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**Policy Research Institutions and Democratization: Recent Experience  
and Future Challenges**

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*Recent Experience and Future Challenges***

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**Introduction**

This paper is limited in scope and purpose partly because of the subject matter itself and partly because independent governance and advocacy institutions in Ethiopia, among which policy research institutions such as FSS are included, are of recent origin and have been operating under difficult circumstances. It was only in the last decade or so that independent policy institutions or institutions undertaking broadly similar functions began to make their appearance in this country. They have in other words a short history and an uncertain future. Similarly, in Africa as a whole such institutions are of relatively new, with the older ones having emerged in the mid-1970s. Many of them are fragile bodies operating on a shoe-string budget and with limited staff.

The main aim of the paper is to draw attention to the relevance of these institutions to the process of democratization –a subject which until recently was ignored both in the broader international context as well as in local settings. Research in the social and economic sciences in this country has been confined to academic institutions, serving largely academic interests. There are, to be sure, several government agencies that are engaged in research activities of one sort or another –the National Bank, the Central Statistical Agency, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development are a few examples- however, their findings are produced largely for technocrats in public service and presented in the form of technical reports that are of limited value for engaging the public in debates or for promoting public awareness. In general, the infrastructure for public information and policy analysis, which is the main task of policy institutes, is quite rudimentary, and policy debates in particular are not keenly sought either by the public or public sector authorities.

Civil society organizations in general usually grow and flourish in a political setting which upholds respect for the rule of law, and tolerates and even welcomes the diversity of views and interests. Such organizations have been associated, historically, with the rise of the middle class and the growth and proliferation of professional groups (Dessaiegn 2002). Both these conditions have been lacking in Africa, more so in Ethiopia where the political environment, which in the past was wholly prohibitive, now remains difficult and challenging, and the middle class and professional groups have been weak and marginalized. It has been argued by many that policy institutions in the mature democracies have made significant contributions to the improvement of the policy process and the cause of good governance and democratization (James 1993, Stone et al

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1998). What is important to note here is that in conditions of political underdevelopment, such as we have here and elsewhere in Africa, policy research and advocacy institutions will have to shoulder greater responsibilities and take on more visible roles if the goal of democratization is to be achieved.

What is meant by political underdevelopment? For the purposes of this paper I shall view political underdevelopment in terms of "civic autonomy", defining it as a condition in which the state is predominant and civil society is weak and marginalized. Here, the voice of society is muted largely because political parties, trade unions, business associations, and social movements in general either do not exist as independent actors or, if they do, they are highly restricted in their activities. Economic society as a whole is fragmented and private enterprise in particular is feeble, confined, or dependent on state patronage and thus in no position to pose as an independent force. The state, in other words, is the most active force in society and the social space between it and the individual is narrow and restricts the autonomy of the latter and his/her primary associations. Political authority seeks to exercise unrestricted dominance over the individual and society, and a good part of the task of government is to extend this dominance and to marginalize those actors that strive to define an autonomous space for their constituents. Thus in the absence of organic social actors, or in conditions in which they are muted and fragile, the responsibility for giving voice to public concerns, and for promoting the public interest, falls on the shoulders of existing civil society organizations.

The political experience of the 1990s, both here and in the rest of Africa, is too well known to require an extended treatment, however, the lessons of that experience have yet to be sufficiently appreciated by social and political analysts in the countries concerned. The close of the 1980s saw the emergence of what were called a "new generation" of African leaders who promised to renounce the tradition of authoritarian rule, and who committed themselves to responsible government and free elections (see Ottaway 1999). Uganda, Congo, Ethiopia, Malawi, and even Zimbabwe were included in this category. However, it was not long before these promises were conveniently ignored, and progress towards democratic government was stalled or altogether derailed. At present, in many of these countries, the authoritarian tradition is once again making itself strongly felt, and there is disregard for the rule of law, massive corruption, and lack of administrative accountability. We shall not attempt in this short paper to examine what went wrong and to analyze why the "democratic experiment" failed so dismally. For our purposes, it is enough to draw one lesson, namely that for the goals of democratization to be achieved it is not sufficient to have favorable policy commitments on the part of government; on the contrary, the active participation of civil society is essential.

