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# Political and economic transition in Vietnam and its impact on think tank traditions

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## Abstract

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This paper discusses how changes in the political and economic context in Vietnam during the reform era have influenced the nature of the country's think tanks. Drawing on policy studies, we identify changes in key actors and policy spaces, dominant ideas, the role of networks and formal and informal institutions. The paper then explores how these have influenced the demand for think tank advice, the institutional location of think tanks, their key functions and capacity, their communication channels, and finally their influence on policy. We show that the demand for advice, particularly economic advice, from Vietnamese think tanks has increased, especially from new interests (albeit within the state), including a more robust National Assembly, new business elites, international donors and the media. Vietnamese think tanks are located largely within or are affiliated to state institutions. In some cases, they provide advice, whilst in others they go as far as drafting laws and regulation. Problems persist in the quality and objectivity of research. However, there are pockets of excellence with some think tanks able to produce arguably high quality research and provide critique to formal government policy, albeit carefully framed. As in many other contexts, think tanks struggle to work collectively to address complex problems. They tend to contribute to policy discussions in subtle ways through commenting on policy documents (where they are invited to do so), through private, informal meetings, through collective social processes and through media coverage, whilst their actual influence is almost always politically motivated.



## Introduction

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During the 1970s in Vietnam, communism was the “touchstone” of the economy and wider society, which were largely under the control of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The adoption of a Soviet-inspired system of research and higher education in the 1960s meant that policy relevant (and academic) knowledge was produced by numerous mono-disciplinary research institutes and universities organised under a wide range of government agencies (Zink, 2011).

During the 1980s, facing an economic crisis, Vietnam took the historic step of making the change from producing for subsistence to producing for profit and capital accumulation, a process formalised in 1986 by policy reforms known as Doi Moi. However, rather than the privatisation of existing state companies, the Vietnamese transition took place through the emergence of new state business interests. Politicians, officials and those with close connections to them took advantage of the opportunities for profit which came with marketization of existing state institutions (Gainsborough, 2010).

Because of this and other reforms, economic growth was rapid and living standards of Vietnamese people improved considerably. For instance, between 1990 and 2008, the average annual growth rate was 7.4%, while between 1993 and 2008 poverty, based on the national poverty line, fell from 58% to 14.5% (Vandemoortele & Bird 2011).

But what impact did these changes have on the production of policy relevant knowledge and on what one might call “think tanks” (which we define very broadly) and their functions in Vietnam? (Mendizabal, 2014). To answer this, this paper draws on insights from academic and grey literature, interviews with a range of stakeholders comprising government officials, researchers and international experts and the authors’ collective experience working on three projects in Vietnam between 2009 and 2013. These include:

- A project, funded by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) between 2008 and 2011, to improve the research and communication capacity of the Vietnamese Academy of Social Science (VASS);
- A project, funded by the Australian Government between 2011 and 2012, to improve economic policymaking (which led to the production of a paper by Datta and Lan Huong, 2013, which this paper draws on significantly);

- A project, funded by the UNDP in 2013, to improve the engagement of development partners with government policy.

The next section provides the theoretical underpinning for this paper. The section thereafter identifies key features of the political and economic context. We then analyse, in some detail, how this has impacted on the development of think tanks and on their roles and functions.

## Theoretical framework

Think tanks are political actors (even if some may be non-partisan) and must therefore be understood within their political and historical context (Mendizabal 2014). Drawing on Paul Cairney (2016), we suggest that the political context is influenced by the following factors:

- **Actors:** these can be individuals or collectives, and can range from private companies to interest groups to government bodies.
- **Ideas:** these are, broadly speaking, ways of thinking and can include proposed solutions to a policy problem and shared beliefs, knowledge, world views and language, which, if they are taken for granted or not questioned, might be seen as core beliefs, paradigms, hegemony and monopolies of understanding.
- **Networks:** these are the relationships between different actors which can shape how think tanks' knowledge flows in and out of policy discussions (or not). Some of these networks can be more exclusive than others by, for instance, favouring particular sources of evidence and some think tanks over others.
- **Institutions:** these are the rules, norms, practices and relationships that influence individual and collective behaviour. These can be formal and widely understood in the form of laws and regulation or informal and only understood by certain groups of people.

In this paper, we explore how these factors (manifested in the Vietnamese context) have shaped think tanks' characteristics. In defining think tanks' characteristics, we draw on Nachiappan, Mendizabal and Datta (2010), who examined how the political and economic context shaped the formation of think tanks in East and Southeast Asia. They found that changes in the context influenced changes to the following think tanks' characteristics:

- The demand for think tanks' advice
- The location of think tanks relative to the state
- The functions of think tanks and their capacity to deliver on them
- Their ability to work across institutional boundaries
- Their channels of communication and ability to influence change

Nachiappan *et al.* (2010) found, among other things, that think tanks in China and Vietnam were closer to the State than think tanks in Japan and South Korea, which had a greater level of autonomy from the State. Conversely, think tanks in Indonesia and Malaysia tended to respond to the interests of social, religious or cultural elites more so than to formal political or economic power. Notwithstanding these findings, every country also witnessed think tanks responding to significantly different traditions. We use this framework to identify how the political context has shaped the characteristics of new and old think tanks in Vietnam. We now turn our attention to the Vietnamese political context.

## Key features of the political context in Vietnam

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Here, we explore four features of the political context: key policy actors and spaces, dominant ideas, the role of networks, and formal and informal institutions and describe where there has been change and where there has been continuity.

### Key policy actors and spaces

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Power in Vietnam is formally organised into several parallel but entwined hierarchies (the State, the Party, the Fatherland Front and the Military), each with vertical networks that extend down to the village level. All hierarchies are bound together by most actors being members of the CPV (Zink, 2011). After more than 20 years of rapid economic growth and development, the Party, whose members account for around four percent of the total population, has largely retained the power to decide who has the right to run for office. This dominance results in the politicisation of most social activities, including literature, science and education (Vu, 2009).

