

Assessment of the Think Tank Fund's Grants to the Economic Research Center, Baku

DRAFT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY¹

This paper reports the results of an assessment the Economic Research Center's (ERC) use of three years' of institutional support provided by the Think Tank Fund (TTF) during 2006-2009. This is an *ex post* assessment that relies on a substantial amount of background material provided to the consultant, information on the ERC web site, responses to a questionnaire sent to ERC for completion prior to the consultant's Baku visit, critically reading and rating ERC policy research reports and shorter papers, and interviews with ERC management, staff, and Board members, and members of the policy community during an eight day visit to Baku. Within the policy community the consultant met with seven persons in the international community, staff of two NGOs, and three government officials. Those interviewed were selected by ERC and the Center arranged the meetings.

Major findings include that the Azeri policy community certainly views ERC as a successful contributor to the country's policy development, perhaps the single most successful civil society contributor. In an extremely difficult political environment it has succeeded in having its work taken seriously, even if government officials are unlikely to acknowledge its work explicitly. As one respondent stated, "ERC has played a huge role as a model of other think tanks to show that they can survive and it has demonstrated how to work with government." The TTF's support for the public relations and external communications functions certainly appear to have contributed to ERC's "strong brand" and the high quality of its dissemination program.

The record on the quality of policy research reports and shorter papers produced by ERC over the period that were read by the consultant is less positive. There is substantial scope for improvement in the organization of these reports and in the depth of the analytic work.

ERC's state of institutional development is impressive. Its public relations and communications operations are first rate. The basic elements of a strong human resources program are rapidly being put in place, although some improvements are possible. Financial management in terms of tracking project costs and audit policy is extremely good. Without the TTF grants these systems would be severely underdeveloped at this time. Indeed, one can say that the institutional development is consistent with a substantially larger organization, and the present structure will serve ERC well should it expand in the coming years. On the other hand, administrative weaknesses include the quality control system and the lack of an established overhead rate as conventionally defined. The later will be much more important going forward when the Center has greater opportunity for charging sponsors its full rate, something that has not been possible under the arbitrary rules of foundation and donor grants.

The next couple of years will be a transition period in terms of evolving sources of support for ERC. USAID and Oxfam have signaled lower program levels, in part because Azerbaijan's high oil revenues give the country greater means to support civil society organizations than those less well endowed. Unfortunately, private support for policy research organizations and other NGOs has yet to materialize. Consequently, ERC will be working to establish relations with European and Central Asian sponsors that could result in project revenue from these sources.

The consultant's general recommendation is for continued TTF support for ERC during its transition period. Two years should be sufficient. Support would be warranted on the ground of

¹ Sam Haddaway provided very useful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

strengthening Azeri public policy alone. However, if the ERC is successful in making its funding transition, it will constitute a permanent positive fixture in the Azeri policy development arena.

There are three areas where the recommended support should be targeted: sustaining the high quality administrative and communications functions and strengthening them where needed; upgrading ERC's analytic work; and supporting activities for the transition to new funding sources.

Administrative functions. Without sustained TTF funding for the staff who have developed these systems, some of these positions will be cut altogether or replaced with less expensive, less capable persons. The result will certainly be a significant degradation of the functions. As noted, quality control stands out as the area needing to be redesigned.

Stronger analytic work. If ERC is to partner successfully with European and Asian organizations, it needs to produce reports that are more analytically rigorous and better presented. The recommendation in this case is for mentors to be recruited to work with ERC staff on specific projects, rather than for staff to attend additional training courses. On-site assistance in the actual application of new techniques is a very powerful tool. ERC has had two experiences with such mentors and is very positive about this form of knowledge transfer.

Supporting the transition. Attracting support from organizations based outside Azerbaijan is important not only for the monetary support provided but also because it will give ERC greater perceived independence from the government. This will have a positive effect on its strength as a local institution. The consultant does not have specific recommendations here. Rather, it seems appropriate for ERC management to consider various options carefully and discuss them with TTF.

