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Reform-oriented
knowledge amid
political transitions:

the role of
Think Tanks

in supporting
policy dialogue &
consensus building

Outcome Report

Regional Forum

Amman, Jordan | 2 - 4 July 2013

As an independent, multilateral and non-profit organization, the **Foundation for the Future** (FFF) was established in 2005 in response to enormous calls by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) for a mechanism to technically and financially support their initiatives fostering Human Rights and democracy in the Broader MENA region, which extends from Morocco to Pakistan and from Yemen to Syria.

From its base in Amman/Jordan, and as a locally-rooted, endogenous, culturally-sensitive and demand-driven non-profit organization, FFF provides appropriate, home-grown responses to the region's burning needs for inclusive and just democracy, and generate long-term sustainable impact while serving citizens' best interests. It capitalizes on its strengths, achievements and legitimacy to also make a unique contribution to the region's political transformation.

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The **UNDP Oslo Governance Centre** (OGC) is part of the Democratic Governance Group in the Bureau for Development Policy of UNDP. Established in 2002, the OGC generates and facilitates the sharing of knowledge on democratic governance to strengthen UNDP's policy, programming and advocacy, and to influence global debates.

OGC undertakes policy and programme-oriented analytical work that incorporates cutting-edge thinking and practice from inside and outside UNDP, producing knowledge outputs that strengthen the impact of UNDP programming. This includes the identification and dissemination of lessons from UNDP's governance programming.

The OGC convenes multi-stakeholder forums to provide spaces where people from different institutional and national backgrounds can discuss and collaborate on specific governance-related themes.

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Foreword

Governance transitions open new windows of opportunity for civic engagement and for greater citizen participation in public policy formulation. As an integral part of a civil society similarly affected by fundamental changes, national policy research centres and think tanks can play a key role in shaping the policy-making agenda in countries undergoing political transitions.

Despite difficulties faced by many think tanks in the Arab region adjusting to the recent fast paced processes of change, evidence suggest that they can contribute to contextualized analysis and knowledge and provide data and evidence for policy options to support a transformative transition. They can also foster meaningful debates that may support consensus building, counterbalance political polarization and strengthen democratic processes.

To what extent do the on-going transitions across the Arab world present an opportunity for think tanks in the region to play an essential role in the post-revolution landscape? What type of technical expertise and support do they need to produce high-quality and relevant policy research and to partner effectively with the media and grassroots organizations to disseminate research and make knowledge more accessible to the public? How can knowledge sharing practices and comparative learning be promoted? These are some of the key questions addressed by participants at the regional forum on “Reform-oriented knowledge amid political transitions: The role of national think tanks in supporting policy dialogue and consensus building”. The meeting was a direct follow up to the UNDP Oslo Governance Centre-NOREF [conference on the political economy of transitions](#) held in 2012.

Organised jointly by the UNDP Oslo Governance Centre and the Foundation for the Future, in close



Dr. Heba El-Kholy
Director
UNDP Oslo Governance Centre

cooperation with UNDP’s Regional Centre in Cairo, and with support from UN Women and other partners, the Amman Forum benefitted from the participation and experience of researchers and practitioners from the Arab region as well as from outside the region. (see Annex II). It received wide media coverage (see Annex IV), with its timeliness and relevance underscored by dramatic events unfolding in the region at the time of the Forum.

The forum started on the day that the Egyptian military gave an ultimatum to Morsi’s government and as we were in the forum discussions, events in the region were quickly unfolding in response. Once again, we were reminded of the complex and unpredictable nature of political transitions and the need for new conceptual frameworks to better capture the dynamics of peace and fragility. We were also reminded of the decisive role of the military in such contexts, and the importance of better and more accessible data and analysis on the formal and informal roles of the military in transitions. Strong national and regional think tanks will be key to such future endeavours.

Think tanks see a clear role for themselves in strengthening democratic governance in the Arab region. However, this role can only be effectively played when research independence is not compromised, when diverse methodological approaches are followed, when the highest ethical standards and transparency requirements are met, and when there is strong connection with civil society and grass roots organizations. Stronger links and collaboration with other regions, both in the ‘South’ and in the ‘North’, was identified by participants as important for growth.

The UNDP Oslo Governance Centre and the Foundation for the Future are committed to working with all of you to move forward the development of concrete ideas from the discussion at the Forum on



Mrs. Nabila Hamza
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“Reform-oriented knowledge amid political transitions: The role of national think tanks in supporting policy dialogue and consensus building”.

compromising their independence and credibility.

Background

As a follow up to the 2012 conference [“The Political Economy of Transitions: Analysis for Change”](#) (Oslo, 8-9 November), jointly organised by UNDP Oslo Governance Centre (OGC) and the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF), the UNDP Oslo Governance Centre and the Foundation for the Future, in collaboration with the UNDP’s Regional Centre in Cairo and with support from UN Women and other partners, organised a forum in Amman in 2013 to:

- I. Deepen the discussion on the technical, financial, political and other opportunities and challenges that national think tanks in the Arab region may encounter during the transitional period, while also considering experiences and lessons learnt from outside of the region;
- II. Promote peer-to-peer dialogue at national and international levels and encourage knowledge sharing practices between think tanks and the strengthening of knowledge networks;
- III. Discuss methodologies for think tanks to expand and advance their ‘analytical toolkit’ during political transitions (e.g. on new ways of generation of data; the use of social media and Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs); policy uptake, etc.);
- IV. Develop strategies for action around gender-related issues during transitions, to stimulate research on critical gender themes and strengthen cooperation between gender activists and policy centres;
- V. Explore strategies that external actors can employ to create the space for think tanks to develop, and to support them without

The Amman Forum brought together more than 20 think tanks, with participants from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon Morocco, the Palestinian territories and Tunisia and experts and development practitioners from Indonesia, Myanmar and South Africa in addition to women activists, UN representatives and think tanks from the ‘North’ - Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the USA.

In preparation for the forum the FFF and the OGC prepared a draft directory of think tank in the region and shared with all participants to elicit their views before finalizing it.

This report aims at providing an overview of the key points of debate and agreement in different sessions.

The report is structured in eight sections, corresponding with sessions at the regional forum: Opening session; The role of think tanks in transitions: Challenges and opportunities in the Arab region; Examples from outside the Arab region; External support to national think tanks: Challenges, opportunities and strategies; Think tanks and gender relations in transitions; Generating, analysing and using data for advocacy and policy reforms; The relevance of social media and ICTs; closing session.

An executive summary is provided in the next pages, and the agenda, list of participants, concept note and summary of media coverage are included at the end of this report as annexes.

Executive Summary

Despite difficulties faced by many think tanks in the Arab region adjusting to the process of change in their environment, participants agreed that they can contribute critical knowledge and foster meaningful debates that may counterbalance political polarization, strengthen democratic processes, and provide evidence for policy reform options to support a transformative transition.

The following six key issues were identified by participants at the Forum:

The challenges of having an impact policy-making

There is no systematic contact between researchers and policy-makers, and those who produce research are meant to bridge the gap between empirical research and analysis, on the one hand, and opinion formation and policy-making processes on the other. However, none have a formal mandate to play this key role. Few think tanks are in touch with what policy makers are engaged in at any particular point in time, so that they can strategically contribute with knowledge and data in policy formulation. To add to this challenge, there are limited incentives for governments to follow think tanks' advice. Think tanks have to persuade governments that they need their contributions for more effective policies which in turn will help governments' own survival.

Knowledge for action

In the current context of transformational change, think tanks should target citizens not only governments – also taking into account that all state institutions are in flux and think tanks face challenges of their own in coping with rapid change. Think tanks as social agents need to be 'situated', that is, produce knowledge for progressive social forces in their respective domains of competence.

In addition to working with policy makers and on shaping public opinion, think tanks need to work with a number of partners, including other civil society organizations, activists –especially young men and women, also as producers of knowledge through new methods of social media–representative political structures (e.g. the parliament), political parties, academics and international organisations. Cooperation needs to be established with social movements and with those working for progressive change.