Nevertheless, economic development in the past two decades has led to greater differentiation within the existing institutional set-up. Given the new (often State) business interests; more robust government agencies, an enhanced role for the National Assembly, a *de facto*, if not always *de jure*, decentralisation to the provinces, and more diverse and vocal societal interests (represented by mass organisations and quasi-NGOs) (Gainsborough, 2010), decision makers have accepted and attend to a greater plurality of interests than before (largely within and across the aforementioned hierarchies).

Image:  
Enrique Mendizabal



### Dominant ideas: economic performance, socialism, nationalism

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The need to sustain economic growth, improve living conditions and maintain macroeconomic stability continues to be important in sustaining the Party's credibility. The opening of the economy and increasing public awareness of living standards in other Southeast Asian countries have increased pressures for reform measures to accelerate growth. Leslie Holmes (2007) concludes that, as long as the Party can maintain or improve its economic performance, Vietnam's communist system should be reasonably legitimate and secure, assuming it is not accompanied by significant inflation or unemployment (Holmes 2017).

The Vietnamese elite has had significant exposure to neoliberal ideas through interaction with members of the donor community in the country. Increasing numbers of the middle and upper classes in Vietnam, including students and researchers destined for – or already working in – government are travelling abroad (including to the West) to study and/or on business. Nevertheless, the Party continues to promulgate socialism as the dominant policy discourse. Party officials stress the pragmatism of “Ho Chi Minh thought” and the formulation of a “socialist orientation” for Vietnam’s emerging market economy, which are integral components of the curriculum of instruction for civil servants in the country (Rama, 2008). As a result, Vietnam’s transition has resulted in tensions between “old” and “new” ways of thinking. The Party and State continue to wrestle with reconciling international and domestic developments with socialist ideology in order to adapt to economic integration and maintain older political structures (Balme & Sidel, 2007).

In addition, nationalism remains a strong feature in the policy discourse. From 1954 to 1986, the Party based its claim to political legitimacy primarily on its success in defeating foreign aggressors, namely France, Japan, the United States of America, the Khmer Rouge and China. This involved appeals to Vietnamese patriotism (Thayer, 2010). Although foreign threats have diminished somewhat, nationalistic tendencies remain: safeguarding security, sovereignty and independence is of utmost importance.

### **The role of networks**

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Policy-makers and researchers, like most other Vietnamese, are members of a dense collection of multiple and interconnected networks and relationships. Some of these relations are hierarchical, with an official owing their position to someone more senior who might at the same time look out for and protect them. This comes with obligations and responsibilities, such as showing deference and loyalty or giving gifts. However, as new power holders tied to new alliances arise, those seeking protection need to adjust their strategies and cultivate new relationships (Gainsborough, 2010). To be marginalised within an important network or to have one’s political umbrella dismantled can lead to dire consequences for one’s job, one’s family, livelihood and one’s standing within the system.

### **Formal and informal institutions: the rule of law, institutional competition and struggles for power**

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Although the Party has had objections to Western-inspired legality (Gillespie, 2007), it is increasingly linking its legitimacy to the rule of law, as embodied in the 1992 Constitution and legislation passed by the National Assembly (Thayer, 2009). In return for market access gained by joining international treaties such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the ASEAN Free Trade Area and the World Trade Organization (WTO), Vietnam agreed to harmonise its commercial laws with international standards. As a result, it has revised and developed a host of new laws, and continues to do so: the amount of legislation processed by the Assembly has doubled since WTO accession (Datta & Lan Huong, 2013).

State officials tend to show a high degree of attachment to their office or institution, are often reluctant to work with – or seek information from – other institutions, and are generally hesitant to go beyond their areas of competence. As a result, different institutions rarely sing from the same hymn sheet (Gainsborough, 2010). This may be due in part to the legacy of a centrally planned system in which many government offices were established to regulate almost every aspect of society along with the rewards attached to public office.

Against this background, institutions are continually finding ways to defend and expand their territory, especially where there are overlapping remits and where boundaries are ambiguous. Given these



struggles, the state is far from being a unitary bloc. It encompasses a multitude of competing interests and is an interlocking matrix of factions overridden by power struggles, with decision making like a “shadow-boxing match.” (Quinn-Judge, 2004). Internal dissent, although officially frowned upon, is quite common.

## Implications on the formation and development of think tanks

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How have these features influenced the formation and development of think tanks in Vietnam? This section explores this question with a focus on the demand for think tanks’ advice, their location, their primary functions, their capacity to deliver on those functions, their ability to work together and their communication channels.

### Demand for think tanks’ advice

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The emergence of new actors and expanded spaces for discussion within the state have led to a new and increased demand for knowledge (to find solutions to seemingly more complex problems, but also to bolster the position of particular actors in a more competitive political environment). For instance, the National Assembly and its over 500 members are under pressure to draft and pass increasing volumes of legislation. To satisfy the demand for knowledge this entails, it signed a formal agreement with an existing think tank – one of the country’s three science academies, the Vietnamese Academy for Social Sciences (VASS), whose institutes were mandated to respond to requests from deputies and committees.

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Further, senior officials within the executive, especially those dealing with economic policy, were making greater demands from their internal think tanks. On the one hand, increasing economic activity, together with larger and faster flows of goods and services beyond Vietnam’s borders, increased the perceived degree of complexity policy actors had had to contend with. For instance, the reform period saw Vietnam transition from a net importer of rice to the world’s second largest global rice exporter.

From a legal standpoint, Vietnam’s signing of international trade agreements, as well as its WTO membership, both increased the amount of legislation that needed to be passed and imposed new constraints on how domestic policymakers operate. With uncertainty rising and policymakers seeking solutions to increase economic performance whilst maintaining stability, officials made more demands of think tanks and their researchers.

On the other hand, being closely associated with prominent researchers improved the credibility of senior officials, helping them move forward in their careers and giving them a degree of protection from other political actors. As such, researchers had a political function, often seeing themselves as “flowers”: helping officials to look good in the eyes of senior party officials.

In some cases, strong informal networks between policymakers and researchers were part of an economic marriage of convenience. Ministry officials often awarded research projects to help service

and strengthen important social and political relationships with research leaders rather than to provide inputs to legislative drafting. In order to avoid being seen to favour some over others and potentially damaging personal networks, officials sometimes awarded funding to research institutes equally rather than on the basis of merit or the quality of the proposals (Datta and Lan Huong, 2013). However, to demonstrate a mutual obligation, researchers were often expected to make informal payments in the region of 30–50% of the total project budget to secure project financing from a ministry (which might include funding originally from an international organisation) (Zink, 2011).