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1. Introduction

From November 2006 through 2009 the Think Tank Fund (TTF) has provided core and institutional support to the Economic Research Center (ERC) in Baku through a two-year grant followed by a one-year extension grant. The major uses of these funds by ERC include:

- funding key positions with professionals—Public Relations (PR), External Communications, Quality Control (QC), Human Resources (HR)-to improve ERC's operations in these areas,
- developing strategies for fundraising and for communications,
- contributing to purchases of certain equipment, and
- supplementing budgets of high priority policy projects.

The TTF commissioned the evaluation reported here. Its purpose is to

evaluate the overall capacity of ERC to identify relevant policy subjects and conduct quality policy research in Azerbaijan. The assessment should include three critical aspects of ERC work – policy analysis and research, communication and advocacy, and institutional management – in order to evaluate whether organization remains strategic and relevant in the very challenging policy making environment of Azerbaijan.²

This paper briefly describes how the evaluation was conducted and then sets forth the results of the assessment. The results are organized into three sections that correspond to the three areas listed in the above paragraph. It closes with recommendations.

² Taken from p.2 of the consultant's Terms of Reference.

2. Evaluation Structure

TTF provided the consultant with a substantial amount of background material and ERC's website was visited to obtain further information. The consultant studied other background materials on the Azeri economy and political situation to update his understanding since he last worked in Baku in 2006. The consultant sent a questionnaire to ERC for completion prior to his eight-day Baku visit in September 2009 to obtain information on topics such as staff count and distribution among positions, activity levels, communications practices, and coverage of the quality control system for written products and events.

Additional information was obtained through reading ERC policy research reports and shorter papers and through interviewing ERC management, staff, and Board members, and members of the policy community. In the policy community the consultant met with seven persons in the international community, staff of two NGOs,³ and three government officials.⁴ The consultant indicated the types of persons with whom he wanted to meet, then ERC selected the people to be interviewed and arranged the meetings. The list of persons interviewed is in Annex 1.

Each interview was guided by an interview form developed prior to the consultant's travel to Baku. The forms were based on the documents reviewed and the consultant's experience in similar assignments. For interviews with policy community members the same questions were asked of all respondents and they were requested to give responses to most questions using a four level scale. This made it possible to tabulate answers across respondents.

The objectives of the interviews were somewhat different depending on the position of the person that was being interviewed. For interviews with members of ERC, the task was to understand the current quality of operations and the extent to which they had improved over the past 2.5 years. For those with policy community members, the task was to gauge ERC's current effectiveness in the policy arena and how well it succeeds in communicating the results of its work using various formats—reports, roundtables, and so forth.

It should go without saying that in the absence of firm baseline information and the ability to control for other developments that affected ERC operations during the past three years, drawing a causal relationship between the TTF support and changes at ERC simply is not possible. However, there are a few places, particularly for institutional development, where the uniqueness of TTF support seems quite probable and the resulting improvement in operations attributable to the grant.

³ The two NGO representatives were interviewed together.

⁴ These figures overstate the effective sample sizes. Among the three public officials only one had had occasion to use ERC research in a policy or program implementation context. Among those in the donor community one had only very general knowledge of ERC.

3. Policy Research – Relevance and Quality

A think tank's primary goal is to produce high quality, relevant analytic work that informs the policy process and results in better policy making. The first two steps are the identifying topics that are of interest to policy makers and producing technically strong research that is reported to the policy community in an accessible format.⁵ This section discusses findings in these two areas.

It is worth noting that the TTF grant did not have a direct role in either the selection of research topics or in the improvement of staff research capacity. TTF did encourage ERC to focus its resources on policy issues important for the country and at the same time of interest to the government.

Policy Issues

Given that think tanks are dependent on outside funding, their choice of policy topics is to some degree constrained by funders' interests. On the other hand, think tank leaders are sometimes able to suggest high priority topics to their sponsors. ERC reported success in finding support for its priority projects: it succeeded in raising funds for 25 percent of such projects in 2008.

