INTRODUCTION: IDEAS THAT MATTER

The Center for Global Development (CGD), founded by development economist Nancy Birdsall, had decided that it needed to do something about preventable diseases for which vaccines could be created but for which market forces alone would not push the research and production of the vaccines to the finish line. After looking at several options, the staff settled on a pilot program to address pneumococcal diseases—pneumonia, meningitis, and related illnesses—that claim more than a million children's lives a year, mostly among the world's poor. Led by a nonresident fellow, Harvard professor Michael Kramer, and Senior Fellow Ruth Levine, CGD launched a working group in 2003 called Making Markets for Vaccines to figure out if it would be possible to get an advanced market commitment—essentially an upfront agreement by governments to buy the vaccines once they were successfully produced—in order to spur private research.

Working closely with international institutions and individuals knowledgeable about public health programs and the pharmaceutical business, the CGD task force was able to develop a plan to spur innovation in vaccine research, built around a specific example. The report laid out the rationale and concept and, including model term sheets that could form the legal basis for a binding

purchase agreement. The task force's work led a coalition of governments, some of which had participated in the research process, along with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to commit over $1.5 billion to purchase pneumococcal vaccines once they were produced successfully. This commitment, in turn, generated a round of private investment into tailoring pneumococcal vaccines for low-income countries, and by 2010 the vaccines were being successfully produced and distributed in countries around the world.[1] What was once an ambitious, though not particularly controversial idea, has now become a reality because CGD made sure the necessary research was done and sufficient stakeholder buy-in was achieved to move the issue forward in a practical way.

Over the past two decades, a very different organization, the liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), has had a central role in getting the earned income tax credit (EITC) approved in twenty-five U.S. states. Dedicated to presenting economic data that can support policies to alleviate poverty, CBPP has built a network of state organizations with the capacity to research and promote new policy ideas to help poor families. Nick Johnson, who runs CBPP's state alliance program, notes that the organization's efforts on economic and social policy have grown exponentially because of this network, which allows state-level organizations to coordinate with each other and with CBPP, thus enhancing all of the partners' impact. Johnson notes that it all comes back to "the credibility of the research" and to "clear and compelling messaging," finding the intersection between the substance of CBPP's economic work and the ability to advocate successfully for policy changes. Legislation on EITC, which was only an embryonic idea in the late 1980s, has now spread to half the country, largely because of the work of this extensive but well-integrated network supported by CBPP.[2]

A few blocks away, the conservative Heritage Foundation set a very different goal. Realizing that the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was still in a formative stage, it

decided to help the Bush administration work on how to structure and consolidate the department. Heritage hired James Jay Carafano, a former Army lieutenant colonel with a doctorate in government, to lead the effort. Over the next few years, he would become intimately engaged in every aspect of DHS's plans. He offered advice and expertise to department staff, held public forums, hosted congressional briefings, prepared policy papers, and conducted endless media interviews to influence the direction of the department's development. Heritage had realized early on that DHS needed strategic guidance, and it used its ties to Republican lawmakers and Bush administration officials—and a professional expertise that won respect in both parties—to create a role for itself in this process. Carafano's work would leave a powerful imprint on the new cabinet department as it took its first steps.[3]

Meanwhile, Geoff Dabelko, who ran the Woodrow Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Program (ECSP) for fifteen years, pursued a different path to shaping policy debates. Created in the mid-1990s to bridge the divide between environmental organizations and the security establishment, which was increasingly worried about environmental threats to stability around the world, ECSP worked tirelessly to bring people from two separate and mutually suspicious policy communities together to share ideas and develop new paradigms to face emerging threats. Over time, the work evolved to include health and population issues and their intersection with environmental concerns and security threats. Ideas developed in ECSP forums found their way into the president's National Intelligence Estimate on Environmental Security; Tom Friedman's best-selling book, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*; and dozens of high-level meetings in the administration, Congress, and international organizations. The program initially started a written report, but by 2007 the platform went virtual with the widely consulted *New Security Beat* blog, which has become a reference point for environmental activists, demographers, public health professionals, and security

specialists, an eclectic but suddenly connected group. This virtual meeting place has generated original and often pathbreaking discussions about issues that otherwise would be limited by disciplinary and professional blinders, and helped create a new field of study that merged security, health, and environmental concerns.[4]

Each of these four organizations believed that ideas had power to shape public policy in innovative and meaningful ways, and all were committed to ensuring that their efforts would have a profound impact on the issues they work on. And what all four organizations shared, in addition to a desire to generate impact, was a *strategy* for doing so. These organizations were successful at what they set out to do because they had a clear idea of the change they wanted to achieve, and they got there by finding the set of activities with which they could make a unique difference, through engaging key target audiences and by leveraging needed resources. Moreover, all four had internal feedback systems that allowed them to evaluate what they were doing and to adjust to meet new challenges, which helped them stay relevant over time as circumstances around them changed. This book looks at how successful think tanks develop systematic approaches to planning for impact and how they learn from the experience so that they make the greatest possible difference on public ideas and policy decisions.

