortium including ODI, the German Development Institute, and the European Centre for Development Policy Management. ETTG provides independent research on European development policy and promotes cross-country cooperation.
5. **SLRC (Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium):** A global research program studying how conflict-affected and fragile states can build effective institutions that respond to citizen needs. Research focuses on state-building, livelihoods, and resilience in eight countries.
6. **HPN (Humanitarian Practice Network):** An independent forum founded in 1994 that facilitates information sharing and learning among humanitarian practitioners. HPN publishes the *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine* and organizes field discussions on critical issues.
7. **CDKN (Climate and Development Knowledge Network):** Led by PwC and funded by DFID, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden,

CDKN provides demand-driven research and technical assistance to help developing countries participate effectively in climate negotiations.

8. **NCE (New Climate Economy)**: The flagship project of the Global Commission on the Economy and Climate, with ODI as a partner. NCE demonstrates how countries can achieve economic growth while reducing climate risks, with current focus on Colombia, Ethiopia, and Indonesia.
9. **PRISE (Pathways to Resilience in Semi-Arid Economies)**: A five-year research project exploring how semi-arid regions in Burkina Faso, Kenya, Pakistan, Senegal, Tajikistan, and Tanzania can achieve climate-resilient development.
10. **Other Networks**: ODI hosts or coordinates multiple specialized networks including ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance), CPAN (Chronic Poverty Advisory Network), and IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Networks).

5 Communication and Dissemination Activities

ODI actively promotes its research and policy recommendations through multiple channels: conferences, lectures, publications, and social media. In 2015–2016, ODI organized the “Global Challenges Event Series” in London, featuring Nobel laureates and leading thinkers to explore issues like gender equality and climate change.

ODI publishes extensively, including two authoritative peer-reviewed journals: *Development Policy Review* and *Disasters*. These journals address contemporary development challenges and have seen significant growth in readership and impact. In 2015–2016, *Disasters* featured articles downloaded three times more than the previous year, while *Development Policy Review* reached over 10,000 subscribing institutions.

ODI maintains a strong media presence, regularly appearing in major outlets such as the BBC, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, and Al Jazeera. In 2016 alone, ODI experts were cited in more than 100 media outlets. The institute’s social media engagement is robust, with 101 experts actively sharing content on Twitter, reaching 94,128 followers, and YouTube videos garnering 851,711 views. These figures demonstrate ODI’s expanding influence and effective use of digital platforms for policy outreach.

6 ODI Fellowship Scheme

While ODI primarily conducts research rather than direct technical assistance, its Fellowship Scheme—launched in 1963—directly supports developing countries by placing highly skilled economics and statistics graduates in government ministries and agencies. Over 53 years, the program has deployed more than 1,000

fellows to Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Pacific regions, with 62 fellows placed in 32 low- and middle-income countries in 2016 alone.

Fellows typically serve two-year assignments in ministries of finance, planning, trade, agriculture, health, education, or central banks. The selection process involves a standardized procedure: application, interview, needs assessment, and matching. Applicants must demonstrate strong technical skills in economics and statistics, proficiency in languages (French, Portuguese, Swahili), IT capabilities, and adaptability to new cultures and environments .

ODI conducts annual monitoring visits to assess performance and gather feedback, ensuring optimal matching between fellows' capabilities and host country needs. Host governments provide fellows with remuneration, benefits, and security equivalent to local staff, while ODI offers additional allowances and support. The program enjoys an excellent reputation, with many alumni pursuing careers at the World Bank, UN agencies, NGOs, or remaining in host country governments.

7 Conclusion and Implications for China

ODI' s 60-year development trajectory offers valuable lessons for China' s think tank construction. Its clear development philosophy, strategic direction, independent operation, diverse funding base, and transparent management provide a strong reference model. The Fellowship Scheme exemplifies how think tanks can directly contribute to capacity building in developing countries.

China has already begun cooperating with ODI on various initiatives, including trilateral cooperation studies in Africa and research on Chinese manufacturing investment in Southeast Asia. Such partnerships enable China to leverage ODI' s expertise and networks to support its “Going Global” and “Belt and Road” strategies. Future collaboration should expand across multiple levels and formats, drawing on ODI' s extensive experience to inform China' s international development cooperation and think tank development.

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Received: December 13, 2017

Revised: February 7, 2018

Responsible Editor: Lü Qing

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

Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.