A review of the web site and the topics of the reports provided to the consultant strongly indicate that ERC is selecting topics of strong policy interest. These include major projects on measuring inflation, assessment of the efficacy of the targeted social assistance program, and the analysis of Azeri agriculture policies in the context of WTO accession.

The interviews with the international community and the small number of interviewed government officials paint a similar picture. As noted, the policy community questionnaire used a four-level response scale for most questions. The mean value of the responses was computed by assigning the value of 4 to the answer giving ERC the highest rating and the value of 1 giving it the lowest rating. Mean values are presented for all observations and for two subgroups: the donor community and local NGOs in one group, and public officials in the other. Each subgroup contains only a few respondents and the report comments on differences in the values among the subgroups only when the differences are very large.

Table 3.1 lists the relevant question asked about policy relevance and gives the mean values for it. The mean is a very solid 3.9 for ERC's work today, and the ratings were high for both subgroups. The view among the donor community and local NGOs is that ERC has improved in recent years in the extent of its targeting priority issues.

⁵ There are additionally occasions on which it is extremely valuable for a think tank to undertake analysis on important topics that are not then of interest to the policy community, with the goal of calling attention to the issue and educating the community.

Table 3.1 Policy Community Rating of Research Relevance

Question	Average Rating		
	Overall	Donor comm. & local NGOs	Public officials
Does ERC focus on issues that are of high priority?			
Now	3.9	4	3.5
2-3 years ago	3.4	3.4	3.5
Difference ^a	0.5	0.6	--
N ^b	7	5	2

a. Differences are computed using only those cases where the question was answered for both points in time.

b. N=The number of respondents and is defined as the smallest number for the three entries above, i.e., a respondent may have answered the question for only one point in time.

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Written Product Assessment

To obtain a sense of the structure and rigor of the research undertaken by ERC over the past several years, the consultant requested reports from ERC. Box 3.1 reproduces the specific request, as it is important to be clear on this point where the assessment results are reviewed. ERC selected and sent the consultant two sets of reports that they viewed as meeting the criteria of the request.

Box 3.1 Reports Requested for Review

- 3 policy research reports produced before the first TTF grant and 3 completed six months or more after the first grant became effective; those produced in the past year would be best. These can be journal articles that have been published, articles submitted but not accepted yet, reports to clients, etc. They should not be more than 50 pages long. They should not just report research results but thoroughly draw out the results' policy implications. Since I am not a Russian reader, they need to be in English.
- 3 policy briefs before and 3 policy briefs after the first TTF grants as described above. Again, they need to be in English.

Each document was reviewed against a defined set of criteria—one for policy research reports and one for policy briefs and similar shorter documents. The scoring sheets and instructions are provided in Annex 2. These criteria are essentially those used by referees of articles submitted for publication in peer-reviewed journals.⁶

The consultant read and scored eight essentially randomly selected reports, and the results are given in tables 3.1 and 3.2 below.⁷ Each “area rated” contains several specific questions that the reviewer must answer with a score from 1 to 10. The figures are composites of these individual ratings. The score in each cell can range between 0 and 100, where 100 is the best possible rating.⁸ Note that the review protocol instructs the reviewer to use the full 10-point range rather than scoring an area like an exam where 60 is failing. In this scoring, values in the 50-70 range indicate average performance.⁹

Table 3.1 Reading Scores for Policy Briefs and Short Papers^a

Area Rated	Year Report Was Completed				
	2007	2007	2007	2008	2009
Purpose explained, quality of analysis	60	10	50	83	48
Quality of presentation	65	28	83	77	50
Total	63	20	64	80	49

a. Scores are out of a possible 100 points.

⁶ This specific rating protocol is now being used in two large impact evaluations of think tank mentoring programs. Each report was scored using the appropriate sheet.

⁷ The consultant set aside one policy research report that turned out to be the final report for a project and was a summary of project activities, including some analysis. But it was very disjointed and the research was badly presented.

⁸ The figure in a cell is computed as the sum of the scores given to each item in an area divided by the maximum number of points possible in that area, with the result multiplied by 100. This procedure controls for the different number of items scored in a block and the possibility that an item might be skipped if it does not apply to the report being reviewed.