A STRATEGIC APPROACH

Generating and sharing policy ideas—the basic work of think tanks—can change the way that the general public and key audiences think about an important issue, bring new issues to the fore, and provide alternatives for decision makers to consider. However, generating and promoting ideas that can influence policy and public thinking is no easy business. It requires strategic thinking, credible research, and a clear communications plan. Millions of dollars are spent each year trying to accomplish this through think tanks.[5] Most have a general idea of what they want to accomplish but not all have a clear plan to ensure success.

This book looks at how organizations that invest in ideas about public policies—whether entire think tanks or their individual research programs—can be successful by being more strategic in their approach. It focuses exclusively on think tanks in the United States; however, many of its lessons may well be relevant to some of the institutional challenges that think tanks in other countries face. Some of the findings will also likely be useful for others who aspire to achieve policy impact through research programs at universities, advocacy organizations, business associations, and other nonprofits. Getting new ideas into the public sphere or shaping the way that policymakers and the public understand issues requires careful planning as well as solid research and a respected institutional or personal reputation.[6]

There is no single accepted definition of a think tank, but they are, in political scientist Donald Abelson's words, "in the business of developing, repackaging and marketing ideas to policy-makers and the public."[7] Or, as James McGann, director of the Think Tanks Project, notes, "organizations that generate policy-oriented research, analysis, and advice on domestic and international issues in an effort to enable policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy issues."[8] As of 2012, McGann had documented 1,823 think tanks in the United States, with 550 in and around the nation's capital, roughly 30 percent of the total, and another 176 in Massachusetts, 170 in California, and 143 in New York. These numbers suggest that think tanks are concentrated in only a few states, but they are present to some extent everywhere.[9] If the United States has the largest concentration of think tanks, they are by no means only a U.S. phenomenon; indeed U.S. think tanks are only a quarter of the total worldwide, according to McGann.[10]

The specific impact of policy research from these institutions is often hard to gauge. Influence tends to be "highly episodic, arbitrary, and difficult to predict," observes former Council on Foreign Relations president Leslie Gelb.[11] Many other groups, political agendas, and critical events intervene in policy decisions, and may

have as much or more impact than think tanks, which are in the business of developing and sharing policy ideas. Moreover, Fred Bergsten, founding president of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, notes that almost all of his institution's greatest successes have been the result of long-term investments in research. "Think tank work at its finest" he notes, involves "ten years from inception of idea to implementation of idea," even if there are intermediate successes along the way.[12] The specific impact of policy research is always somewhat uncertain and needs to be measured with a long time horizon.

How then can think tanks plan for impact when much of what they hope to achieve—changing people's frameworks for looking at issues, developing new ideas for public policy, or building new fields of knowledge—are, by nature, long-term processes whose success can only be measured in years (if not decades) and may never quite materialize in the way that researchers would like? Ruth Levine, formerly of CGD and now at the Hewlett Foundation, notes that the key is to start by "thinking what the outcome should be and then putting together the steps" to get there.[13] This means starting out in inverse order—with an intended outcome in mind—and figuring out what might get you there, even knowing that the nature of the policy process may take to you different outcomes along the way. It turns out that this is precisely what successful think tanks do.

The most successful policy research efforts almost always start by setting clear goals and then asking a series of crucial follow-up questions about what the organization does best; who its audiences are and how to reach them; what human, financial, and other resources it will need along the way; and how it can keep track of its efforts and measure impact. Indeed, successful policy research organizations are almost single-mindedly obsessed with these questions, whether they look at them through formal strategic planning processes or just through ongoing internal discussions. While there is no guarantee in a chaotic policymaking environment that

this intense focus on strategy will lead to unmitigated success, creating a roadmap up front can help you get there.

We will return in a moment to the key strategic questions that successful think tanks ask themselves, the questions that constitute the foundation for this book. However, it is worth looking first at what policy researchers consider "impact" before we look at how they go about trying to achieve it.