Such organizations will have to *promote and monitor* social and political reforms, and vigorously defend what has already been achieved. Until we are able to create robust civic organizations and a diversity of public policy institutes there is the danger that the "democratic experiment" will be short-lived and the autocratic tradition will continue to prevail. We should of course be careful not to over-estimate the potential of civic organizations as has been done by a good number of international donors. According to

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the World Bank, for example, such organizations are thought to "hold the greatest promise of success... in building and rebuilding of state structures and institutions" (World Bank 1998: 24). But, on the other hand, it is important not to ignore their relative significance as has been done in the literature on political development until recently.

There is another reason why the issue of democratization should be looked at from a different perspective. The process of democratization in Africa as well as in Ethiopia has often been seen from what may be termed a top-down approach. Students of the subject have examined the prospect for democracy on the basis of formal legislation and state interventions in the political process. Thus constitutional provisions, the electoral process and the practice of state power consolidation are often the main issues that are singled out for analysis. While analysts writing on other African countries are now turning their gaze on the role governance and policy institutes can play in promoting responsible governance, Ethiopianists have yet to shift their focus away from the orthodox approach. I believe it is time to adopt a bottom-up and non-statist approach to the debate in Ethiopia, and it is hoped that this paper will make a modest contribution to that effort<sup>1</sup>.

### **Policy Research Institutes**

In the mature western democracies policy institutes (sometimes known as "think tanks") are playing an increasingly prominent role in policy planning and formulation, advocacy and public education. Their growing importance is attributed, among other things, to the expansion of the democratic process and the robustness of civil society in these countries. Such organizations are also spreading quite rapidly in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, but they are making a belated appearance in Africa (Stone et al. 1998). There is the belief among some in the donor community that in these non-Western societies policy institutes, which are accepted by many of the governments in question, will play an important role in promoting popular democracy, and more significantly economic liberalism (*Economic Forum Today* 1996, CIPE 1999). In Africa, on the other hand, the organizations are facing many challenges and lead for the most part an insecure existence.

Policy institutions come, as it were, in many shapes and colors, and thus any attempt to define them and establish their identity will be met with considerable difficulties. The organizations differ in commitment, objectives, access to resources, structure and size. Some of the older think tanks in the West are large organizations with dozens of staff and a large budget. Others are smaller outfits dependent on a small core staff and a limited budget. On the other hand, think tanks may be independent organizations or may be affiliated in some way with government, political parties, faith-based organizations, labor unions, or social movements of one sort or another. But whether large or small, independent or affiliated, most institutions are dependent to one degree or another on donor organizations for their financial resources. Among the better known and well

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<sup>1</sup> There are a number of unpublished and consultants reports on civil society in Ethiopia but most do not fully relate the subject to democratization. See Dessalegn 2007 for references. Kassahun (2002) has looked into NGOs' contribution to democratic values. For the African literature see Kasfir 1998

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established think tanks in the West are ones concerned with economic growth and policy, democracy and human rights, poverty reduction and support to poor countries, international relations and foreign affairs, and environmental issues.

Broadly speaking, think tanks are institutions engaged in research and analysis of policy relevant issues. They serve as sources of new ideas, and often undertake advocacy activities. They are sometimes called *idea brokers* and *catalysts* for change. They produce informed and in-depth analysis of issues and seek to promote public awareness, to inform decision-makers, and to influence the policy process. Their weapon, as it were, is the force of intellectual argument, and their chief instrument for achieving their goals are publications, public debates, workshops and symposia, and the media. Unlike NGOs or charitable organizations, think tanks do not build schools, clinics, irrigation schemes, etc.; what they offer instead is an intellectual product. In the West, governments and the media listen eagerly to policy institutes, and quite often, cabinet ministers, legislators, and reporters freely borrow ideas, theories, and policy options from them. Whether or not the main end user of their product is the government, others, such as, donor organizations, civic institutions, the public and the business community equally benefit from their intellectual output. Think tanks therefore not only actively engage in dialogue with government but also maintain an open and healthy communication with the public, the business community and other non-government bodies.