Moreover, think tanks should also strive to recruit and retain 'situated researchers', experts who combine credibility to do scientifically sound research with the capacity to carry out research for public entities or civil society organizations, as well as the capacity to formulate and manage funding proposals. This, however, is never an easy task, less so in highly dynamic transitional countries.

Funding, vision and tactics

The relationship between donors and recipients is not always sufficiently debated and addressed. All donors have an agenda, and also a huge responsibility to be clearer and more transparent about it. This open disclosure and honest dialogue on responsibility for setting and following agendas would help clarifying the contours of the donor-recipient relationship and encourage 'mutual accountability'.

Foreign funding is overall seen as problematic, with funders tending to set an agenda – often a narrow one that does not necessarily reflect priorities at the country level. In their quest to get funding, most research centres keep changing their agenda and focus. So, instead of being specialized in some areas of work and deepening their expertise in these areas, they shift their agenda according to the implicit or explicit requests of foreign donors. While this resource mobilisation strategy might work in the short-run, it erodes the credibility of the think tanks.

Financial sustainability and independence from externally set agendas and fashion is linked to a clear vision and clear internal decision-making and governance structures. More thinking about what works for which type of research organisations is required, considering different business models. The short-termism of donors in using a project approach is seen by many as a barrier for think tanks to advance agendas. A fluid donor-recipient dialogue would be particularly useful in circumventing this problem, making good use of existing spaces to challenge and eventually change a donor agenda with a convincing message and clear institutional vision.

Credibility and trust

According to forum participants, in the Arab region there is a notable lack of trust in polling centres, much more accentuated than in other parts of the world. The publication of opinion polls which appear to be at odds with each other – as has been the case in, for example, Tunisia – generates public confusion and undermines the possibility of having informed public debates. As with other types of think tanks not producing opinion polls, the full disclosure of how the information is organized and high methodological standards are of utmost importance to build trust in research findings and combat the credibility deficit. Think tanks can go a long way in building credibility by being transparent about the methodological steps followed, and by observing and promoting the highest standards of ethical conduct through their performance.

The reversal of rights gained

As a direct response to popular demand, various Arab countries have undergone constitutional reform processes since 2011, with women's activism being instrumental in prompting and influencing these reform processes.

A striking development that the region has witnessed is, however, the political pressure and influence by the new leadership that took power

after the old regimes were toppled. Newly elected governments and parliamentarians have focused on retracting many of the gains achieved and abolishing legislations and laws on women equality and rights that women have achieved in the last few decades. Sometimes, the justification is under that these were the priorities and achievements of the “First Ladies” of the old regimes.

Researching gender equality in transitions

Gender issues are often treated in a compartmentalized way, as an independent topic, and are not mainstreamed into the broader policy research projects or debates.

Moreover, think tanks tend to avoid conducting research on gender issues that are seen as culturally or politically sensitive. Also, some argue there are some achievements in statistical reports, but these do not always produce disaggregated data. Even when sex-disaggregated data exists, the lack of commitment or lack of qualitative research mean that the statistics are left without in-depth interpretation and therefore no strong link to implications for changes in policy making

To address and capture the impact of political transitions on women's equality and priorities, there is a need for in-depth studies and research that documents transitions and their impact on women's issues in current constitutional and political reforms.

The importance of forging strong relations and interactive dialogue between gender think tanks, activities and political and community leaders cannot be underestimated. Strong relations and continued dialogue will help mainstream gender issues and priorities within the political discourse.

Opening Remarks

Speaker: Costanza Farina, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, Jordan

Speaker: Nabila Hamza, President, Foundation for the Future

Speaker: Heba El-Kholy, Director, UNDP Oslo Governance Centre

Think tanks as agents of democratic change

In her opening remarks, Ms Costanza Farina, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Jordan, emphasised that think tanks and policy centres have a tremendous role in supporting this transition, where active civil societies and youth want to take part in shaping the political, social and economic agenda. Think tanks can and should contribute with ideas, expertise and know-how in influencing new forms of participation and pluralism – true pillars of a democratic society.

The international community, including the United Nations, should ensure that a mutual dialogue with civil society is opened and sustained, and should support accountable governments in their challenging work. To illustrate this point, Ms Farina referred to the global process initiated by the UN last year to shape the post-2015 new development framework, and Jordan's contribution to it. Jordan is one of the 87 countries globally (and ten in the Arab region) that have carried out post-2015 national consultations to influence the future development agenda. Over 2,500 Jordanians in all governorates engaged in the post-2015 dialogue, facilitated by the UN Country Team. Several critical messages emerged from the consultations, two of which were underlined as of critical importance:

First, people reiterated that responsive governance is a pre-condition for promoting sustainable development and a lasting social peace, to address inequalities and to eradicate poverty. People's expectations of systemic reforms include measures

to fight corruption and robust actions to reduce unemployment.

Civic engagement was seen as a priority conduit for the promotion of human rights and for safeguarding the freedom of expression.

Second, civil society identified "inclusiveness" in access to health, education and employment as an essential aspect to advancing the cause of democratic and social reforms. Overcoming inequalities and combating poverty remain a priority requiring a collective effort. In parallel, women's participation and representation in the political, economic and social arenas should be continuously nurtured and actively expanded.

Policy-relevant and action-oriented knowledge

Recalling some of the key messages from the South-South conference "The Political Economy of Transitions: Analysis for Change" (Oslo, 8-9 Nov. 2012), Ms Heba El-Kholy, Director of the OGC, spoke about the role of independent national policy and research centres in supporting innovations, generating better understanding of the local political economy context, strengthening national expertise and building consensus on public policy choices and governance reforms.

Both Ms El-Kholy and Ms Nabila Hamza, President of Foundation for the Future, emphasised that the both the shortage of sound, relevant, and accessible, knowledge of critical governance data and analysis weakens the capacity of the new regimes to address essential needs for reform and the opportunities for citizens to play a significant role in the renegotiation of the social contract. Experience shows that policy centres and think tanks are instrumental in filling this knowledge gap and bringing about democratic change, providing that there is enough political will to discuss and act upon this new evidence, and that citizens are able to access to and use available data to hold governments to account.

Session 1: The role of think tanks in transitions: Challenges and opportunities in the Arab region

Chair: Mounir Tabet, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, Tunisia

Panellist: Rami G. Khouri, Director, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (Lebanon)

Panellist: Nader El-Fergany, Director, Almishkat Centre for Research (Egypt)

Panellist: Bassma Kodmani, Director, Arab Reform Initiative (Regional)

Panellist: El Hassan El Mansouri, Director of Partnerships and Cooperation, Observatoire National du Développement Humain (Morocco)

Think Tanks and transitions in the Arab region

Think tanks in the Arab region are faced with significant challenges but also opportunities to influence the socio-political landscape, as a result of the ‘Arab Liberation Tide’.¹ In addition to inherent capacity and independence challenges, think tanks asking for progressive change also face exogenous challenges regarding, for example, global and regional geopolitical agendas; the deep state and elite interests and their anti-progressive stand; or right wing ‘Islamised’ forces.

“We all need to be humble about the importance of the knowledge we produce. Our role is to help in opening channels for citizens to express their demands.”
Nader Fergany, Almishkat Centre for Research

On the other hand, think tanks are part of civil society, and the role of the latter has

been revitalised. It is important to discuss the possibility of strengthening links and exchange of knowledge between research centres, social media

and activists to facilitate broad societal dialogue and healing.

Impact on policy-making

There is a critical gap between those who produce knowledge and those who use it. This is the main finding from a study carried out by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, examining some 650 research centres and think tanks, and their impact on policy making. Amongst other objectives, the study aimed to answer the question of why these centres generally have so little impact, despite the excellent work done by many of them. There is no systematic contact between researchers and policy-makers, and those who produce research are meant to bridge the gap between empirical research and analysis, on the one hand, and opinion formation and policy-making processes on the other. However, none have a formal mandate to play this key role. Few think tanks are in touch with what policy makers are engaged in at any particular point in time, so that they can strategically contribute with knowledge and data in policy formulation. To add to this challenge, there are limited incentives for governments to follow think tanks’ advice. Think tanks have to persuade governments that they need their contributions for more effective policies which in turn will help governments’ own survival.