Donor agencies have often played a role similar to an interest group in policy circles, such as an opposition party or civil society organisation in a parliamentary democracy. They often used research and advice (much of it produced by foreign consultants in partnership with local think tanks) to argue for the neoliberal policy reforms. These would include the break-up of State enterprises and the creation of new markets as well as more and better participation of various groups in society, such as small businesses, ethnic minorities and migrant workers. There was subsequently a risk that donor agencies might draw top researchers into their own supply-driven agendas that produced work that was not particularly relevant to government priorities.

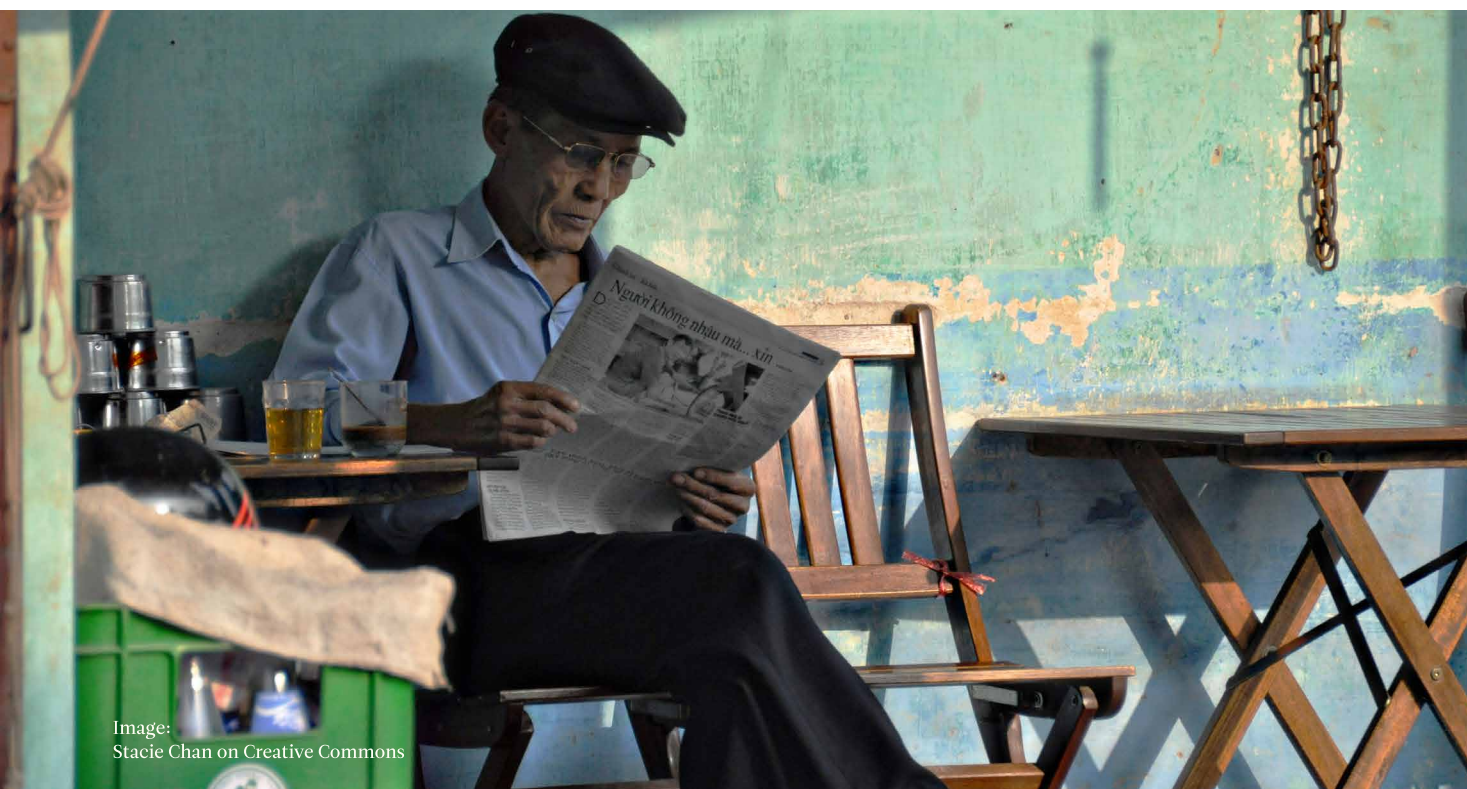


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Finally, the media have become an increasingly important consumer of think tanks' research and advice. They were at the forefront in reporting on “fence breaking” experiments or clandestine activity taking place outside the central plan in the 1980s. Although they continue to be owned by some element of the State, the reform period has nonetheless seen a proliferation of media outlets, with roughly 600 newspapers and magazines, some of which are internet-based. Examples include the *Vietnam Investment Review*, which belongs to the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) and the *Saigon Times*, which is owned by the Ho Chi Minh City 's People's Committee (Forsberg, 2007).

Unable to pay adequate salaries or provide free newsprint, the reform period saw the government allow media companies to generate revenue through advertising under a revised media law (McKinley, 2009). Less financial dependence on the state has contributed to a loosening of editorial constraints imposed by the state and an increase in press standards (Heng, 2001).

The role of the media has subsequently expanded – at least formally – and now represents a wider variety of perspectives than it did in the mid-1990s and, at times, can be influential in pushing politicians to respond to perceived public mood. Freedom House (2006) noted that the constitutional protection granted to party officials is slowly being eroded whilst Madeleine Elmqvist and Lukas Luwarso (2006) suggested that there was more space to undertake investigative journalism, with subsequently more appetite for think tank advice and opinion.

The expansion of the media has provided a public forum in which think tank’s perspectives can be brought up for consideration. However, researchers spoken to by the authors felt journalists were likely to overly simplify policy issues, misquote them and/or take their comments out of context. This was in a context in which messages had to be prioritised and where journalists lacked technical training to interrogate findings or explain complex issues to readers. At the same time, however, media houses, an actor in addition to a space for debate, compete alongside think tanks for the attention of the public and policymakers.