⁹ One can compare these scores with the average scores for policy research report reviews for 15 think tanks from as many developing and transition countries. Overall ERC is about in the middle.

Mean Score	Percent Distribution of Scores				
	0-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100
59.57	4.8%	15.7%	31.3%	26.5%	21.7%

Table 3.2 Reading Scores for Policy-Research Reports^a

Area Rated	Year Report Was Completed		
	2007	2007	2009
Purpose explained, quality of analysis	50	69	55
Quality of conclusions and policy implications	NA	10	75
Total	50	46	59

a. Scores are out of a possible 100 points.

The scores for neither the policy briefs nor the policy research reports are very high and no consistent pattern emerges as to which of the two broad areas is stronger.

There is no indication that scores improved over the period during which the sample reports were prepared, but the sample is too small to support a strong judgment on this point. The one 2009 research report was much more sophisticated than the earlier ones. However, it was so tightly addressed to the client, and the WTO in particular, that non-experts on agriculture issues generally would get very little from the conclusions and from the more rigorous parts of the presentation because it assumes reader familiarity with measures not commonly employed. Worth noting is that the ERC Chairman characterized the analytic work improving over the last few years from “mainly descriptive work” to “mostly in-depth policy analysis.”¹⁰

There are several general points that can be made about these reports’ limitations. Most have to do with their organization and presentation issues.

- The introductions are often weak. The purpose of the analysis is not well-defined, the specific points to be investigated are not clearly stated, and there is an absence of a statement of expectations or hypothesis. The structure of the report is not explained.
- Several papers are “marches through the data.” The paper just begins presenting descriptive findings. In some cases the logic to the ordering is not clear.
- Conclusions are often missing and in those reports where they are present those conclusions presented are frequently weak.

¹⁰ From “Basic Information” questionnaire completed by the Chairman prior to the consultant’s visit.

With respect to the analysis,

- Analysis is essentially descriptive. There is nearly a total absence of statistical tests in these documents. Even where two populations are being contrasted, e.g., program participants versus non participants, there are not even simple t-tests of the differences.
- There are very few literature citations. This is striking, for example, in a paper that reviews international practices in constructing the inflation index. This is about more than sharing sources with the reader: ERC should be substantiating its sources and taking advantage of the vast body of research, particularly the analytic methods already developed. Without clear references to the literature it is unclear whether their sources are the strongest and most relevant and whether they are taking advantage of work already done.

Another view of the research comes from the interviews of donor community members, public officials and NGOs. Table 3.3 gives the mean values for the two relevant questions. The same four point scale was used here as described above. The ratings given are respectable, on average 3.3 and 3.5 out of 4 points for the value of ERC's results a source of research and statistics and as a reliable source, respectively. Respondents also reported that they perceived an improvement in both areas over the past 2-3 years.

Some of those interviewed also volunteered critical comments about reports they had read. Some of these are listed in Box 3.2. There is no real contradiction between these comments and the scores just reviewed: ERC's results are indeed useful and fairly reliable, but they could be more useful and better presented. To be fair, positive comments were also made, one extremely so.¹¹

¹¹ This respondent said that five years ago the policy community looked to the World Bank for quality analytical work; today they look to ERC.

Table 3.3 Views on ERC Research

Question	Average Rating		
	Overall	Donor comm. & local NGOs	Public officials
Is ERC “a valuable source of research, including data and statistics?”			
Now	3.3	3.2	3.5
2-3 years ago	2.7	2.6	3.0
Difference ^a	0.6	0.8	0.5
N ^b	6	6	1
Is the information contained in ERC publications reliable?			
Now	3.5	3.4	4.0
2-3 years ago	3	2.8	3.5
Difference ^a	0.5	0.6	0.5
N ^b	8	6	2

a. Differences are computed using only those cases where the question was answered for both points in time.

b. N=The number of respondents and is defined as the smallest number for the three entries above, i.e., a respondent may have answered the question for only one point in time.