Knowledge for action

A key question is how think tanks can translate the aspirations of tens of millions of citizens who asked for dignity, rights and humanity – not only in political terms but also in policy terms.

In the current context of transformational change, think tanks should target citizens not only governments – also taking into account that all state institutions are in flux and think tanks face challenges of their own in coping with rapid change. In this regard, think tanks as social agents

¹ This term is used by El-Fergany instead of the ‘Arab Spring’ as the latter only describes a short phenomenon while the former refers to a long historical process to rid the region from an entrenched authoritarian system

need to generate and reproduce knowledge for action. The three-pronged roles of think tanks would then be to understand, to mediate and, finally, to influence. Humility and independence are key factors needed before they can be in a position to mediate and to influence.

In addition to working with policy makers and on shaping public opinion, think tanks need to work with a number of partners, including other civil society organizations, activists –especially youth, also as producers of knowledge through new methods of social media– representative political structures (e.g. the parliament), political parties, academics and international organisations. Cooperation needs to be established with those working for progressive change.

Funding of think tanks: Independence and credibility

Foreign funding is overall seen as problematic, with funders tending to set an agenda – often a narrow one that does not necessarily reflect priorities at the country level. In their quest to get funding, most research centres keep changing their agenda and focus. So, instead of being specialized in some

“We want to get away from fashion, we need to be organically driven not to be led by agendas set by international organizations”

Dina El Khawaga, Arab Reform Initiative

areas of work and deepening their expertise in these areas, they shift their agenda

according to the implicit or explicit requests of foreign donors. While this resource mobilisation strategy might work in the short-run, it erodes the credibility of the think tanks. To get away from fashion and externally set agendas, think tanks need to be organically driven and not trade away their research identity, their organisational mandate and their priorities.

The above-referred study by Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs showed that private sector funding –such as foundations– tended to allow for more independence. This

finding, however, is questioned by some, arguing that the private sector is not apolitical.

Key points and recommendations

- Self-criticism and self-reflection are to be encouraged. Think tanks need to continuously examine their role and effectiveness and the quality of their data and analyses.
- Think tanks should not just produce knowledge but also play a political role for change, targeting both policy makers and citizens.
- It is important to establish think tanks’ independence from donors, by
 - seeking funding from different kinds of donors (e.g. private sector or the creation of an Arab fund with no conditionality attached)
 - identifying donors who work for progressive change and who allow for room for maneuver for think tanks;
 - promoting think tanks’ specialization in specific areas of work according to their own skills and national or regional priorities;
 - ensuring that think tanks follow their own agenda based on citizen’s priorities and not a donor-led agenda
- To build diversity and trust with the young generation, think tanks should broaden their sources of information to more systematically include social media and youth/revolutionary art.

Session 2: The production, dissemination and uptake of policy-relevant knowledge: Examples from outside the Arab region

Chair: Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid, Executive Director, Partners in Development (Egypt)

Panellist: Roland Friedrich, Head of the Palestine Office, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF)

Panellist: Mark Orkin, Professor, University of the Witwatersrand / OGC Consultant (South Africa)

Panellist: Wicaksono Sarosa, Executive Director, Kemitraan (Indonesia)

Panellist: Myat Ko Ko, Yangon School of Political Science (Myanmar)

Knowledge production and policy advocacy: DCAF and Kemitraan

Established in 2009 at the initiative of the Swiss government, the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) works on promoting security, development and the rule of law. Combining academic classical research with policy-oriented knowledge, DCAF's Research Department gathers knowledge and best practices, and analyses and converts them into knowledge products.

"During periods of transitions is important for 'pure' think tanks to develop close cooperation with various action-oriented organizations."

Wicaksono Sarosa, Kemitraan

Knowledge production and policy advocacy are also two core components of Kemitraan's work in Indonesia. Lessons

from activities and projects are almost always 'reformatted' for wider publication. Kemitraan regularly conducts independent studies to provide inputs to government, directly or through its own projects and programs. The Indonesia Governance Index is also a flagship activity of Kemitraan. Key to

its advocacy work is finding and working with 'champions' for the cause within the institutions.

Situated knowledge

Think tanks in transitions should be 'situated', that is, produce knowledge for progressive social forces in their respective domains of competence. The evolution of South-African NGO CASE (Community Agency for Social Enquire) illustrates well this point: established in 1985 to conduct applied social research, in interaction with progressive civil society, CASE aimed at helping the overthrow of the apartheid regime and giving shape to the new democracy. CASE provided different types of user-oriented, policy-relevant research through the various phases of socio-political transformation (see box 1).

Box 1: CASE's situated knowledge production in South Africa

Phase	User-oriented, policy-relevant research
Conflict	Sanctions against apartheid, "counting the dead", defending guerrilla struggle
Mobilisation	Studies on community resistance, militant youth, shop-stewards
Transition	Uncovering state-fostered ethnic violence, baseline studies for education, health etc.
Consensus-building	Studies of religion, popular priorities, constitutional awareness, election polling
Implementation	Commissions for departments, local government programmes, economic issues
Re-examination	Service delivery weakness, vulnerable workers, evaluation studies

Moreover, think tanks should also strive to recruit and retain 'situated researchers', experts who combine credibility to do scientifically sound research with the capacity to carry out research for public entities or civil society organizations, as well as the capacity to formulate and manage funding proposals. This, however, is never an easy task, less so in transitional countries.

"Think tanks need to position themselves politically as a progressive force to support democratic transition"

Mark Orkin, University of the Witwatersrand / OGC Consultant

The case of the Yangon School of Political Science

The Yangon School of Political Science (YSPS) was established by former political prisoners in 2011, to fill an existing gap – there was no Political Science Department at the University of Yangon- and to actively contribute to a process of transformation in Myanmar. Thematically, the YSPS has as its main priorities constitutional reform, civil-military relations, the role of women in public life, institutional reform and transitional justice, aiming at raising awareness and societal understanding about these issues through talks – sometimes by international experts – and working with the media, translating books, as well as other activities.

The anti-democratic practices of the former military junta are said to have had a toll on society, and the political culture needs to be transformed. The YSPS collaborates with other organizations to make such a transformation possible, which is a long-term objective. In order to carry out its activities in an independent manner, the YSPS attempts to distance itself not only from the state and donor agendas, but also from the current societal mode influence - severely influenced by authoritarian ticks and the current anti-Muslim political discourse and sectarian violence which undermine the popular support for political opposition.

Key points and recommendations

- Think tanks from the Arab region can learn from experiences of policy centres from outside the region.
- Donors should facilitate peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing practices.
- ‘Think tank’ is a fluid and elusive concept. Further study on definitional and operational aspects is needed.
- The four key challenges facing think tanks during periods of transition are related to funding and self-sustainability; technical expertise; staff turnover and retention; and access to policy-making circles.
- In situations of democratic transformations, where youth and social media are creating and occupying new public spaces, think tanks might also need to reform themselves if they aspire to be at the vanguard of the ‘new thinking movements’.
- Think tanks cannot produce transformative knowledge unless they break the negative legacy of oppressive regimes in universities, the educational system and collective mindsets.
- Think tanks should be “situated”, producing knowledge for progressive social forces in their respective domains of competence.

Session 3: External support to national think tanks: Challenges, opportunities and strategies

Chair: Alia Al-Dali, Director, UNDP Regional Centre in Cairo

Panellist: Charlotta Sparre, Ambassador of Sweden to Jordan

Panellist: Ammar Abu Zayyad, Executive Director, Open Society Foundations- Arab Regional Office

Panellist: Clarisa Bencomo, Program Officer for Governance, Regional Office in Cairo, Ford Foundation

Panellist: Anja Wehler-Schoeck, Resident Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Jordan and Iraq

Donors' agendas and the importance of transparency

The relationship between donors and recipients is not always sufficiently debated and addressed. All donors have an agenda, and also a huge responsibility to be clearer and more transparent about it. This open disclosure and honest dialogue on responsibility for setting and following agendas would help clarifying the contours of the donor-recipient relationship, especially in accountability terms.