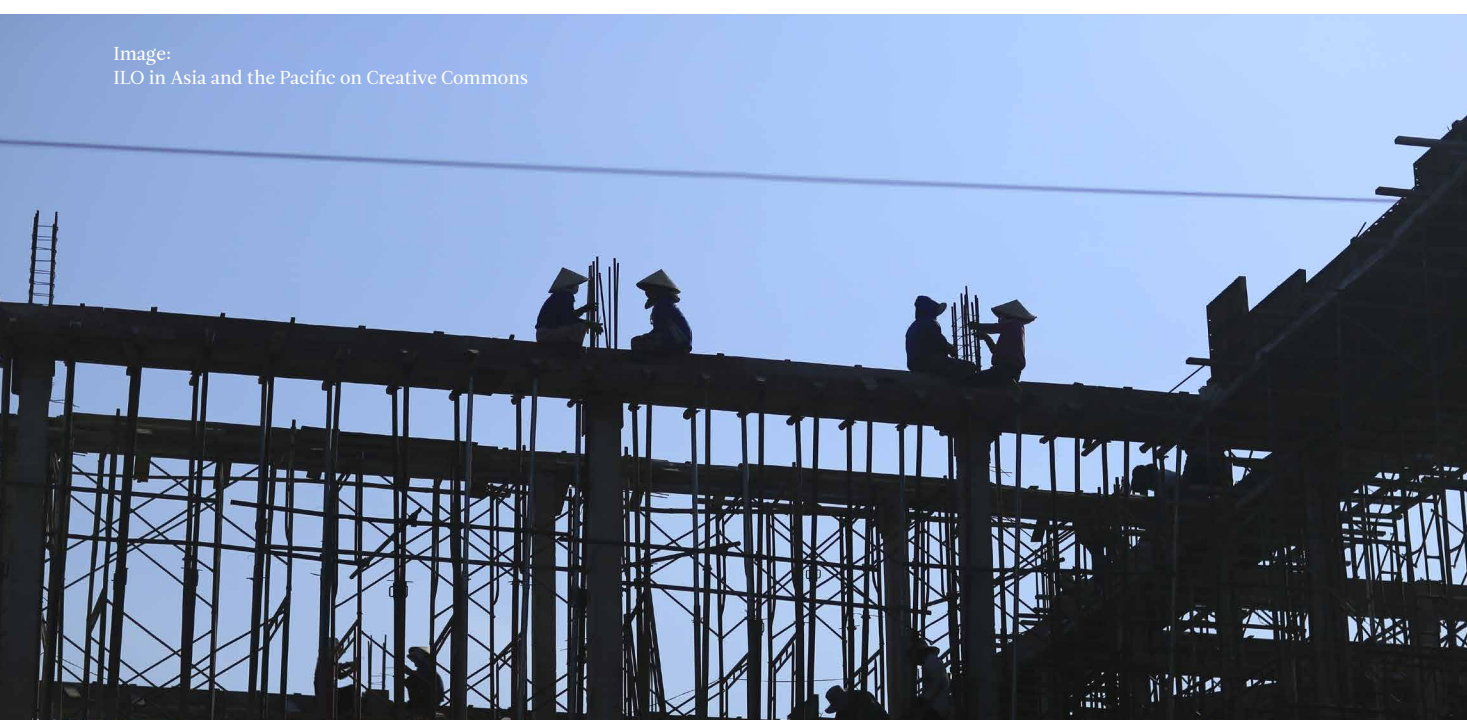
### **The location of new think tanks**

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The emergence of new interests also saw new sites for the production of policy-relevant knowledge. For instance, in addition to formally engaging with existing think tanks, the National Assembly has nurtured its own through the Centre for Information, Library and Research Services (CILRS) and the Institute of Legislative Studies (ILL) within the Office of the National Assembly (ONA). They arguably play the role of internal think tanks within the legislature – generating and disseminating knowledge to its members. For instance, the CILRS had, at the time of undertaking this research, grown steadily, employing more than 50 staff, many of whom were educated abroad.

The liberalisation of rules and regulations around the formation of “new” organisations, in addition to the availability of foreign funding, saw a boom of issue-oriented groups engaged in research and consulting during the mid-1990s in Hanoi, with senior staff tending to be former public officials (Wischermann & Vinh, 2003). Reconciling trends towards socialism and nationalism on the one hand and neoliberal expansion on the other, such organisations were usually affiliated to the Vietnam Union for Science and Technology (VUSTA) which itself came under the Fatherland Front (and is therefore part of the

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state). Research centres producing economic and related research included the Development Policies Research Centre (DEPOCEN) and the Center for Community Support Development Studies (CECODES).

Although the State has tolerated, albeit grudgingly, the emergence of a wide variety of “nongovernmental organisations,” it did not allow the development of private business associations, which is consistent with the absence of a private sector. However, in addition to a few National Assembly deputies who were “entrepreneurs,” there were several mass organisations which aimed to represent the voice of business in policymaking. These included the Vietnamese Chamber for Commerce and Industry (VCCI) and the Vietnam Cooperative Alliance (VCA). These might be interpreted as think tanks using research as a resource to support its representation of business interests in pursuit of improved national economic performance.

Nevertheless, despite new think tanks emerging, this paled in comparison with the infrastructure and budget the executive arm of government gained to gather information and study policy issues. As such, members of parliament often had to rely on government reports for policy analysis (inhibiting their effectiveness in holding the executive to account) while some committees had set up informal “collaboratives,” something to which we return below (Datta & Lan Huong, 2013).

### **Key functions of think tanks**

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The functions of think tanks depend, understandably, on their institutional location. Research institutes, especially those within ministries, are often asked to conduct research as inputs to legal drafting processes. For instance, the Central Institute for Economic Management (CIEM) under the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) studied the investment promotion policies of other countries – including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and South Korea – in the context of the development of the 1995 Law for the Promotion of Domestic Investment (LPDI) in Vietnam.

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In some cases (depending on the issue, perceived capacity and personal relations), in addition to providing advice, research institutes within ministries [...] are assigned to actually draft laws and regulations.