Despite their differences there are certain basic characteristics that are common to most policy institutes, and these are:

- a) *Credibility*. Building credibility by providing “products” that are sound and of high standard. The views expressed in these products may not be accepted by all, but the force of argument is such that they cannot be ignored.
- b) *Freedom to undertake research*. The organizations must be able to set their own research agenda, determine their own methodology and theoretical framework, and pursue the investigation of issues independently.
- c) *Status autonomy*. Think tanks should have legal status as non-profit institutions, and must be established outside the organizational framework of the public sector. However, in some countries, the organizations may be financed by government or political parties, nevertheless, these too are expected to enjoy a good degree of autonomy in matters related to their core responsibilities.
- d) *Policy analysis*. The main objective of think tanks is to engage in policy relevant research for the purpose of informing decision-makers and making appropriate interventions in the policy process. This is what sets them apart from university research institutions whose research output is largely geared to academic purposes and is frequently less amenable to public consumption. In many African countries, research undertaken by academic institutions is often not available outside academia due to poor dissemination.

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e) *Public Purpose*. Research in policy institutes has a public purpose, i.e. it helps to inform the public, contributes to the enhancement of public debate, and encourages public participation in the decision-making process. This is what differentiates think tanks from consultancy firms. The public voice is an essential input in democratic decision making but this voice will be ineffective unless it is informed; informing the public is one of the main tasks of policy institutes.

## **Policy Research Institutes in Ethiopia**

### ***The FSS Experience and Challenges***

There has been increasing social activism since the fall of the Derg, and the voluntary sector in Ethiopia has been growing fairly rapidly both in number and diversity in this period. There are today numerous non-state institutions, many of which would not have been allowed to function either under the imperial or Derg regimes. The sector now consists of professional societies, women's groups, human rights and advocacy organizations, community organizations, indigenous and Northern NGOs, environmental groups, and policy research institutes. The focus of governance and advocacy organizations, which are new and only emerged in the 1990s, ranges from monitoring human rights abuses, to protecting the rights of women, to conducting voter education and advocating the care of the environment. Women's groups consist of a variety of organizations established by women, including organizations of women lawyers, women writers, women journalists, businesswomen, women's cultural groups, and women's NGOs and advocacy groups. Community organizations are engaged in cleaning up urban neighborhoods, promoting environmental sanitation, and providing support to the homeless, street children and the needy. The Forum for Social Studies, which was formally registered with the Ministry of Justice in 1998, is a product of the period of relative liberalization that saw the emergence of such organizations as the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, established in 1991, the Ethiopian Economic Association set up in 1992, and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association, formed in 1995.

The fall of the Derg and the subsequent political changes that took place provided a mixture of opportunities and challenges to citizens wishing to translate into action the freedom of association provided in the 1995 Constitution<sup>2</sup>. Active citizens planning to set up civic groups or non-state bodies to pursue legitimate ends soon found that what was provided in the law and the reality on the ground were two different things. On the one hand, the Constitution and other reforms that were initiated in the mid-1990s appeared to promise the liberalization of the political environment allowing greater space for independent initiatives and the public voice. The enactment of the press law in 1992 and the appearance of independent newspapers and magazines, on the one hand, and the Constitutional guarantee of free and fair elections in which political parties were allowed to contest seats in Parliament and the Killil Councils on the other, further suggested that the country was entering a new era of political liberalization. The deregulation of the

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<sup>2</sup> For the discussion here and in the next paragraph see Dessalegn and Meheret 2004.; Pausewang et al 2002. See also Dessalegn 2002 for discussion of civil society organizations

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print media and the subsequent end of censorship has made it possible for governance and advocacy organizations in particular to publish and distribute without hindrance studies, reports, conference proceedings, and educational and advocacy materials. While the governing principle of ethnic federalism established by the Constitution was seen by many as leading to conflict and political instability, the new authorities presented it as a form of devolution of political power and decentralization of decision-making. Elections at the national level have been held five times since 1992 though their outcome has been hotly contested by opposition parties and international election monitors.