Vision and tactics for progressive change

Donors' work with think tanks should focus on structural change and not on short-term initiatives linked to specific projects. Logically, long-term strategies are lengthy processes that include

"We need think tanks to work in the participatory process between governments and civil society and bridge the gap between research and policy making."

Charlotta Sparre, Ambassador of Sweden to Jordan

building on shared expectations and learning from success to achieve common goals and the celebration of these successes. For this to happen, think tanks need to have a clear vision and to master tools of how to communicate information.

Donors do not only support think tanks and other civil society organisations through funding, but also through the important role of networking and opening channels of communication and debate. For think tanks, networking is crucial, and includes "knowing who to call or knowing who to call who can tell you who to call".

Sustainability and resilience

There is a shared concern for resolving the problem of external dependency, considering models and approaches to supporting institutes that are conducive to sustainability. *"Some donors would like to see proposals that push them out of their comfort zone."* Financial sustainability is linked to a clear vision and clear internal governance structures. More thinking about what works for which type of research organisations is required, considering different business models. The short-termism of donors in using a project approach is seen by many as a barrier for think tanks to advance agendas. A fluid donor-recipient dialogue would be particularly useful in circumventing this problem, making good use of existing spaces to challenge and eventually change a donor agenda with a convincing message and clear institutional vision.

The resilience of think tanks can also be promoted by UN agencies, for example by using local researchers and existing capacities in the development of knowledge products such as the Human Development Reports. Strategic partnerships to develop joint analysis, surveys and studies could contribute to building technical and managerial capacities, adding to other types of direct support.

Key points and recommendations

- There is a need for think tanks to expand the room for maneuver in order to negotiate for new and transformational areas of work beyond donor agendas.

- The role of donors in supporting think tanks should be revisited to strengthen technical support and networking.
- Not only should the impact of the work of think tanks in the region be evaluated, but so should the impact of the work of donors in supporting those think tanks.
- There is a need to evaluate the work on gender and women issues which has shown little impact on gender equality.
- The establishment of new fora for debate and exchange of ideas between think tanks in transitions should be considered, including an e-platform.

Session 4: Think tanks and gender relations in transitions

Chair: Nabila Hamza, President, Foundation for the Future (Jordan)

Panellist: Najate Bouzri, Executive Board Member, Communication at the national level, Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (ADFM), (Morocco)

Panellist: Asma Khader, President, Sisterhood is Global (Jordan)

Panellist: Amneh Halweh, Regional coordinator, KARAMA (Jordan Office)

‘Arab Spring’: The reversal of rights gained

A striking development that the region has witnessed since the events of the “Arab Spring” is the political pressure and influence by the new leadership that took power after the old regimes were toppled. Newly elected governments and parliamentarians have focused on retracting many of the gains achieved and abolishing legislations and laws on women equality and rights that women have achieved in the last few decades, many times under the rubric that these were the priorities and achievements of the “First Ladies” of the old regimes.

Think tanks with Islamic political orientation have emerged within the constellation of forces making up the new political leadership. More often than not these centres articulate demands to retrieve commitments to international conventions and withdraw the ratification of the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Constitutional reform and women’s activism in Morocco

As a direct response to popular demand, various Arab countries have undergone constitutional reform processes since 2011, with women’s activism being instrumental in prompting and influencing these reform processes. The 2011

constitutional reform process in Morocco, for example, saw great engagement of women’s groups such as the ADFM. ADFM, among other Moroccan NGOs, was invited by the Consultative Commission for the Revision of the Constitution to submit its propositions for the reform.

Early on, women in Morocco understood that in order to influence constitutional drafting they had to follow the discussion and writing process closely, participate and organise large campaigns advocating equality between women and men. As a result, the new constitution had two important clauses, ensuring equality between men and women and stressing and defining the role of civil society in participating in public policy.

However, the process was not without its challenges. These included raising awareness for implementing constitutional clauses pertinent to women’s equality, ensuring the adequacy of existing legislations or introducing reforms to enact on constitutional provisions. Some of the clauses in the new constitution which were pertinent to women’s equality created confusion and led to different interpretations. Women’s organisations and civil society now have to commit themselves to exercising the freedoms and roles for which the constitution provides.

Gaps in research

A major gap in research is that think tanks avoid gender issues that are seen as culturally or politically sensitive. Also, some argue there are some achievements in statistical reports, but these do not always produce disaggregated data – the limited generation of gender-disaggregated data also came out of the pre-forum survey (see Box 2). Even when sex-disaggregated data exists, the lack of commitment or lack of qualitative research mean that the statistics are left without in-depth interpretation and therefore no strong link to implications for changes in policy making

To address and capture the impact of political transitions on women’s equality and priorities, there is a need for in-depth studies and research that documents transitions and their impact on women’s issues in current constitutional and political reforms.

Some of the research topics put forward as priorities included the following: studies on trends in the number and composition of women activists and their direct relations with new emerging leaders, the effect of discrimination against women in the workforce and discrimination with regard to women’s property rights, as well as other economic and political rights.

Challenges faced by think tanks working on gender issues

Also with regard to gender equality, there seems to be consensus among forum participants in seeing the influence of donors’ funding on research priorities and agendas as potentially problematic. Think tanks often organise workshops and forums focusing on specific policy issues in response to demand from certain external institutions and donors, issuing policy recommendations or reports that may remain unpublished. Influenced by the availability of financial resources, some centres, occasionally, tailor their research agendas to suit donor priorities – usually on topics such as

“We are producers of new forms of knowledge to be reckoned with” democratization or good governance.

Amneh Halweh, KARAMA

The cultural and political discourse in the Arab region that does not view gender issues as integral to economic and political reform or development also poses a challenge. The undermining of the importance of these think tanks puts at risk their own viability, with independent think tanks having to close down for lack of financial resources. Meanwhile, think tanks with powerful ideological agendas and political influence are on the rise, focusing on

Box 2: Gender programmes and disaggregated data



regional political crises and priorities and sidelining the human rights and equality agendas.

A serious gap persists between think tanks and decision makers which renders studies of limited influence. The difficulty of accessing data and information has led to studies of a generalized nature. This has led to a further gap and weaknesses in influencing legislation and decision makers.

Another challenge is whether women are trained and equipped sufficiently to exercise “intellectual freedom”, and whether think tanks and policy centres have the opportunities and space to exercise intellectual freedom and influence research priorities. The internal decision-making and governance structures within these centres around agenda setting need to be assessed.

Partnerships: Towards ‘collective intelligence’

At the Forum, there was consensus in emphasising the importance of “collective intelligence” and strong partnerships between gender think tanks and civil society organizations through undertaking joint research and studies, and engaging in

partnerships for advocacy tools, publications and other products and activities.

Key points and recommendations

- Gender issues are often treated in a compartmentalized way, as independent topic, and not mainstreamed with all subjects discussed. This is exemplified, for example, in workshops and meetings of different kinds.
- The importance of forging strong relations and interactive dialogue between gender think tanks, activists and political and community leaders cannot be underestimated. Strong relations and continued dialogue will help mainstream gender issues and priorities within the political discourse.
- There is a need to train the new generation of political activists, university students and researchers on gender mainstreaming and research methodologies in order to produce knowledge that can shape policy making.
- There is a need to shed light on gender equality and women's rights in the current political transitions in the region and directly influence political leaders and decision makers. This can be done by publishing in Arabic in-depth analysis and research, adopting qualitative methodologies and producing policy briefs to guide decision making.