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In some cases (depending on the issue, perceived capacity and personal relations), in addition to providing advice, research institutes within ministries – such as CIEM and the Institute of Labour Science and Social Affairs (ILSSA) in the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) – are assigned to actually draft laws and regulations. CIEM, for instance, has drafted numerous laws, including on enterprise and bankruptcy (Dang, 2005). These research institutes are also often part of appraisal councils, which assess draft policies before they are submitted to the Office of the Government for approval. Although this function did not change throughout the reform era, the volume of legislation it has had to draft and provide inputs to is likely to have increased, given the country’s signing of various international agreements.

## **The capacity to deliver their functions**

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To deliver on their functions, think tanks have had to address several strategic challenges. We consider three: research quality, independence, and organisational maturity.

### ***Research quality.***

Research institutes were mainly funded by the state. However, the state budget was under more pressure to make investments which would yield improvements in economic performance. A failure amongst policymakers to see the merits of investment in Vietnam's policy research infrastructure had seen many think tanks stagnate. Many researchers continued to have inadequate methodological training and analytical capacities, whilst a lack of flexible funds before and during policy drafting processes meant that specific expertise could not be hired and data collection could not be carried out. Moreover, researchers were often unable to capture the complexity of various policy problems, with a tendency to simplify and make vague recommendations which failed to account for the institutional setting policymakers worked in.

Short time horizons were also a contributory factor – arguably influenced by the emergence of more political and economic interests as well as more uncertainty because of the country's greater global interconnectedness. For instance, CIEM had to rush to complete a first draft of a comprehensive nation-wide assessment of the impact of Vietnam's accession to the WTO within a three-month timeframe. Heads of research institutes and senior researchers were often only given between three to five days to produce a report on any one of a wide variety of topics. In the absence of any additional funding and with little time, researchers were left to “cook up” something based on material found mainly on the internet.

However, according to key informants during the projects mentioned in the methodology section, there were some research institutes which had a reputation for producing research of higher quality (defined by evidence produced through more rigorous methods and better writing), including but not limited to CIEM, ILSSA, the Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD) in the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and the Policy Advisory Group (PAG) in the Ministry of Finance (see Box 1 below for a description of PAG). CIEM, ILSSA and VASS had been noted by key informants for making key contributions to the legal framework for doing business, making increasingly important contributions on labour policies and social insurance and informing WTO negotiations and undertaking poverty analysis, respectively.



Image:  
Enrique Mendizabal

### Box 1: The Policy Advisory Group in the Ministry of Finance

Established in 2006, and benefiting from support from UNDP, the PAG aims to carry out and coordinate public financial policy analysis and develop the capacity of MoF and related agencies to conduct public financial policy analysis. It comprises a head, members, consultants and collaborators. Members include those specialising in areas of macroeconomic policy both within and outside MoF. It meets monthly and can assign specific topics to a team of collaborators or consultants (both international and national, working on a contractual basis) who can undertake research and analysis. UNDP suggests the quality of expertise necessary to carry out assigned tasks successfully is scarce and the right mix of incentives and rigour in recruitment will have to be provided, and also that the leadership has begun to place increasing demands on the PAG for analysis and short-term advice, making it harder to plan longer-term research (taken from Datta and Lan Huong, 2013).

These research institutes were located within large ministries which dealt with issues that were a priority to the government – which in turn attracted large shares of the national budget. Furthermore, some of the more policy focussed institutes within VASS, such as the Institute of Economy and the Centre for Analysis and Forecasts (CAF), were also said by key informants of the projects we worked on to produce more robust policy analyses.

#### *The role of research institute leaders.*

According to key informants, the effectiveness of research institutes was largely attributable to the ability of their directors to attract significant external project funding from foreign donors. The proximity of institutes such as CIEM, ILSA, IPSARD and CAF to strategic decision making was crucial, as donors emphasised policy impact and subsequently value for money on their investments. But so too was leadership. With national and international sources of project funding primarily available to the most senior members of a research institution (given the importance of hierarchy), directors at these institutes were particularly astute in using their organisations as a platform to attract funders.

Successful directors ensured that some of the project funding was used to supplement staff salaries, build up staff capacity (for instance, through securing scholarships to undertake Masters and PhD programmes abroad), and “sell” their research to both government and donors as a means of improving the country’s economic performance and maintaining stability – ideas which dominate mainstream policy discourse. This has led to further funding and support. Indeed, the career success of directors often depended on their ability to secure projects and money from external sources, and not necessarily their ability to stimulate the production and use of new knowledge domestically. Staff from these institutes were said to be more qualified, have higher incomes and subsequently greater levels of motivation (but not necessarily more time to do research). This came with greater levels of authority, which in turn reinforced and increased the level of demand for their advice and services from top officials and donors.

Ultimately, government funding for basic salaries and infrastructure for these institutes contributed only a small fraction of total funding they receive. The basic salary package for a

mid-level researcher made up, on average, about 30 per cent of their income, giving them a high degree of financial independence. However, this has often led to staff in these institutes being overworked. Many had to undertake routine administrative work, respond to ad hoc and often urgent demands from senior officials, draft policy or comment on drafts of other ministries (usually within short time frames) and undertake donor (and government) funded project work in a resource-poor environment. In addition, some researchers might also engage in teaching at private universities, tutoring assignments and/or run a small business.

Moreover, in some instances, once project funding – increasingly being channelled through government systems – had been “disentangled” from the (hierarchical) social relations that researchers were a part of (through, for instance, payment of debt and obligations), what was left was rarely enough to undertake work that was of sufficient quality. Consequently, researchers ran the risk of having to recycle research results from previous projects, and donor funded projects that could not be completed successfully during due to lack of funds, could potentially be funded again in later years (Zink, 2011). Although research funds were in principle only disbursed in return for satisfactory research outputs, donor pressures to disburse money often meant that they “turned a blind eye” to poor quality work (Nguyen, 2005). A heavy workload and poor working environments often saw the best researchers leave for opportunities in the international sector. Against this backdrop, it was unsurprising that Vietnamese researchers were said to be less productive than researchers in many other Southeast Asian countries (Hien, 2010).