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Box 3.2 Selected Critical Comments on Report and Presentation Quality¹²

- “There is a lack of conclusions, and focused summary is needed.”
- “Not so reliable...very academic language. Too often a collection of laws or information with insufficient analysis and conclusions.”
- “At conferences where data and results were challenged ERC was not able to respond quickly to the criticism.”

In summary, ERC is working on important and timely topics. It has been successful in defining important subjects and securing money to work on them. The focus on relevant topics makes the work valuable to the Government. On the other hand, presentation and content of its analytical work can be significantly improved.

¹² One respondent was very negative and his comments are not included as they are judged to be an outlier.

4. Communications Strategy and Advocacy Efforts

Information was gathered from two sources to address questions under this heading. The first was information about communications practices obtained from ERC. This began with fairly detailed information on publication types and distribution policies and on various event types and invitation policies gathered in the questionnaire filled in before the consultant’s visit to Baku. Meetings with ERC staff during the visit covered strategies for developing the institution’s image and for preparing plans to communicate the results of major projects. The second source was interviews with policy community members about ERC’s effectiveness in the policy arena and, in this context, its communications activities.

Communications Strategy

A think tank’s communications strategy has two distinct elements. One is designed to establish its position and image in the policy market. The other is designed to promote the use of the organization’s policy research results in the policy process.

Current image. How well has ERC done in establishing a well-defined, favorable image in the policy market? To address this point we asked those interviewed (other than ERC staff): “How well does ERC communicate its mission, program, and activities, directly or indirectly?” Again the four point scale was used for the answers. Respondents awarded ERC high marks—with an overall score of 3.6 out of 4 points. Importantly, there is a sizable increase in the rating today versus 2-3 years ago, suggesting that the investment in external relations and PR allowed by TTF funding paid off.

Table 4.1 Views on ERC’s Success in Establishing Its Mission in the Public Mind

Question	Average		
	Overall	Donor comm. & local NGOs	Public officials
How well does ERC communicate its mission, program, and activities, directly or indirectly?			
Now	3.6	3.4	4.0
2-3 years before	2.8	2.4	3.7
Difference ^a	0.8	1.0	.3
N ^b	10	7	3

a. Differences are computed using only those cases where the question was answered for both points in time.

a-b. N=The number of respondents and is defined as the smallest number for the three entries above, i.e., a respondent may have answered the question for only one point in time.

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A review of the PR and External Communications activities through information presented to the consultant makes clear that the content of these functions is well conceived and well executed. ERC's operations in this area are very strong and a dramatic improvement over activities prior to the resources provided by TTF. Some further notes on this are provided below.

Project-specific communication strategies. The consultant asked ERC staff a series of questions about how the strategy for a major project is developed. It appears that the real effort goes into developing a plan during project proposal preparation and this is largely followed after the award. The process for developing the plan sounded sensible. Where needed for end-of-project effectiveness, for example, a working group including government officials, donors and others is created at the beginning of the project to get guidance on the research; the group meets during the project execution period. This creates a positive context for getting the results used. In short, there appears to be real tailoring of the communication strategy at the project level.

ERC's new Communications Strategy. ERC has recently developed a new strategy and it was shared with the consultant. It clearly builds on the external relations program of the past year or more. It also reflects the evolving fund raising strategy that is necessitated by the declining support in prospect for Azeri PROs from international NGOs and bilateral agencies, mostly because surging oil revenues suggest that local sources should replace international ones.

The consultant's view is that the strategy is not sufficiently explicit about the two missions communications must have in the future: (a) continuing to advance ERC's brand in the Azeri policy market and to a lesser degree the local revenue/support market, and (b) launching ERC more firmly in the international support market in the U.S., Europe and Central Asia (Asian Development Bank).¹³ A good deal of activity has already supported the second objective, including certain international visits by the Chairman and Deputy Chairman and ERC becoming active in numerous international think tank and NGO networks. The strategy would be clearer if its dual missions were more fully articulated at the outset and the following sections were explicitly organized to address each mission, rather than the current and somewhat ineffective merged presentation.