Session 5: Generating, analysing and using data for advocacy and policy reforms

Chair: Mussa Shteivi, Director, Centre for Strategic Studies (Jordan)

Panellist: Maged Osman, Director, Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research (Baseera), (Egypt)

Panellist: Hussain Abu Roman, Director of Studies and Research, Al Quds Center for Political Studies (Jordan)

Panellist: Slaheddine Jourchi, Political Analyst (Tunisia)

Private polling centres in transitions: Baseera's example

The Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research (Baseera) was established in April 2012 by Egyptian academics as an independent and non-partisan private entity for evidence-based public opinion research. The centre has two main tracks: a- for profit activities track and a corporate social responsibility track.

The centre's main objective is to generate, analyse and disseminate information to empower citizens, to inform public debates and to support accountability. Baseera's work is guided by certain principles and commitments, such as the gathering of information in full compliance with a code of conduct, confidentiality and methodological approaches that don't contradict professional ethics.

For Baseera, the role of information in transitions relates to three interlinking circles: empowering citizens, informing public debate and supporting accountability. The Centre's methodology is organised around a cycle with the following stages: identification of issues, generation of data, analysis of data, knowledge creation, informing the public and identifying gaps.

Examples of Baseera's different types of products are public opinion polling (e.g. measuring the president's approval rating) or "number of the day" e-mails. Public opinion polls are usually based on a sample of 2,000 respondents to phone interviews. As for the "number of the day" e-mail, it is sent on a daily basis to subscribers – some 27,000 in Arabic, and 1,200 subscribers in English - reporting on a number or indicator which is explained in no more than two sentences – for example, "(73 %) *Percentage of Egyptians who currently feel unsafe.*"² The purpose is to inform and empower citizens about an issue of relevance or to help public debates to be evidence-based. The numbers are also sent to newspapers, and shared on Facebook and Twitter. In addition to these two types of products, Baseera also prepares information reports and analyses of, for example, parliamentary elections or equity of representation of governorates in the parliament.

Credibility and trust

According to forum participants, in the Arab region there is a notable lack of trust in polling centres, much more accentuated than in other parts of the world. The publication of opinion polls which appear to be at odds with each other – as has been the case in, for example, Tunisia – generates public confusion and undermines the possibility of having informed public debates. As with other types of think

"The majority of centres in the Arab world cannot be called think tanks."

Mussa Shteivi, Centre for Strategic Studies

tanks not producing opinion polls, the full disclosure of how the information is organized and high methodological standards are of utmost importance to build trust in research findings and combat the credibility deficit. Think tanks can go a long way in building credibility by being transparent about the methodological steps

² Baseera's Number of the Day, 9 Sep 13. From Twitter, @Baseera_Egypt.

followed, and by observing and promoting the highest standards of ethical conduct through their performance.

Information flows in Jordan and Tunisia

Transitional periods are likely to result in an explosion of information – in contrast to the monopoly and hiding of information that characterises authoritarian regimes. In post-Ben Ali’s Tunisia, all nationals and corporate persons have by decree the right to access administrative documents, from any department. But a high percentage of Tunisians are not aware of their legal right to access this information.

There is a significant difference between having the right and exercising it, also because of many administrative difficulties on the ground – e.g. opposition from public employees. The Right to Information Law in Jordan was enacted in 2007. In spite of it, it remains challenging to access information because the law does not provide the required mechanisms and guarantees. Periodical discussions on this issue are being held in the Parliament, with some reluctance to reform the law.

“The relation of policy makers in Tunisia with think tanks and the world of information have not changed. Speeches are often disconnected from reality, lacking figures and solid data.”

Slaheddine Jourchi, Political Analyst

Furthermore, accessing the information needs to be followed by using and acting upon that information. The relationship

between policymakers, civil society and the citizenry at large with the world of information is unlikely to change overnight and may be influenced by the legacy of previous regimes long after the fall of those very same regimes. Think tanks and other civil society organisations and groups need to check the accuracy of the information, and how it can be used – or misused. Certain critical indicators can be used as a political tool. For example, on growth or unemployment rates, are there any significant changes? Are these the result of

decisions taken by the current or former government?

Key points and recommendations

- Political transitions ‘from below’ tend to result in an explosion of information. The de jure right to information does not always translate into actual use of that information.
- Access to information is meaningless unless there is a conscious effort to take advantage of the democratic opportunities it presents and to educate the population on how to read that information.
- Structured methodological approaches, transparency and high ethical standards are all of utmost importance to build credibility and trust.

Session 6: The relevance of social media and ICTs in producing and disseminating knowledge

Chair: Zena Ali Ahmad, Country Director, UNDP Jordan

Panellist: Ghida Anani, ABAAD Resource Center for Gender Equality (ABAAD), (Lebanon)

Panellist: Mahassen Al Emam, Arab Women Media Center (AWMC), (Jordan)

Fighting violence against women through traditional and social media

In November 2012 ABAAD – a Lebanese civil association founded in June 2011 with the aim of promoting sustainable social and economic development in the MENA region - launched the 16-day campaign “We Believe... Partners to End Violence Against Women and Girls”. The campaign was possible thanks to the active participation and commitment of religious leaders. Appealing to the moral authority of these religious leaders and their ability to catalyse changes in attitudes, behaviours and beliefs for many in the Lebanese society, ABAAD used positive psychology to raise public awareness and work towards the elimination of violence against women and girls.

“Social media played a major role in the dissemination of knowledge among citizens on sensitive topics such as marriage of minors or rape.”

Ghida Anani, ABAAD

Four Muslim and Christian religious leaders representing Lebanese diversity conveyed messages endorsing a culture

of respect for the dignity of women and rejection of all forms of violence, condemning violence as sacrilege and citing holy texts to support their decrees.

The nation-wide media campaign included both traditional and social media. It resorted to YouTube and Facebook, press and online articles, online advertising, press releases circulated worldwide

through various global networks, mass e-mails, TV and radio interviews and billboards, among other means of dissemination.

The campaign triggered interest among the youth, with expressions of interest in volunteering at ABAAD and the creation of a “youth solidarity/outreach programme”. The seeds of the campaign have given way to follow-up discussions and engagement with religious leaders and institutions, with a series of round tables and trainings on how to engage religious leaders in gender programming.

The Arab Women Media Center

The Amman-based NGO AWMC has at the core of its work the promotion of women journalists and media coverage of women, children, family and development issues.

AWMC carries out original research, and more than 450 studies have been conducted on violence against women in the media. In addition to media research, AWMC promotes capacity development and awareness activities and training – including on-the-job training. AWMC has created a network of communication between women journalists, which has reached 1,000 registered members.

Key points and recommendations

- Social media can play an essential role in creating social change.
- Think tanks and NGOs can benefit from systematic and regular use of the social media.
- There is a need for further capacity development and trainings on social media tools and strategies.
- The impact of campaigns and dissemination activities employing social media needs to be adequately measured and analyzed.
- Social media offers great and effective opportunities to disseminate knowledge among citizens, also on sensitive issues such as marriage of minors or rape.

Closing session

The three-day forum resulted in a series of concrete recommendations to support the generation and use of policy-relevant and action-oriented knowledge in a sustainable manner. Reflecting on these, the UNDP Oslo Governance Centre and the Foundation for the Future made the following commitments:

1. To work further in the codification of knowledge about think tanks in the Arab region, establishing **an online directory and network of think tanks in the region**.

Participants recognized the value of the directory prepared by the Foundation for the Future and the UNDP Oslo Governance Centre for this Forum, praised as one of the first and most comprehensive attempts to systematise the otherwise scattered and unverified information about think tanks in the Arab region. Knowledge from other countries will be brought to bear as this is taken forward. To make this a comprehensive, systematic and accessible initiative, an electronic, “one-stop-shop” portal could be set up, where think tanks, partners and research, and users can feed in information and interact among themselves.