### Independence.

Think tanks within government, particularly before the reform era, played a largely legitimating function (Rama, 2008). Institutes with a disciplinary focus were often tasked with reinforcing the Party’s political philosophy, from the arts to economics through philosophy. This was unsurprising given that both Vietnam’s Confucian heritage and Communist Party rule promoted a style of leadership that tended to interpret a difference of opinion amongst researchers, scientists and the *intelligentsia* as a form of subversion.

As we have discussed, there is a greater plurality of interests operating in a more open political environment. However, given that research institutes – both within VASS and those within ministries – faced continuous financial and political dependence on the State and the country’s history of enforced uniformity, researchers and research leaders have not been well equipped to engage with new ideas in a self-confident and critical way. They subsequently tended to think twice before articulating potentially critical research, for fear of being censured through salaries withheld or promotion prospects damaged (Rama, 2008). This was illustrated when Vietnam’s first genuinely private think tank, the Vietnam Institute of Development Studies, was effectively closed down after it challenged the government’s approach in areas such as finance, economics and education through regular seminars and in newspaper commentary.

As a result, most of the institutes have focussed on tactical issues and technical details and steered clear of issues that were perceived as sensitive (Nguyen, Bui, Pham, 2005). The Centre for Analysis and Forecasts (CAF, 2006) went further to suggest that there remained a tendency amongst policymakers to ask researchers to undertake research to support arguments and evidence in support of specific policies, rather than provide independent and objective evidence-based policy advice.



Image:  
Enrique Mendizabal

However, as we have alluded to, there are exceptions. CIEM are considered by some key informants to be more willing to take on issues such as the appropriate role of the State, as well as the direction of socialist-oriented market economy (Nguyen et al, 2005). Their analysis, overall, has tended to be critical, but it cognisant of the language it used, especially in relation to the “party line.” For instance, CIEM undertook research which suggested that the likelihood of poor households being targeted by poverty reduction programmes was only 50%. This contradicted research by MOLISA, which suggested that identifying poor households had been key to rapid poverty reduction. However, CIEM’s findings were buried deep inside a long report, and it was unlikely that CIEM would broadcast them to the public (Datta and Lan Huong, 2013) thus avoiding any direct confrontation.

Critique did not necessarily challenge but tried to pursue innovation within existing constraints. Institutes are thus unlikely to take on sensitive issues such as fuel subsidy reform, border disputes with China or corruption, even if it is in exchange for donor funding.

Nevertheless, “risk-taking” behaviour is shaped by historical, political and economic reasons. The fact that CIEM essentially developed the plans associated with the Doi Moi economic reforms, were once of equal rank to other ministries, and had a long tradition of critiquing government policy (albeit subtly and behind closed doors), probably empowered recent CIEM leaders to be critical and be listened to. Moreover, as mentioned above, public funding made up only a fraction of their total operational costs, which afforded them more political space as



government had fewer tools with which to discipline outspoken leaders. Political umbrellas for individuals could also provide leaders with the power to speak out. However, these could over time be dismantled with new more powerful umbrellas emerging: a former president of CIEM who “spoke out” saw their prospects of promotion dashed.

### Organisational maturity.

Being a researcher in Vietnam often means being part of several overlapping social and political networks – as alluded to in our theoretical framework. Indeed, a researcher’s ability to produce knowledge is often dependent on having good relations with those higher up the hierarchy and being generally well integrated in various networks. However, given the often-excessive bureaucracy within institutes and the need to secure various permissions, individual researchers make attempts to minimise formal links between an externally funded project and the research institution to maintain more control over the project. As a result, researchers can become relatively individualistic in their work and when they do find consultancy work, tend to keep their activities secret from each other (Zink, 2011). Hierarchical networks also mean it is difficult for issues to be debated and contested openly. Nevertheless, projects funded by outsiders can often create a space for researchers to write, speak and organise effectively and in ways that can, to some degree, challenge those higher up the hierarchy.

### Working across institutional boundaries

The high degree of individuality described earlier, coupled with institutional competition means that researchers from different institutes find it difficult to work together formally on a research project. Formal horizontal networks, once established, tend not to remain active for very long. Erin Zink describes how a leading scientist brought together 15 national “NGOs” located in Hanoi that were considering or carrying out climate change projects, while also attracting additional partners from other national NGOs, universities, and even private enterprises. However, after a relatively short while the network became inactive (Zink, 2011).

Image:  
ILO in Asia and the Pacific on Creative Commons



Externally funded formal networks attempted to overcome this collective action problem. Box 2 below lists three examples of foreign funders' efforts. However, the authors' own observations suggest that formal networks have resembled research programmes where institutes did not necessarily collaborate. Moreover, the absence of a legal status for a network resulted in one of the 'members' "stepping up" to channel funding towards the others, which often created tension. Policy research therefore has remained narrowly framed, lacking linkages with broader national development priorities (Jones and Young, 2008). This is problematic – especially for issues such as food safety, the environment and disaster preparedness – which require expertise and coordinated action from a range of ministries. Given the reluctance of think tanks to work together to address complex problems, the highest level of government has established more senior research institutions, such as the now disbanded Prime Ministers Research Commission (PMRC).

### Box 2: Formal development partner funded research networks

Examples of donor funded attempts to establish networks include the following:

- The Vietnam Development Forum was established in 2004 by a joint research project between the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo and the National Economics University in Hanoi, to promote interactions between researchers and policymakers through workshops and seminars.
- The Vietnam Economic Research Network: Supported by IDRC since its inception in 2002, members have studied international trade, competitiveness, employment, poverty and inequality. The network quickly expanded to include researchers from across the country and established strong and credible links to policymakers and development practitioners.
- The MISPA Project was funded by the French Embassy, first for ICARD and then with IPSARD. Policy questions raised by policymakers of MARD were turned into research projects through MISPA's research fund. Research groups nationwide can bid for these projects (From Datta and Lan Huong, 2013).

However, even at this level, formal units made up of diverse institutional interests resulted in "inefficiencies." For instance, the National Advisory Council on Monetary and Fiscal Issues, which reported to the Prime Minister – and chaired by the deputy prime minister and vice chaired by the governor of the State Bank and the chair of the National Financial Monitoring Committee – tended to function poorly. Members, who happened to be senior officials, were too busy to meet regularly, reaching consensus was challenging, and given members' official interests, there were doubts about the quality of the advice. As a result, the Prime Minister was said to have come to rely more on informal units or "collaboratives."