APPROACHES TO IMPACT AND THE POLICY CYCLE

Maya MacGuineas, president of the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, housed at the New America Foundation, has taken on a multi-trillion-dollar challenge: to create bipartisan options for reducing the country's federal budget deficit. When asked about how she evaluates success, she notes, only half-jokingly, that "nothing [we do] has succeeded because we still have a giant deficit."[14] She is, of course, more than a little correct. If we judge organizations dedicated to working on policy ideas by whether they are successful in getting policy implemented, most would probably fail most of the time.

But MacGuineas also observes that the Committee has spent years "[g]etting ready so that if the political moment comes along we have everything to get it on the agenda."[15] Judged by less ambitious, but no less important, standards, the Committee has been a resounding success. It has become a reference point for new ideas on how to cut the budget deficit, created a safe political space for Democrats and Republicans to talk with each other about policy options, and built the intellectual foundations for the work that major budget commissions and congressional groups have undertaken in recent years. These efforts only become more relevant as the deficit grows and politicians are looking for new ideas and for neutral ground on which to explore them.

Think tanks and policy research programs are dedicated to the belief that ideas matter for politics. Edward Djerejian, the founding

director of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy, observes, "Public policy is not only about interests, it is about ideas."[16] Indeed, most policies that are eventually implemented begin as ideas that float around and are discussed among experts, interest groups, and policymakers long before there is a political opening that allows policy to be made on the issue.[17] To be sure, think tanks do not have a monopoly on policy ideas. There is no shortage of ideas that come out of traditional academic institutions, advocacy groups, the private sector, and other sources. However, think tanks are structurally set up to produce, analyze, and share policy ideas in agile and often effective ways and to make sure they reach key policy audiences and attentive publics. According to the distinguished economist Murray Weidenbaum, "for very practical reasons, think tanks have a special potential to play a key role in responding to fundamental but urgent issues."[18] This potential derives from their basic design, which includes a mixture of research capacity, convening power, and communication skills that target key policy and public audiences.

The first challenge for these organizations is to understand the dynamics of the policy process itself and where their ideas can have the greatest impact. In general terms, the policy cycle has three stages in which policy research can help shape outcomes: framing ideas and issues; providing policy alternatives; and shaping decision making (Figure I.1).[19] The first stage, *framing ideas and issues*, takes place on an ongoing basis. Policy organizations and researchers can often help decision makers, experts, and the general public understand issues and ideas in new ways through analysis and public dialogue. These efforts can include everything from exploring the historical, economic, and political context of issues to providing new information on how issues are seen outside the capital or outside the country. In some cases, policy researchers focus explicitly on educating policymakers in the executive and legislative branches (whether national or local government), but others focus extensively on educating other opinion leaders, grassroots

FIGURE I.1. Stages in the policy cycle

movements, or the public at large. The Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Program, for example, has largely directed its efforts at framing ideas in ways that help policymakers, advocates, and the public understand them in new ways.

Other institutions focus on the second stage in the policy process by *providing policy alternatives* on specific issues. The Center for Global Development's research on making markets for vaccines falls squarely into this category, as does the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget's efforts to develop blueprints for deficit reduction and CBPP's work to develop a model for the earned income tax credit. In all of these cases, these efforts have sought to develop new ideas that may eventually find their way into actual policies. Rarely do researchers have the ability to choose the timing of how issues move onto the public agenda, so most ideas are developed in the hope that they will, over time, gain acceptance and become influential when there is a political opening that forces policymakers to focus on that particular issue. John Sewell, a senior scholar at the Wilson Center and the former president of the Overseas Development Council (ODC), observes that advocacy organizations and interest groups generally do a much better job at the hard work of raising issues than at putting them on the political agenda.[20] Most new ideas take time to mature, and decision making on issues tends to be driven by political events outside of researchers' control. The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget's patient search for solutions to the budget deficit and CBPP's long-term advocacy for the EITC over two decades are far closer to the norm in how new ideas slowly gain influence over time as political events bring issues to the fore.

Finally, there are a few think tanks that are experienced at the third stage, *shaping decision making* by influencing policymaking as it happens. Relatively few think tanks are well equipped to do this, because it requires an intimate knowledge of the political system and close, almost organic relations with decision makers. The Heritage Foundation's work on homeland security is a successful example of this. The Heritage Foundation is particularly well placed to influence decisions as they happen because it has invested heavily in close ties with politicians and their staff who share the same conservative philosophy. Heritage is also particularly adept at producing brief analyses of pending legislation and providing talking points to members of Congress shortly before crucial votes take place.