On the other hand, all through most of the 1990s there was an insecure political environment and relations between citizens and public authorities were unfriendly and mutually mistrustful following a spate of undemocratic measures taken by the new government. There were forceful interventions in the activities of long established professional bodies and labor organizations often resulting in harassment or detention of some of the leaders concerned. The authorities looked at most independent citizens groups with a jaundiced eye believing them to be trouble-makers and part of the opposition. Moreover, there were numerous cases at this time of detention of individuals without due process, extra-judicial killings, harassment of journalists and unlawful seizure of private property. Peaceful demonstrations for redress of grievances in Addis Ababa and other urban areas were quickly suppressed, often involving the use of excessive force in which many participants were either killed or seriously injured. The voice of the state that came through the official airwaves was intolerant, uncompromising and intimidating. New organizations found it hard to obtain legal registration from the regulatory body, the Ministry of Justice, and older ones became apprehensive because of the fear of suspension or de-registration. In contrast, quasi-official organizations that were closely affiliated with the ruling political parties were given most favored status, with privileges and opportunities that were denied to independent groups. It was following the outbreak of hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 1998 that the government's hard line stance on non-state actors began to soften but this did not involve a dramatic change and citizens groups continued to be looked at with a great deal of suspicion (Dessalegn 2002)

It was in these contradictory and uncertain circumstances that the Forum for Social Studies (FSS) was born. The genesis of the organization goes back to the summer of 1996 when a few friends met to discuss the idea of setting up an open forum to stimulate public debate on development issues and public policy. By the latter part of the year, the founding members had met several times to discuss and endorse the objectives and program activities of the organization, to approve its statute and bye-laws, and set up a provisional management structure. It took well over a year for the organization's application to the Ministry of Justice for formal registration to be approved and a legal certificate issued in its name.

From the outset, FSS envisioned itself as a dynamic center for research and debate on development and public policy, bringing an innovative approach to policy analysis and public discourse. The goals of the organization were cast in highly ambitious terms. Its core objectives were seen not just as providing an open forum for public discussions, but

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also embraced numerous broad concerns, such as: engaging in relevant research activities and publishing the findings to promote public awareness; supporting the cause of the marginalized and the disadvantaged; training young academics, researchers and others in research skills; providing consultancy services; and offering technical advice on strategic planning and capacity building. The list of its priority areas for research and publication numbered well over a dozen, ranging from Poverty Alleviation, to Urban Studies, Oral Literature and Development, to Indigenous Knowledge, and Substance Abuse. The founders of the organization believed that FSS was the first independent think tank in the country, and its mission was to be, at least in the long run, to contribute to the democratization of the policy making process in Ethiopia. And yet, while the support provided by the members of the organization, the Board and the general public was highly encouraging, it was obvious that neither the founding members nor the staff in charge of running the organization at the time had any experience managing independent think tanks. Public good will and the enthusiasm of the founders could not in the end make up for the shortage of experience and capable policy analysis. This was to prove highly challenging later.