Collaboratives were official but "non-formal" units – meaning they were officially invited to form, but lacked access to an office or secretariat – set up to provide advice to senior officials. Some of the Party's key committees, which oversee government ministries, also rely on advice from such groupings. People in such units are usually experts in government agencies or so-called "wise men" who top-level officials trusted rather than members of the research community (Nguyen et al, 2005). These experts are typically selected for their seniority, their prior experience in decision making and personal relations, rather than their analytical and methodological skills (Dang, 2005). Members also felt more at ease to speak as individuals rather than representatives of their various agencies. This is not a new

phenomenon (Rama, 2008). Dissatisfied with official economic advice, leaders established units made up of intellectuals and experts to provide objective advice during the reform period. Although formal institutions such as the CIEM and the Institute of Economy at VASS were producing more rigorous and independent research, “informal” units remained highly active. Nevertheless, a senior member of an informal group that reported to the prime minister suggested that, to be more effective, he would need a team to undertake research for him, a role that Office of the Government (OoG) could potentially play.

## **Communication channels**

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The political and economic transition during the reform era saw the expansion of channels through which researchers could influence the policy debate. Whilst the circulation of – and comments made to – draft legal documents, together with private informal meetings continued to be important channels, the reform era saw researchers attending an increasing number of invitation-only technical workshops and seminars, as well as engaging with a larger number of media houses. We elaborate on some of these below.

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**Whilst the circulation of – and comments made to – draft legal documents, together with private informal meetings continued to be important channels [to inform policy], the reform era saw researchers attending an increasing number of invitation-only technical workshops and seminars, as well as engaging with a larger number of media houses.**

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### ***Circulation of legal documents:***

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Indicating the state’s preference for legality, the circulation of drafts of legal documents was the most common way in which (senior) researchers, particularly from public think tanks, engaged with policy. When faced with commenting on drafts, ministers usually asked appropriate general directors or research institute directors to respond with comments and suggested changes, who in turn might push requests further down the hierarchy to heads of departments or chief division officers. Given the often-heavy workload of officials and the weak incentives they had to engage, unless a draft contained controversial clauses, they tended not to spend a great deal of time in reviewing them.

This was likened by Naru and Nguyen (2010) to a postal service where agencies simply stamped and passed papers between them (Naru & Nguyen, 2010). In some cases, drafts were circulated amongst narrow and unrepresentative interests – on some occasions, only public officials, in other cases only business interests. Often, the time provided to comment on drafts was too brief (two days to assess hundreds of pages of text). In other cases, consultation was organised too late in the drafting process, when structural changes to the measures became extremely costly and impractical (Córdova, 2004). Nevertheless, numerous revisions could be made to a draft before National Assembly deputies voted indicating a highly iterative process. During the four years it took to draft the Enterprise Law, the committee prepared and consulted on more than 32 versions of the text (Stromseth, 2003). A preference for collaborative practices meant that this approach spared participants the possibility of having to confront one another where there was a difference in opinion.

### ***Collective social processes:***

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Technical workshops, conferences, seminars and meetings with stakeholders and experts were an important site for the production of knowledge as well as for exerting influence over

other actors and organisations (Zink, 2011). However, there were different types of workshops: namely those convened by researchers and funders and those convened by policymakers. Many seminars were designed to disseminate (usually donor-funded) supply driven research (which tended to occur frequently towards the end of the donor financial year). These workshops usually focussed on the delivery of research findings with limited discussion. Workshops were a common element of donor funded work, as they arguably helped to quickly consume and redistribute large amounts of funding and produce quantifiable and demonstrable results: people gathered, speeches delivered, production of meeting proceedings, as well as other measurable forms of impacts such as newspaper articles, mentions in annual reports and banners and posters (Zink, 2011).

Some workshops were held to present research that was commissioned specifically to inform a law-drafting process. For instance, a workshop was organised to identify key issues and recommendations related to the impact of economic crime provisions on business incentives, which was commissioned as an input to the amendment of the Penal Code in the November 1999 session of the National Assembly. Most of these meetings were by invitation only since public hearings were rare. Where senior officials were involved, a preference for collaboration and consensus influenced the style of policy discussion as well as who could say what and how. As a result, discussions were usually relatively controlled, participants avoided adversarial proceedings, great deference was given to seniority, and conflicting views were only subtly aired, if at all. Although alternative views could be expressed, the delivery of criticism, especially in the company of senior officials, even if subtle, carried with it some risk (of being considered an opponent), particularly if the speaker lacked a powerful patron.

In some cases, government held large-scale (usually donor-funded) consultation workshops which were open to the public. In the revision of a land law, a particularly contentious issue, a public workshop was organised to collect comments on a draft from a wide variety of stakeholders – including local authorities, mass organisations, SME's, members of the public and the mass media. In other instances, once a draft law was posted on a ministry's website for consultation, other organisations (such as the Vietnam Economic Association) convened workshops independently of government and sent the meeting proceedings to the chair of the drafting committee. In these cases, especially where participants were, say, researchers of similar rank, workshops could play host to lively discussions.

Across all types of workshop, participants were careful to frame issues technically, even if they had clear implications on the role of the state and the distributional consequences (as was the case with land reform). The boundaries of the discussion during workshops and meetings could be strictly marshalled, given the presence of party members in all organisations. This was especially so in meetings open to the public and journalists, which became patent when the Vietnam Institute of Development Studies (the country's first ever private think tank) was forced to close after it challenged the government's policy approach.

Where foreigners were present, Vietnamese officials were less likely to be frank with one another. Moreover, foreigners had to be careful not to take on issues that were considered "out of bounds." Apart from avoiding the topics of multi-party politics, human rights and civil society, it was also considered inappropriate to openly challenge the government on its internal business, as such issues were considered "family matters". For instance, Vietnamese delegates at a workshop on climate change in the National Assembly considered a question

about how the Minister for MONRE would work with his “competitors” at MARD insulting and a sign of donor arrogance (Zink, 2011).