2. To carry out an **analytical study of think tanks in transitions**, looking at some of the key issues identified during this Forum. These include: typologies and new form of think tanks emerging in transitions, bridging the gap between researchers and activists (including crucially on gender related research), funding sources and modalities (including local sources), and experiences on the specific role and challenges of think tanks in supporting political dialogue and consensus building. Since tailoring the message is crucial, we will ensure this analysis is encapsulated in different ways to meet the knowledge demands of different communities.
3. To consider different options to **support think tanks mobilize strategic support from the external community**. The support sought will be wide-ranging and long-term (going beyond project funding), aiming at providing a foundation for self-sustainability and encouraging stronger collaboration and cooperation between think tanks

Annex I – Agenda

Reform-oriented knowledge amid political transitions: The role of think tanks in supporting policy dialogue and consensus building

Forum

Amman, Jordan, 2 – 4 July 2013, Landmark Hotel

Day 1 (2 July 2013)

- 08:30 – 09:00 **Registration**
- 09:00 – 09:45 **Welcome**
- Costanza Farina, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, Jordan
 - Nabila Hamza, President, Foundation for the Future
 - Heba El-Kholy, Director, UNDP Oslo Governance Centre
- 09:45 – 10:15 *Coffee/Tea break*
- 10:15 – 12:30 **Session 1: The role of think tanks in transitions: Challenges and opportunities in the Arab region**
- Rami G. Khouri, Director, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (Lebanon)
 - Nader El-Fergany, Director, Almishkat Centre for Research (Egypt)
 - Bassma Kodmani, Director, Arab Reform Initiative (Regional)
 - El Hassan El Mansouri, Director of Partnerships and Cooperation, Observatoire National du Développement Humain (Morocco)
 - Chair: Mounir Tabet, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, Tunisia.
- 12:30 - 13:30 *Lunch*
- 13:30 – 14:30 **Session 1 (continues)**
- 14:30 – 14:45 *Coffee/Tea break*
- 14:45 – 17:00 **Session 2: The production, dissemination and uptake of policy-relevant knowledge: examples from outside the Arab region**
- Roland Friedrich, Head of Palestine Office, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF)
 - Mark Orkin, Professor, University of the Witwatersrand / OGC Consultant (South Africa)
 - Wicaksono Sarosa, Executive Director, Kemitraan (Indonesia)
 - Myat Ko Ko, Yangon School of Political Science (Myanmar)
 - Chair: Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid, Executive Director, Partners in Development (Egypt)
- 17:00 – 17:15 **Wrap-up and closing for the day**
- 17:15 *Reception*

Day 2 (3 July 2013)

- 09:00 – 09:15 **Introduction to Day 2**
- 09:15 – 10:45 **Session 3: External support to national think tanks: challenges, opportunities and strategies**
- Charlotta Sparre, Ambassador of Sweden to Jordan
 - Ammar Abu Zayyad, Executive Director, Open Society Foundations- Arab Regional Office
 - Clarisa Bencomo, Program Officer for Governance, Regional Office in Cairo, Ford Foundation
 - Anja Wehler-Schoeck, Resident Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Jordan and Iraq

 - Chair: Alia A.G. Al-Dalli, Manager, UNDP Regional Center in Cairo.
- 10:45 - 11:15 *Coffee/Tea break*
- 11:15 – 12:30 **Session 3 (continues)**
- 12:30 - 13:30 *Lunch*
- 13:30 – 16:00 **Session 4: Think tanks and gender relations in transitions**
- Najate Bouzri, Executive Board Member, Communication at the national level, ADFM (Morocco)
 - Asma Khader, President, Sisterhood is Global (Jordan)
 - Amneh Halweh, Regional coordinator, KARAMA (Jordan Office)

 - Chair: Nabila Hamza, President, Foundation for the Future (Jordan)

Day 3 (4 July 2013)

- 09:00 – 09:15 **Introduction to Day 3**
- 09:15 – 11:15 **Session 5: Generating, analysing and using data for advocacy and policy reforms**
- Magued Osman, Director, BASEERA (Egypt)
 - Hussain Abu Roman, Director of Studies and Research, Al Quds Center for Political Studies (Jordan)
 - Slaheddine Jouchi, Political Analyst (Tunisia)

 - Chair: Mussa Shteiwji, Director, Centre for Strategic Studies (Jordan)
- 11:15 – 11:30 *Coffee / Tea break*
- 11:30 – 13:00 **Session 6: The relevance of social media and ICTs in producing and disseminating knowledge**
- Ghida Anani, ABAAD (Lebanon)
 - Mahassen Al Emam, Arab Women Media Center (Jordan)

 - Chair: Zena Ali Ahmad, Country Director, UNDP Jordan
- 13:00 – 13:30 **Key reflections and closing** (UNDP and Foundation for the Future)
- 13:30 *Lunch*

Conference facilitator: Mr. Marwan Abisamra, Governance Practice Leader, UNDP Regional Center in Cairo.

Annex II – List of participants

Marwan Abisamra, Governance Practice Leader, UNDP Regional Centre in Cairo
Chafika Affaq, Programme Officer, UNDP Morocco
Alia A.G. Al-Dalli, Manager, UNDP Regional Centre in Cairo
Zena Ali-Ahmad, Country Director, UNDP Jordan
Mustapha Kamel Al-Sayyid, Executive Director, Partners in Development, Egypt
H.E. Mr. Mohamed Ali Al Zaher, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
The Institute of Diplomacy
Ghida Anani, Director, Resource Center For Gender Equality (ABAAD), Lebanon
Giuseppe Belsito, Representative, UN Women Country Office for Jordan and Syria
Clarisa Bencomo, Programme Officer for Governance, Cairo Office, Ford Foundation
Faiza Benhadid, Programmes and Technical Assistance coordinator, CAWTAR, Tunisia
Najate Bouzri, Executive Board Member, ADFM, Morocco
Heba El-Kholy, Director, UNDP Oslo Governance Centre
Mahassen Al Emam, Director, Arab Women Media Center, Jordan
Javier Fabra-Mata, Programme Analyst, UNDP Oslo Governance Centre
Costanza Farina, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, Jordan
Nader Fergany, Director, Almishkat Center for Research, Egypt
Laura Fernández-Palomo, Foundation for the Future
Roland Friedrich, Head of Office 'Palestinian Territories', Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control
of Armed Forces (DCAF)
Sana Guermazi, Vice-President, College Mediteranneen pour la Recherche Scientifique (CMRS),
Tunisia
Amneh Halweh, Regional Coordinator, KARAMA, Jordan
Nabila Hamza, President, Foundation for the Future, Jordan
Torni Iren Johansen, Administrative Associate, UNDP Oslo Governance Centre
Slaheddine Jourchi, Political Analyst, Tunisia
Ezra Karmel, Identity Center, Jordan
H.E. Asma Khader, President, Sisterhood is Global Institute, Jordan
Dina el Khawaga, Director 'Arab research Support Program', Arab Reform Initiative
Ryan Knox, Regional Representative, Middle East and North Africa, SKL International
Rami G. Khouri, Director, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, Lebanon
Myat Ko Ko, Yangon School of Political Science, Myanmar
Bassma Kodmani, Director, Arab Reform Initiative
George Kossaifi, Lebanon
Hassan Krayem, Head of the Governance Unit, UNDP Lebanon
El Hassan El Mansouri, Director of Partnerships and Cooperation, Observatoire National du
Développement Humain, Morocco
Dima Masri, Communication and Outreach Officer, Foundation for the Future, Jordan
Mark Orkin, Professor, University of Witwatersrand / OGC Consultant, South Africa
Magued Osman, CEO and Managing Director, Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research (Baseera),
Egypt
Jon Rian, Program Advisor, FOKUS, Norway