During the first half of the FSS' life, programs were undertaken with a shoe-string budget, a tiny staff, and basically through an informal and unstructured decision-making system. It was much later that FSS acquired a formal management structure, increased its staff, and had access to sufficient funds to meet the expanding needs of the organization. Similarly, it took nearly half a decade for the organization to trim its ambitions and to concentrate on a limited number of core concerns, which at present consist of poverty and poverty reduction, environment and development, and good governance. The main focus of program activities from the very beginning was organizing open debates on a wide variety of issues of concern to the public, and publishing the proceedings for distribution. Some of these public programs were important and proved to be popular with the public. For example, the series of debates running for a year more on the country's first poverty reduction initiative, the Environmental Policy Dialogue, and the Inter-generational Transfer of Knowledge (which is still going on) gave FSS a good reputation, and have influenced the thinking of a good number of civil society organizations. In March 2001, FSS launched an educational program on FM Radio Addis in an attempt to reach a much wider audience; this experience proved to be quite successful and was followed up with another similar venture with FM Radio Debub (broadcast from Awassa) in the latter part of 2005. It is estimated that FSS' educational program on the broadcast media now reaches a combined audience of    million people.

However, sound and engaging policy analysis that could serve as a basis for meaningful public debates and reform alternatives -one of the chief objectives of the organization-remained and still remains a scarce commodity. While almost all of the public conferences hosted by the organization involved written presentations prepared by different speakers for the occasion, the focus and quality of the papers were not up to the standard expected of a policy institution hoping to influence policy making and the reform process. Many of the papers in question could not in fact be considered policy analysis, in the strict meaning of the term, but rather commonplace discussions hurriedly put together. Policy debates require informed, thoughtful and critical analysis of public



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issues and the policies that have a bearing on them, based on current and convincing evidence, and the presentation of sound and feasible alternatives taking into account existing opportunities, resource constraints and the interests of stakeholders and the concerned public. This kind of product continues to be unavailable, making the work of FSS and other policy institutions similarly engaged difficult and challenging. Partly as a result of the failure of the educational system, the considerable brain-drain the country has suffered in the last three to four decades, and other reasons that are too involved to discuss here, very little capacity exists in the country for analysis, planning, monitoring and evaluation of policy processes. These capacity constraints cannot easily be resolved since their causes are deep rooted, and as a consequence institutions like FSS will remain disadvantaged for a considerable period of time.

Another challenge that from time to time face all organizations running programs of public discussion is the culture of debate in the country. Open, public debates are a product of democratic practice, and their success depends not only on the quality of the ideas and arguments presented but also on the contributions of all participants. Civil discussion consists of people listening to one another, respectful of other's opinions and arguments and in which there is a healthy exchange of knowledge and experience. While it would be unrealistic to expect all participants at each forum to voice their opinions due to the limited time available for discussions, efforts must be made so that as many people as possible are given the opportunity to express themselves. There is in other words an unexpressed but mutually accepted code of conduct in such debates which governs both speakers and the listening audience. Over the first years of FSS' activities it became apparent that such public conduct could not be taken for granted and there were indeed occasions when the discussions threatened to get out of hand. Thus, promoting a *culture of civil debate*, and, through that, the *democratization of voices*, should be an important task of policy institutes in this country.

***Lessons Learnt?***

In Africa in general (with the exception of South Africa, perhaps) policy institutes operate in a difficult environment: the state over- dominates in virtually all spheres of activity, civil society institutions are not very strong though they are emerging as a force, and the democratic process is either in its infancy or, in some cases, altogether absent. Most African governments are hostile to independent opinion, which they view as a form of opposition or as an irrelevant exercise. Independent bodies such as trade unions, farmers' organizations, or teachers' associations are not welcome and sooner or later are liable to be brought under government control. The independent media, if at all it exists, lacks the experience, resources and trained staff to assist in the task of public education and to serve as a forum for public debate. Think tanks rely on the independent media to disseminate their findings and to inform the public. The situation in Ethiopia is no different, indeed, in some respects, it may be much worse than in the other countries of the continent. Under these circumstances, policy institutes face immense challenges and shoulder a far greater burden of responsibility than elsewhere in the world.

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On the other hand, the lack of a proper enabling environment should not mean the institutions should try to keep the government at arm's length. On the contrary, they should make efforts to engage in a *dialogue* and establish close *cooperation* between one and the other, otherwise they will be unable to contribute to the policy process, and the government will lose the opportunity to benefit from independent and professional opinion.