Effectiveness in the Policy Process

In many ways this is the most important section in the report: is ERC having a positive effect in the policy development arena? The short response is that ERC is perceived to be very effective. This view is nearly universal.

Before providing more information on this point, it is useful to consider the environment in which ERC operates, specifically, to explore the degree to which policy research is used in the policy development process (the market for ERC's product) and the receptivity of policymakers, i.e., government officials and MPs, to taking information from organizations like ERC. After exploring this point, the discussion turns to effectiveness.

Context. Respondents who are members of the donor community and local NGO staff were asked two kinds of questions about the policy environment to establish the market for products produced by ERC and similar organizations. The first inquired about the extent to which hard

¹³ The current Strategic Plan runs to 2010. The new five-year plan will be produced in October.

analysis and information is used in the policy development process. The second asked about the degree to which officials were open to accept input or using reports from such organizations. As shown in Table 4.2, the policy community's view are fairly negative, with ratings for today's situation hovering around 2.0, except for the use of analysis by government offices which has a score of 2.4. Perhaps surprising is the clear view that parliament uses analytic results less and is less open in receiving think tank input. On the other hand, there is positive news in that

Table 4.2 Views on the Policy Environment^a

Question	Donor comm. & local NGOs
How would you rate the frequency with which well-organized data, research and analysis are used by government agencies in policy making?	
Now	2.4
2-3 years before	1.6
Difference ^b	0.8
N ^c	7
How would you rate the frequency with which well-organized data, research and analysis are used by the parliament in policy making?	
Now	1.9
2-3 years before	1.6
Difference ^b	0.3
N ^c	6
Do you think that senior government officials are really willing to accept input or use reports from organizations like ERC?	
Now	2.2
2-3 years before	1.3
Difference ^b	0.9
N ^c	8
Do you think that MPs and parliamentary commissions are really willing to accept input or use reports from organizations like ERC?	
Now	2.1
2-3 years before	1.5
Difference ^b	0.6
N ^c	8

a. Questions not asked of government officials.

a-b. Differences are computed using only those cases where the question was answered for both points in time.

a-c. N=The number of respondents and is defined as the smallest number for the three entries above, i.e., a respondent may have answered the question for only one point in time.

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responses to all four questions exhibit a clear improvement over the past few years. Nevertheless, these interview results and the various cross country indexes of the quality of government and freedom of expression make clear that Azerbaijan's is a tough environment for ERC and other think tanks.

Effectiveness. Interviewees' views on two dimensions of effectiveness are recorded in Table 4.3. The top panel displays the results for two broad questions—one on the utility of ERC's policy recommendations and another on ERC's policy impact. Interestingly, respondents gave higher marks to ERC's influence than to the quality of its policy recommendations. Effectiveness appears to have increased somewhat more over the past few years than recommendation quality, although the small number of respondents makes this conclusion uncertain.

Table 4.3 Views on ERC's Effectiveness in the Policy Arena

Question	Average Rating		
	Overall	Donor comm. & local NGOs	Public officials
Overall effects			
Are ERC's policy recommendations helpful?			
Now	3.1	2.8	3.7
2-3 years before	2.7	1.8	4.0
Difference ^a	0.4	1.0	--
N ^b	6	5	1
Does ERC's work positively impact public policy or program administration?			
Now	3.4	3.5	3.0
2-3 years before	2.4	2.4	2.5
Difference ^a	1.0	1.0	0.5
N ^b	7	5	2
ERC events			
How do you rate the substantive content of these events?			
Now	3.4	3.2	4.0
2-3 years before	3.0	2.8	3.5
Difference ^a	0.4	0.4	0.5
N ^b	6	4	2
Did the events include the "right people," i.e., those most concerned and knowledgeable about the issue including government officials?			
Now	3.5	3.3	4.0
2-3 years before	2.9	2.5	4.0
Difference ^a	.6	0.8	--
N ^b	8	6	2

a. Differences are computed using only those cases where the question was answered for both points in time.