**Private informal meetings:** these were one of the primary means through which policymakers acquired information. Ministers and their deputies often sought policy advice from research institute directors, their deputies and/or departmental heads, through one-to-one meetings to help them understand issues and construct arguments. Senior UN officials were known to have private meetings with their counterparts in government over a glass of wine in an informal setting. Such meetings would often serve as a way of conveying information considered sensitive that was unlikely to be formalised in writing or verbalized in front of an audience.

### Media coverage:

The media was increasingly serving as a forum for policy debate. Whereas media outlets were once invited to report on policy once it was drafted, drafting committees now invited journalists to publish selected drafts and comments from consultation workshops. Proceedings in the National Assembly were also likely to be reported and discussed on the front pages of prominent newspapers. For instance, the National Assembly Standing Committee decided to publish the 1995 draft LPDI in its publication, the *Nhan Dan* (The People) (Stromseth, 2003).

Senior members of staff from research institutes such as CIEM or IPSARD regularly appeared on television and were interviewed by outlets such as Vietnam Net. Articles based on research written by national and international researchers and consultants were often published and widely discussed in the print and television media. CIEM and VCCI actively sought to mobilize grass-roots support through systematic cooperation with the media to promote public debate on business constraints in the drafting of the 1999 Enterprise Law (Mallon, 2004).

However, sensitive policies which challenged the legitimacy of the Party (such as border disputes with China and the weakening of the economy) were rarely debated in public and those officials who violated this principle were likely to be censured (Vu, 2009). Some editors continued to receive guidelines regarding which issues should be covered and how, which issues should be avoided and by their absence from the discussion, which issues were not sufficiently sensitive to merit special oversight (Zink, 2011).

Despite varying levels of state control, ambitious and conscientious reporters and editors have pushed the envelope whenever they can (Vu, 2009). Some media outlets tended to have more editorial space than others. Physical distance from central government appeared to increase editorial independence. Most of Vietnam’s progressive papers were based in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) which, in a context of political decentralisation, had gained considerable power in relation to the centre. Political distance also appeared to be a crucial factor, as evidenced by the relative freedom exhibited by papers owned by mass organisations, particularly youth groups who, as a result saw censorship as less of a constraint on their work. For example, during the Avian Influenza outbreak in the mid-2000s, most of the media was essentially used as a propaganda and mobilisation tool of the state. However, a few outspoken newspapers such as *Tuoi Tre*, based in the South, conveyed a more populist narrative, exposing the government’s attempts at a cover up, reflecting the perspective of the people affected by the outbreak, and scrutinising central and local officials. Officials were, however, quick to prevent further public scrutiny into the policy process (Vu, 2009).

However, for outlets not dependent on state funding, providing commentary on policy was increasingly difficult in a context in which sensational news stories were more likely to generate wide circulation and, crucially, advertising revenues.

On several pertinent topics, frank discussions had taken place in newspapers and on key internet sites, where people expressed opinions and suggested alternatives. However, many media outlets suffered from a dearth of credible information. If there was analysis, it was often not made public and debated strictly behind closed doors. In fact, very little analysis concerning important policy issues was made public. Only in a few cases did media outlets have the capacity to collect its own facts or conduct its own analysis. Hence debates, if they did emerge tended to be dominated by several government interests, which did not necessarily see eye to eye and were probably also using the media to gather support for their positions (Zink, 2011).



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### Influence:

As mentioned earlier, key agencies such as CIEM, ILSSA or IPSARD could produce important technical inputs to policy making. However, influence was usually a result of research leaders with strong personalities – often seen as “bullet proof” mediators – who could convince the most senior officials, with whom they had a strong relationship, of the merit of new ideas without risk being labelled a radical. For important reforms, the mere technical soundness or attractive packaging of technical inputs was not enough. Senior leaders had to be convinced that recommendations were informed by the country’s context, would serve its best interests, and would be compatible with political stability (Rama, 2008). Nevertheless, good quality research provided leaders with an important resource with which to persuade others.

Think tank advice which drew on neoliberal ideas had limited uptake in Vietnam. Many policymakers found such ideas difficult to engage with. Not surprisingly, discussions on political matters between the government and Western donors – who often draw on such

advice – were not always productive, with people often talking past each other. Westerners appeared stuck in a liberal democratic mind-set whilst the values of the Vietnamese were perceived as fixed and immutable (Gainsborough, 2007).

## Conclusions

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As a result of a Soviet-inspired system and reflecting the Confucian tradition of formal education and bureaucratic service dating back almost two thousand years, researchers and think tanks have played a prominent role at the frontline of government in Vietnam (Zink, 2011). During the reform era, the space for knowledge production including think tanks expanded as the context changed and new actors emerged. This has meant both continuity and change in think tank roles and functions. While the emergence of more robust government think tanks, business associations, quasi-NGO research organisations and media entities did not amount to the rise of an entirely new tradition of think tanks, it did imply that organisations are increasingly adopting new characteristics and behaviours. They have been able to exploit, for instance, the support provided by an international community keen to strengthen research capacity in Vietnam, whilst the growth of the media has also opened opportunities for think tanks to explore communicating research ideas to new audiences and in different ways.

However, despite the scattering of power during the reform era, central government retains a near monopoly on the production of policy relevant knowledge with think tanks concentrated in and around Hanoi, with a lesser but significant number in and around Ho Chi Minh City. Ensuring most researchers and think tanks are employed by (and thus contained within) the State has enabled the latter to access research and its benefits, but also stifle potential challenges from the middle-class intellectual elite (Nguyen-Vo, 2008). While the state has enabled researchers to engage with new ideas and practices partly through interaction with foreign actors, they have also insisted that researchers refrain from challenging its interests.

Furthermore, think tanks in Vietnam are, for the most part, fulfilling an instrumental role in pursuing the state's own objectives. This does not, by itself, delegitimise them. The nature of the Vietnam's developmental state provides such an opportunity – which secures long term funding in exchange for problem driven research. Nevertheless, through long term efforts – such as CIEM's – or through more formal mandates – as in the case of VASS's think tanks – have been able to provide independent and, at times, critical advice. Their lack of public visibility should not be understood to reflect low capacity or censorship. Rather, it reflects a preference, across society, to pursue more private, social and hierarchical forms of influence.

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