Hussain Abu Roman, Director of Studies and Research, Al-Quds Center for Political Studies, Jordan
Francesco Rosa, Chief Operations Officer, Foundation for the Future, Jordan
Hassan Saaf, CERSS, Morocco
Elissar Sarrouh, Special Advisor, Strategic Initiatives, Democratic Governance Group, BDP, UNDP
William Schulte, Visiting Researcher, Arab Institute for Security Studies, Jordan
Marwa Shalaby, Program Director for Women and Human Rights in the Middle East, James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, US
Mussa Shteivi, Director, Centre for Strategic Studies, Jordan
H.E. Charlotta Sparre, Ambassador, Embassy of Sweden, Jordan
Mounir Tabet, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, Tunisia.
May Al-TaHER, Director, Vision Institute for Civil Society Studies, Jordan
Nadia Taher, Senior Consultant
Wicaksono Sarosa, Executive Director, Kemitraan, Indonesia
Lotte Vermeij, Research Fellow / Manager Civilian Capacity Programme, NUPI, Norway
Anja Wehler-Schoeck, Resident Representative, Jordan&Iraq, Fredrich Ebert Stiftung
Ammar Abu Zayyad, Executive Director, Open Society Institute - Arab Regional Office, Jordan
Iyad Abu Zneit, Head of Policy Analysis, Palestinian Centre for Democracy, Studies and Research (PALDSR), Palestine
Moaz El Zoghby, Arab Reform Initiative

Annex III – Concept Note

1. Summary

Governance transitions open a window of opportunity for civic engagement and public debates on policy issues. As an integral part of a civil society also in transition, national policy research centres and think tanks play a key role in shaping the policy-making agenda. Despite difficulties faced by many think tanks in the Arab region adjusting to the process of change in their environment, there is no doubt that they can contribute knowledge and foster meaningful debates that may counterbalance the political polarization and strengthen democratic processes, as well as provide evidence for policy options to support a transformative transition.

Against this background, and as a follow up to the 2012 conference [“The Political Economy of Transitions: Analysis for Change”](#) (Oslo, 8-9 Nov.), the UNDP Oslo Governance Centre and the Foundation for the Future are organising a regional forum to provide a platform to:

- VI. Discuss opportunities and challenges (e.g. technical, financial, political, etc.) that national think tanks in the Arab region may encounter during the transitional period, while also considering experiences from outside of the region;
- VII. Promote peer-to-peer dialogue, at national and international levels, and encourage knowledge sharing practices between think tanks and the establishment of knowledge networks;
- VIII. Discuss methodologies for think tanks to expand and advance their ‘analytical toolkit’ during political transitions (e.g. on generation of data; use of social media and ICTs; policy uptake, etc.);
- IX. Develop strategies for action around gender related issues during transitions, to stimulate research on critical gender themes and strengthen cooperation between gender activists and policy centres.
- X. Explore strategies that external actors can employ to create the space for think tanks to develop, and to support them without compromising their independence and credibility;

Background and rationale

Think tanks and policy research centres can be defined as organisations that undertake public policy research and analysis, with the aim to inform decision-making on specific policy issues and influence policy content³. Think tanks play an important role in the adoption and implementation of policies based on research but can also create spaces for debate, developing research capacity and provide training, legitimating narratives and policies⁴, and fomenting a culture of accountability. Think tanks and policy

³ UNDP, 2009, “The role of think tanks and research institutes for more national ownership and alignment of evidence to policy”. Discussion Paper 24, UNDP Oslo Governance Centre. Authors: N. Jones, J. Pomares, A. Pellini and A. Datta. p.4. This discussion paper was part of OGC’s research programme on the role of think tanks, analysing cases from conflict countries and emerging democracies. The findings from this research were discussed at a roundtable on the evidence on governance in policy (Cairo, 18 – 19 Jan. 2009). For broader discussions on the concept of think tanks, see, for example, D. Stone and A. Denham (eds.), 2004, *Think Tank Traditions: Policy Research and the Politics of Ideas*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.

⁴ Adapted from A.Datta, presentation on “Evidence-informed policy-making. Appliance and Methods”, RAPID Programme, ODI SOQUA Summer School 22nd July 2010.

centres are key building blocks in the process of consolidating an evidence-based political culture long after the dust of transitions has settled.

From an institutional point of view, there are at least five types of think tanks and policy research centres: (i) independent civil society think tanks established as non-profit organisations; (ii) policy research institutes located in or affiliated with a university; (iii) governmentally created or state sponsored think tanks; (iv) corporate created or business affiliated think tanks; and (v) political party (or candidate) think tanks⁵. These local think tanks often coexist with regional and international think tanks.

The quality of information and knowledge production from think tank forums are essentially influenced by its environment. There are several factors that may influence the outcome, for example, the political context, research market, socio-economic conditions, cultural perspectives, or donor policies⁶. In addition, the direction of the activities of think tanks and potential outcomes are also related to internal factors, such as their locus and level of consciousness and commitment to issues of inequality. The capability to generate relevant knowledge and influence the policy-making landscape as well as public debate correlates to a great extent with the complexity of the governance policy issues at hand and the level of technical expertise required. The impact and uptake of new knowledge produced by think tanks also depends on other factors, such as interaction and coalescence with other types of knowledge, knowledge arenas and formal and informal interactions between top, middle and lower layers within institutions, conflict of interests and resistance to change, and political will, among others.

Similarly, the degree of contestation over a policy issue is inversely proportional to the leverage capacity of think tanks⁷ - the less controversial the issue, the easier for a think tank to influence the public debate. With respect to capacity, their level of inclusiveness of diversity and representation of larger constituencies who will exert pressure in different ways is also important.

Most, if not all of these factors pose a challenge on its own in the context of transitions from authoritarian to democratic rule, especially during the early stages of transition where the situation is volatile and highly dynamic. In the Arab region, a new generation of think tanks highly attuned to opportunities offered by ICT and social media has proliferated during the last two decades⁸. The winds of freedom that came with the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya seem to be boosting this trend. However, some of these newly established think tanks might be limited by financial and human resources, the lack of formal channels with government bodies and therefore have restricted means of influencing politics and policy making. In addition, some think tanks in the Arab region are still weak in terms of expertise and the quality of the research (including polls) and policy papers are not always up to international standards. Moreover, gender issues might not be properly considered and dealt with.

The following questions have proliferated in discussions of the role of think tanks in transitions in the Arab region: Can the on-going transitions across the Arab world present a well-situated window of opportunity for think tanks in the region to play an essential role in a post-revolution landscape? What type of

⁵ Stone, D. (2005), "Think Tanks and Policy Advice in Countries in Transition", paper prepared for the Asian Development Bank Institute Symposium: "How to Strengthen Policy-Oriented Research and Training in Viet Nam" 31st August 2005, Hanoi, Vietnam.

⁶ Start, D. and Hovland, I. (2004), *Tools for Policy Impact: A Handbook for Researchers*. London, ODI.

⁷ UNDP, 2009.

⁸ UNDP (forthcoming), *ICT and New Media for Governance Assessments in the Arab Region*.

technical expertise and support is needed for think tanks to produce high-quality research and to partner effectively with the media to disseminate research?

The healthy spread of think tanks that support democratic change is severely undermined by the restrictive regulatory framework inherited from the authoritarian rule⁹, and there are also some laws that are being discussed restricting the right of association and absence of legal guarantees for freedom of information and access to information.

The shortage of sound and policy-relevant knowledge on critical governance sectors and specific issues (e.g. civil-military relations, security sector reform, constitutional reform, transitional justice, gender relations issues, illicit financial flows, etc.) weakens the capacity of the state to address essential needs for political and economic reform. Experience shows that policy centres and think tanks are instrumental in filling this knowledge gap and bringing about democratic change, providing that there is enough political will to discuss and act upon this new evidence in combination with other forms of knowledge.

In order to respond to the pressing need for analysis and evidence to inform the reform agenda and promote evidence based policy debate and to ensure that policy-makers have the pulse of, and are responsive to the demands for change, it is important for countries undergoing major political transitions to invest in national and local analytical capacities through think tanks and research facilities¹⁰. Similarly, the degree of inclusiveness of policy research centres vary and depends not only on the ‘politics of the think tanks’ and their consciousness of, and interest in addressing social inequalities (between women and men, across class, age, etc.) but also on their methods – e.g. the main form of ‘knowledge creation’ to which they adhere, whether they step away from the expert-led models of ‘knowledge creation’.