There may be a definitional problem when talking about policy institutes in Ethiopia. Are we referring to an emerging force and a set of organizations with a distinct identity? Certainly, the number of institutions that may be described as independent policy institutes is small but there is reason to believe that there will be more of them in the coming years. Some of the recent ones such as PANE are actively engaged in monitoring the implementation of the government's poverty reduction program as well as evaluating the accountability of public officials to the citizens whom they are expected to serve. Furthermore, given the existing circumstances we may have to stretch the term a little bit and include some of the more dynamic professional associations which actively seek to influence public policy and whose functions are similar to those of think tanks. The Ethiopian Economic Association, for example, while in principle a professional society, is in most other respects operating as a think tank through its research arm, the Economic Policy Research Institute. On the other hand, there are a few institutions that have been set up by government to provide research and analysis, such as the Ethiopian Development Research Institute, and the Peace and Development Institute.

The policy-making tradition in Ethiopia has not been friendly to independent opinion and the decision-making process remains essentially closed to public scrutiny. Parliament has always been a pliant institution and traditionally rubber-stamps the government's initiatives. Policy is commonly drafted by a small group of trusted individuals who are often close to the power-holders. There is no attempt to consult stakeholders or professionals outside government, or to solicit public opinion. The few occasions when the government has submitted weighty issues to the public for discussion, it was obvious that the initiative was not taken in good faith and not really to get feedback from the public. Quite frequently, policy planners are inaccessible to the public and their efforts are shrouded in secrecy.

During the imperial regime major economic policy was prepared either by the donors which were expected to provide the financial backing, or by a core of technical experts composed largely of foreign nationals. The underlying assumption at the time, and to a good extent since then, was that policy formulation was a technical matter about which the public was ignorant and consultation serves no useful purpose. Moreover, policy implementation is handed over to the line ministries and concerned agencies and they for their part jealously guard their activities against any intrusion by outsiders or the public. Given this long and strong "exclusionary" tradition, it is quite unlikely that in the short run civil society and policy research institutions will be readily listened to by the state. It would, in other words, be too optimistic to expect these institutions to be the dynamic catalysts for change in the short run. We must also bear in mind that in the last two to three decades the country has suffered the ravages of civil disorder, war and economic

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decline, conditions which militate against the growth and influence of civil society institutions in general.

Nevertheless, I believe that in the long run policy institutions here, and in Africa in general, have an important role to play in helping open up the decision-making process and stimulating reform for the following reasons:

1. Until recently, there was no tradition of informed and constructive public debate on reform and policy issues in Ethiopia, and think tanks and other civil society organizations have the opportunity to establish and extend such a tradition.

2. In the mature democracies, the media serves as the catalyst and the main channel through which public opinion is transmitted to the government and government intentions conveyed to the public. The media keeps alive public debates on policy issues. In Ethiopia, the media has not served this purpose, and therefore the public has no opportunity to intervene in policy debates. The independent papers here, most of which are quite poor and operated on small budgets by non-professionals, are almost exclusively concerned about sensational issues (Shimelis 2000). They are ill-equipped to provide a forum for the debate of important policy matters. The government media on the other hand is strongly one-sided and on most occasions highly sycophantic; it is thus least able to present public debates in a balanced way. Think tanks therefore have the chance to fill the gap, that is, they can serve to keep alive public concerns about important policy issues, transmitting such concerns to the appropriate authorities. While no dramatic success stories can be reported at the moment, one can say that the activities of governance and advocacy organizations have had some influence on policy making and program implementation.

3. Parliament in Ethiopia is not a “debating forum” in the constructive sense of the term. Ethiopian Parliamentarians lack access to reliable information and have no research support hence their interventions in policy debates do not carry sufficient weight. While to date Parliament has been easily manipulated by the government, approving state policies and legislation without meaningful debate, this is bound to change in the years to come. Think tanks can become important catalysts in stimulating legislative debate and Parliamentary scrutiny of policy initiatives.