^{a-b} N=The number of respondents and is defined as the smallest number for the three entries above, i.e., a respondent may have answered the question for only one point in time.

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The second effectiveness dimension concerns ERC's events, in particular the strength of the substantive presentations and whether the "right" people attend them. Strong substance is essential because without it the event's influence on promoting change will be minor at best.

Even though it is said that in Azerbaijan government officials are not disposed to attend civil society organizations' events, these officials are the very persons who have to act to effect policy change. Their absence undermines events. Therefore, it is important for PROs to make a maximum effort to achieve their participation. The entries in the table's lower panel show that in both areas, respondents rated ERC quite positively. (Interestingly, the two officials who responded to the "right people" question gave the highest marks.) Most respondents also thought that ERC was doing better in getting officials to participate than in previous years.

Some flavor of the discussion with the respondents about ERC's role in the policy process is captured in a few of the more memorable comments listed in Box 4.1.

• **Box 4.1 Comments on Effectiveness in the Policy Process**

- "Officials are reading their reports."
- "Influence is strongest where government does not have its own data or analysis. If the "supplier" in such circumstances has a good reputation, then it can be quite influential. Example is of work on the Law of Municipal Responsibilities. ERC was central in producing a factual policy note that then was used by the government. But these officials will not publically recognize ERC's help."
- "Work on the inflation index was very successful."
- "Much more effective now than three years ago, without a doubt."

Partnering. A frequent observation is that think tanks can significantly increase their policy impact by partnering with advocacy NGOs to deliver a common message. It is also observed that consulting partners early is critical, rather than trying to recruit them after the analysis is completed. How well does ERC rate in such partnering? Quite well for both types and improving in recent years, according to the responses summarized in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4 Views on ERC’s Partnering with Other Organizations

Question	Average Rating		
	Overall	Donor comm. & local NGOs	Public officials
Does ERC effectively partner with domestic civil society organizations in developing analysis and working for change?			
Now	3.2	3.7	2.0
2-3 years before	2.5	2.7	2.0
Difference ^a	0.7	1.0	--
N ^b	4	3	1
How well does ERC do in consulting with members of the public and CSOs to obtain input or information?			
Now	3.7	3.9	3.0
2-3 years before	3.2	3.2	3.0
Difference ^a	0.5	0.6	--
N ^b	5	4	1

a. Differences are computed using only those cases where the question was answered for both points in time.

b. N=The number of respondents and is defined as the smallest number for the three entries above, i.e., a respondent may have answered the question for only one point in time.

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Summary

Two striking characteristics in ERC’s communications and policy effectiveness are the consistency of the positive views of those interviewed *and* the assessment that ERC has been steadily improving along the various dimensions. Reducing the interview discussions to numeric scores robs the description of much of its color, but scores are clear on the positive nature of overall findings.

5. Management

The consultant explored four areas of ERC internal operations: human resources, quality control, financial management, and governance. Information on these points was obtained from reading various TTF-ERC project documents, presentations by and interviews with the germane ERC staff, and interviews with non staff members of the Management Board and Advisory Board.

Human Resources

HR is an area explicitly supported by the TTF grants. The grants have resulted in the transformation of this function from a few tasks handled as necessity demanded to one characterized by professionalism. Results include the creation and implementation of job application forms and a standard, orderly hiring procedure; creation of files on staff members; production of an Administrative Guide for employees (hours, holidays, etc); and, creation of an annual staff evaluation system (just being implemented).¹⁴

As impressive as these accomplishments are, there are areas where more could be done, and the timing seems right for undertaking some of these. These areas are:

1. Staff incentives: the research staff could be more strongly motivated by two changes. (1) The names of those who author reports should appear on the title page; in the reports reviewed by the consultant this was generally not the case. (2) Position levels should be introduced for researchers, e.g., Research Assistant...Senior Research Associate, where none exists now. This would create a career ladder; importantly, promotions give a way to explicitly recognize and reward researcher development.
2. A formal orientation session for new employees should be installed. A key element would be an explanation of ERC's mission and philosophy, so that the staff from the outset understands these fundamental points and works accordingly. Various administrative functions would also be covered and the IT system introduced.
3. An annual training plan, informed by the results of the staff assessments, should be prepared. It need not be elaborate but the tasks to be accomplished should be stated.
4. Senior researchers should make presentations on their work to the staff. The presentations could even be practice for conference presentations. These could be adjusted somewhat from the conference version to give more attention to the methods employed and analysis performed so as to be an explicit tutorial for less advanced staff.