There is also a need to connect think tanks with other movements and civil society actors to raise their consciousness and to deepen their ability to represent and mobilize support for policy influence. Regarding gender related issues there is currently an untapped potential with respect to connecting women activists and think tanks. It is pertinent to understand the strategies and alliances of women in the promotion of gender equality and rights to link these vital relationships between the think tanks, policy-oriented research institutes and activists involved such strategies. This may offer advantages to both camps, such as more information and research to inform advocacy strategies, professional networks, respected community leaders, change agents, transnational networks and other sources of information to communicate on what works and what doesn’t work.

In 2012 the UNDP Oslo Governance Centre (OGC) and the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) organised the conference [“The Political Economy of Transitions: Analysis for Change”](#). More than 100 participants - policy makers, civil society representatives, military leaders, practitioners and researchers, as well as senior UNDP staff from across the regions, met to re-think how to best support and inform processes of change toward more democratic forms of governance, taking into account the power dynamics and challenges faced by diverse actors in these transitions.

⁹ See, for example, Nader Fergany, 2012, “Think tanks and the political economy of transitions after popular uprisings. Observations from the case of Egypt”. Note prepared for the UNDP-NOREF conference “The political economy of transitions – Analysis for Change” (Oslo, 8-9 Nov. 2012), Unpublished – the author was not able to attend the conference.

¹⁰ See, for example, Stone, 2005; UNDP, 2009; Buldioski, *Think tanks and state reform in Central Europe*; ODI, 2011, *Think tanks in sub-Saharan Africa*; Struyk, 1999, *Reconstructive Critics: Think Tanks in Post-Soviet Democracies*.

Based on the collective experience gathered over the past decades, in particular in countries like Brazil, Chile and Indonesia, and illuminated by the on-going transitions in Tunisia, Egypt and Myanmar, the discussions concentrated on issues regarding inclusive intermediary institutions and mechanisms that may help transform street protests into viable collective action and strategies to depoliticize and legitimize such institutions. The conference underlined the importance and present need to share experiences for knowledge-based policy-making practices and methodologies on how to better assist policy support centres and institutionalize strategic advice.

As part of this conference, OGC also started to explore work specifically related to gender equality issues in the context of political transitions. An annotated bibliography on “Gender Equality in Political Transitions” to identify what is currently known about the conditions that hamper or support women’s empowerment in the specific context of transitions to democracy was prepared and shared with conference participants. As the annotated bibliography highlights, while women’s political participation is crucial as an end in itself, democratic transition to be truly transformational will not happen without addressing gender inequalities at all levels. As a follow-up measure, a consultation will be held in 2013 in a concerted effort to identify key thematic areas of research and action, and decide on strategic partnerships, services and support in a possible joint programme for the betterment of women’s political participation in political transitions.

Transitions offer an opportunity for change. However, in most cases, research literature claims that potential gains for women are often subsequently lost or diluted. The programme will aim to provide actionable research and to support existing women’s networks and organisations as is desired to foster sustainable change.

In partnership with other organisations, the OGC is planning to support dialogue (in light of the increased polarization around women’s issues and the role of conservative forces in this process) and South-South exchanges on gender equality. OGC also intends to support specific research on transforming power relations and knowledge gaps identified as critical for women’s empowerment in the context of transitions and the re-writing of the ‘gender contract’. One area of work will also be supporting barometers for tracking changes in the conditions of women in selected transition countries.

2. Objectives

Building on discussions and recommendations from the session “Policy Support Facilities and the Creation of Reform-oriented knowledge” at last year’s UNDP-NOREF conference on governance transitions, as well as other ongoing and past activities carried out by the OGC and the Foundation for the Future, the Regional Forum aims to:

- I. Discuss opportunities and challenges (e.g. technical, financial, political, etc.) that national think tanks in the Arab region may encounter during the transitional period, while also considering experiences from outside of the region.
- II. Explore strategies that external actors can employ to create the space for think tanks to develop, and to support them without compromising their independence and credibility;
- III. Promote peer-to-peer dialogue, at national and international levels, and encourage knowledge sharing practices between think tanks and the establishment of knowledge networks;

- IV. Discuss methodologies for think tanks to expand and advance their ‘analytical toolkit’ during political transitions (e.g. on generation of data; use of social media and ICTs; policy uptake, etc.);
- V. Develop strategies for action around gender related issues during transitions, to stimulate research on critical gender themes and strengthen cooperation between gender activists and policy centres.

3. Participants

Approximately 50 participants, from 5 countries in the Arab region plus 2-3 countries from other regions, that will represent both ‘new’ and ‘old’ policy-support centres and networks, including women activists – as well as UNDP Regional Centre in Cairo, Country Offices and think tanks from the North.

4. Location and dates

Amman, Jordan, 2-4 July 2013.

5. Background to the Oslo Governance Centre and the Foundation for the Future

Background to the Oslo Governance Centre

The [Oslo Governance Centre](#) (OGC) is a unit of the Democratic Governance Group (DGG) in the Bureau for Development Policy (BDP) of UNDP. It was established in 2002 as a centre of excellence designed to provide support to the practical and operational work of UNDP in assisting partner countries in developing more democratic and effective forms of governance for sustainable peace and development.

OGC is a well-networked knowledge centre, optimally positioned at the intersection of codified ‘expert’ knowledge and practitioner knowledge on governance. OGC aims to facilitate flows of knowledge between these worlds to encourage learning. We are guided by a global advisory board, made up of governance experts from all regions and from different institutional backgrounds

Background to the [Foundation for the Future](#)

The Foundation for the Future is an independent, multi-lateral and not for profit organization, created in 2005 and fully committed to promoting democracy, Human Rights, the Rule of Law and reforms through supporting CSOs’ relevant initiatives in the Broader MENA region including Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Established in response to calls by CSOs of the region to create a MENA-based mechanism for channelling technical and financial assistance, the Foundation maintains its headquarters in Jordan and outreaches to several countries of the region through country representatives.

The Foundation develops civil society support initiatives around 3 axes:

- *Grant-Making* for projects developed and implemented by local CSOs
- *Capacity-Building* for CSOs
- *Networking*
- *Knowledge-building* through research-action initiatives such as seminars, conferences and publications aiming at strengthening knowledge on and of civil society, and disseminating best practices and information on specific under-addressed or emerging needs in the region

The Foundation makes it a point to open new spaces of debates on emerging themes or issues on which civil society could have an influential role to play. This has been done through publications, seminars, and large regional conferences on topics such as:

- Women's rights and gender issues
- Role of Civil Society in Security Sector Reform
- Status of Research on Civil Society Organizations
- Tools and Experiences of Transparency and Accountability of Civil Society
- Role of Civil Society Networks in Combating Human Trafficking in the MENA region

Annex IV – Media coverage

Arab media (in Arabic)

- Petra – Jordan News Agency - <http://tinyurl.com/pjwocea>
- JordanZad.com - <http://tinyurl.com/p4bqu44>
- Alsiasi.com - <http://tinyurl.com/geec3w3>
- Almadenahnews.com - <http://tinyurl.com/ngnxaq6>
- Addustour.com - <http://tinyurl.com/nd6bf3y>
- Shababunity.net - <http://tinyurl.com/o66tf9f>
- Menara.ma - <http://tinyurl.com/nlvua6f>
- Jordan Msader-news.com - <http://tinyurl.com/q9nmuvr>
- Albaladnews.net - <http://tinyurl.com/oyvdpqh>
- Ranod.net - <http://tinyurl.com/p3u99q2>
- A7zaan.com - <http://tinyurl.com/o64q5ep>
- Shababunity.net - <http://tinyurl.com/o66tf9f>

Social media

- Twitter - #ArabTT

Press releases

- Pre-event press release (English) - <http://tinyurl.com/pvmju54>
- Pre-event press release (Norwegian) - <http://tinyurl.com/nga3gpb>
- Post-event press release (English) - <http://tinyurl.com/nhk6v52>