4. At some point, policy planners are more likely to listen to the voice of the urban elite than that of the ordinary citizens in the towns or the countryside, and policy institutes can take advantage of this elitist bias to advocate for change.

We should also add here that policy research institutions have, or should have, better access to new ideas and to best practices in other countries in their respective fields of specialization because of their closer linkage with the international research community. This gives them an advantage over civil servants and state institutions.

**Conclusion**

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At the moment, civil society institutions in Ethiopia, including think tanks, operate in difficult circumstances. Most of them are seriously handicapped by a host of factors of which the most serious are the existing policy environment, lack of access to secure resources, and limitations of human and intellectual capital (see Dessalegn 2002 for more details). As noted earlier, the brain drain that has been going on since the latter half of the 1970s has seriously depleted the country's trained human power, and nowhere is this more keenly felt than in the voluntary sector, in particular among research institutions. Policy institutes cannot hope to grow and influence public policy without top class research staff and a secure organizational foundation, both of which are lacking at present. Due to these and other limiting factors, the quality of research and policy analysis produced currently leaves much to be desired. The government does not wish to accept think tanks and other civil institutions as partners in a common endeavor nor does it recognize independent opinion, and policy institutes will have a difficult time putting their ideas across and creating dialogue with policy planners.

Given resource and staff limitations, policy institutes cannot hope to tackle all the pressing problems that the country is currently facing, hence prioritization of goals and needs becomes essential. In this country, for example, poverty, food security, environmental degradation and good governance are pressing issues that should be addressed urgently. There is a need for extensive debate by the public, professionals and policy planners on these issues and it becomes the duty of policy institutes to prepare the ground and stimulate the debate. In other national contexts, there will be other priority areas needing urgent attention. Ideally, such prioritization should help refocus the nation's attention on the problems concerned, enabling a deeper understanding of the issues and providing a wider set of policy options.

Policy institutes in Africa should set themselves lofty goals even though these may not be fulfilled in the immediate future. They should provide independent opinion of the highest professional standard, which will help improve policy planning and formulation. They should, in other words, serve as *catalysts for change*. Moreover, they should work actively to promote public awareness of policy issues and to encourage public participation, and through such effort contribute to the *democratization of the policy making process*.

The goals of think tanks in Ethiopia should be no different from those in the rest of Africa, although there will be differences in priorities and methods of operation due to differences in political culture and historical tradition. Policy researchers here have a number of very important but very difficult tasks awaiting them. First, they should make all effort to convince the government that it should *seek* independent opinion. As noted above, the tradition among successive governments in the country has been to marginalize independent opinion. Decision-makers always turn to government experts whenever there is a need for information and analysis, or the formulation or evaluation of policy initiatives. This is, if you will, an incestuous exercise: the government is merely talking and listening to itself, and as a consequence foregoes the benefits of the diversity of ideas and options that independent opinion would have offered. Secondly, think tanks should help create a tradition of dialogue among professionals, the public and decision-

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makers. Thirdly, policy researchers should pursue innovative ideas and approaches in all their undertakings. They should learn to tackle old problems in new ways, to rewrite the terms of the policy debate, and to provoke a healthy and wide- ranging debate. Finally, and perhaps in the long run more importantly, Ethiopian think tanks should strive to bridge the gap between power and knowledge, between policy initiatives and public concerns.

As policy institutes grow in number and diversity, they will be able to shoulder more responsibilities, such as, for example, policy planning, budget analysis and program impact assessment, enabling citizens to hold public officials accountable, and effective monitoring and evaluation of government programs. Until then, capacity improvements especially to enable them to produce high caliber policy analysis, and to undertake innovative programs of public education are essential. The more governance and advocacy organizations, including policy institutes make sound interventions in policy debates the greater the chances for the democratization of the policy making process. We should therefore all make a concerted effort to nurture the country's nascent civil society organizations in general and policy research institutions in particular.

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