Despite notable exceptions, such as Heritage, most think tanks tend to be most influential in the stages of framing and policy alternatives, while interest groups tend to be most influential during the decision-making phase.[21] Think tank scholar Andrew Rich argues that "[p]olicy research can help to define the boundaries of problems and the dimensions of interventions before issues even receive serious debate," and, as a result, "Opportunities for experts to be influential are greatest early in the policy process."[22] However, clear exceptions abound, as the example above of the Heritage Foundation suggests. "Think tanks, like world class athletes, play to their strengths," observes Abelson, and different issue areas and specific issue debates open up entirely different possibilities for the influence of those in the marketplace of ideas.[23]

The preceding discussion highlights the fact that there are two different kinds of think tanks, those that have an ideological or political agenda, such as the Heritage Foundation and CBPP, and those that publicly and consciously eschew ideological identification, such as the Wilson Center, the New America Foundation, and CGD. The first group includes such well-known organizations as the Center for American Progress (CAP), the Cato Institute, the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), and the Institute for

Policy Studies (IPS), which pursue agendas specifically linked to ideological positions.[24] Around the country there are dozens of these organizations, usually with a local or regional focus. They exist to develop ideas that will move forward their particular view of a good society, and they tend to be closely linked with politicians and interest groups that share their vision. These groups often have a greater ability to influence policy decisions themselves, since they are enmeshed in the political networks of politicians who make the decisions, but they have a more narrow partisan appeal.

The second group of think tanks, which avoids political or ideological identification, is guided by the notion that reasoned debate and analysis can lead to a better understanding of key public policy issues. Among other well-known organizations that fit into this category are the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Baker Institute, the Peterson Institute for International Economics, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), the Center for Global Development (CGD), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Pacific Council on International Policy (PCIP), the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). In the case of a few of these organizations, observers may ascribe a particularly ideological leaning to them or to their particular programs, and some may have limits to their objectivity, but they do not have an overall ideological purpose that guides a consistent approach to policy analysis. Rather, all are committed to the notion that research and dialogue can inform policy debates in important ways.

Within this category, there are a few organizations, including the RAND Corporation and the Urban Institute, which are dedicated primarily to highly technical analysis of the effectiveness and potential of public policy. While most think tanks focus on ideas, these organizations are more concerned with facts and correlations. Their research often directs policymakers to move in new

directions and develop new approaches, as we will see later on, but these organizations generally prefer to let their findings speak for themselves rather than propose new ideas for policy. Similarly, the Pew Research Center is part of a separate (and rare) strain of organizations that focus primarily on polling and demographic data, eschewing the battle of ideas in favor of the presentation of data. The Pew Center considers itself a "fact tank" dedicated to the power of information.[25]

The desire to inform instead of influence, however, does not mean an absence of perspective or a disinterest in impact. As we will see through the examples presented in the remaining chapters, all strategic think tanks, whether they have an ideological agenda or not, seek to have an impact on public ideas and public policy; they just take different routes to get there.

THE FIVE STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

Successful think tanks and policy research programs all share a single way of approaching their work that helps increase their chances of success. Organizations as distinct as those mentioned earlier all seem to follow a similar template in terms of their thinking, even while they pursue strikingly different objectives and do so with dramatically different formats for planning. This is also true whether they are large, diversified institutions such as the Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation, and the Baker Institute; more compact, focused institutions such as the Center for Global Development, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, and the Migration Policy Institute; or even specific programs within institutions, such as the Wilson Center's ECSP, New America Foundation's Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, or many university-based research centers. What they do have in common is that they ask—in one way or another—the same set of five strategic questions (Figure I.2).

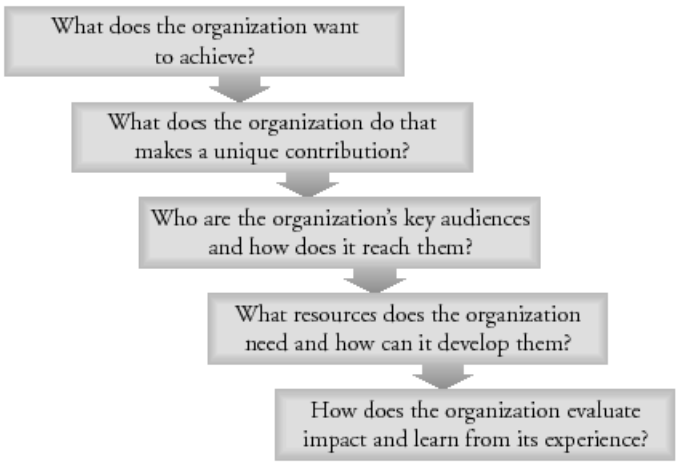

FIGURE I.2. The five strategic questions

The first question is *What does the organization want to achieve?* Finding the organization's core mission—what it aspires to achieve over time—provides the guide that allows everyone within the organization to remain on the same page and focused despite multiple activities and changing strategies. Finding what, specifically, the organization wants to achieve in the short term is critical for focusing these efforts for impact. In large organizations, goal-setting often addresses big picture changes, while specific goal-setting on initiatives is left to the individual programs or researchers. Achievement-oriented goals that spell out what the organization wants to accomplish are also critical for assessing success and learning from experience.

The second question is *What does the organization do that makes a unique contribution?* Deciding an organization's comparative advantage requires finding the intersection between what the organization (or program) does well and what needs exist in the policy environment. In some cases, organizations address issues

that no others have dealt with sufficiently; in other cases, an institution's unique marker is ideological—it represents a particular viewpoint on the issue or it is uniquely positioned to be neutral when others are not; and in still other cases it can be geographical, if it is the only institution in a particular city or region dealing with the issue. To decide comparative advantage, organizations also need to know what they do well, whether it is developing original ideas, conducting policy analysis, or providing a convening space.

The third question is *Who are the organization's key audiences and how does it reach them?* For organizations focused on impact, quality work in a unique niche is not enough; the products also have to reach intended target audiences. In many cases, the target audiences are policymakers in specific positions of influence, but just as often they may be key opinion leaders, other researchers, grassroots organizations, the media, or the public at large. Reaching different audiences requires segmented outreach strategies that allow researchers to target different audiences with the most effective formats for their needs. The advent of social media, including blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, has vastly increased the opportunities for outreach, but these new technologies have also created a more crowded marketplace for ideas that organizations have to contend with.[26] New technologies, and the increasing number of issues that are truly international, have also allowed think tanks to be increasingly global in their audiences and even sometimes in their structures.[27]

The fourth question is *What resources does the organization need and how can it develop them?* Successful organizations share a belief that resources follow vision and strategy, not the other way around, but finding resources to implement ambitious goals is still paramount for execution, and the nature of the institution's resource engine—what its funding looks like and what kind of staffing it has—often helps shape its goals and the kinds of activities it can undertake. There are four key sets of resources critical to

any successful think tank or policy research program: *human resources*, which include staff, scholars, and boards, who constitute the organization's intellectual capital; *financial resources* from grants, contracts, project income, individual and corporate donations, and endowment income; *partnerships* with like-minded organizations, which allow organizations to multiply their impact; and *reputation* (brand), which attracts attention and talent. Finding the right intersection between what the organization wants to do (question one), what it does well (questions two and three), and what its resource base is (question four) is critical.[28] However, there is no area of think tank work with more pitfalls and dangers, ranging from inadequate funding to poor human resource management to funders' attempts to exert control over programming. Resource management is almost always the most challenging arena of think tank development, but successful organizations find ways to integrate it effectively within their goals and their plan of action rather than do it as a stand-alone activity.

Finally, the fifth question is *How does the organization evaluate impact and learn from its experience?* Successful organizations try to understand their successes and failures and shift their future goals and strategy on the basis of this learning process. One of the most difficult challenges for think tanks and policy research programs, given the uncertain nature of links between ideas and actual policy outcomes, is measuring impact. However, organizations that have clear goals up front can develop systematic approaches to knowing whether they are successful or not—or, at least, if they are moving in the right direction toward their goals. Effective evaluations require separating three sets of measurements and tracking them systematically: *inputs* (resources), *outputs* (events, publications, media citations, web hits, and so on), and *outcomes* (actual impact on policy ideas and decisions). The first two of these usually can be measured quantitatively and tracked regularly. The third one, evaluating outcomes, requires developing a rigorous approach to ongoing qualitative analysis. Successful think tanks and think tank

programs find creative ways to build periodic assessment into their operations.

The chapters in this book address each of these five questions in depth with concrete examples of how actual think tanks and their programs have dealt with each of them. There is an enormous variety of ways in which organizations answer these questions, yet what remains consistent is that all of the most successful institutions and programs appear to follow the same basic process to plan for impact. To be sure, many successful organizations are more consciously focused on some of the questions than on others, but all seem to touch on all of them in some ways. And what is perhaps most significant, as we will see in Chapter 1, is that the most successful organizations don't just invest in formal strategic planning processes, they build the five questions into their institutional DNA so that they are asking these questions over and over again in their daily work. Strategy is less about stand-alone planning and more about developing a repertoire for understanding the organization's work as it takes place, with specific planning exercises when the organization is going through a time of change.