¹⁴ The consultant was somewhat surprised that the HR team had not seen the reference book, *Managing Think Tanks*, which covers these tasks in detail.

Quality Control

ERC has a formal QC process that was created in the past couple of years and is a result of the TTF grant. A reviewer (called an “editor” within ERC) is appointed for each written product that is a candidate for publication. The reviewer is selected based on input from the Chairman, the author, and the coordinator for the work. The reviewer is required to provide written comments and this is followed by a meeting of the three persons who selected the reviewer and the reviewer to discuss the remarks.¹⁵ External reviewers are paid.

In principle, presentations are subject to review before they are made, through an internal “dry run” presentation, although senior staff can be exempted. The Deputy Chairman stated that he regularly makes the practice presentations and believes his presentations are much improved as a result.

For reports to clients and similar documents not intended for formal publication, the internal review falls to the Chairman and Deputy Chairman for substance and the QC officer for format and structure.

One ERC senior researcher indicated that a significant problem in the review process was the lack of the tradition in Azerbaijan of structuring research-policy papers in the classic format, beginning with a statement of the issue, then defining how the question will be researched, analytic method, results, and recommendations based squarely on the findings. This tradition influences both report authors and reviewers. Additionally, there is little expectation on the part of government officials of reports being organized in the standard (Western) way. Officials reportedly are seldom interested in the details of the methods employed.

That said, it is the task of the quality control officer to review reports to ensure that the standard organization is followed. But senior management stated that the low wages they can pay the QC officer means that this person is not very capable of critically reviewing reports even in these terms.

The official system, as defined, should protect ERC from poor quality documents being published. The open question remains as to how the lower quality reports read by the consultant got through this system. Either these documents fell into a class that is exempt from the process or those reviewing them either did a sloppy job or have not fully absorbed the applicable standards. It seems likely that all these factors played a part. The discrepancy is troublesome and warrants attention.

Financial Management

Three particular areas were selected for assessment: the information on expenditures of a project provided to the team leader over the project’s implementation period; the existence of an “overhead rate,” as usually defined; and audit policy and its implementation.

Cost reports to team leaders. It is critical for team leaders to have timely information on the expenditures to date on each project so that costs can be effectively controlled. ERC has in place

¹⁵ Apparently the reviews are not kept for possible review by the supervisor at the time of staff assessment. They should be.

a sophisticated system for tracking project costs and produces regular monthly expenditures reports. Reports are provided to team leaders three days after the end of the month—a remarkably short period of time. (Standard times among U.S. think tanks are 10-14 days.) The Finance Department uses software purchased for this purpose, which was purchased in January 2007 with internal funds.

Overhead rate. ERC does not have an overhead rate as conventionally defined. It has had little incentive to develop one because the donors that have funded projects have set arbitrary maximum rates for their grants. In the future, new clients are in prospect according to the Communications Plan, which is based on the evolving new strategic plan. Sponsors will include organizations such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank that are ready to pay full project costs. Therefore, ERC should develop a comprehensive, realistic and fully defensible rate.

ERC has adopted a somewhat complex payment arrangement for its two full-time researchers under which each has two contracts: a labor (regular employment) contract for a portion of the person's time that pays a modest share of the total monthly payment; and, a service (fixed-price) contract for each research project on which the person works.¹⁶ Compensation is in principle limited so that the researcher is not paid in total more than the amount for a standard work week. This arrangement has the advantage of limiting ERC's liabilities in case there is not sufficient work to occupy these researchers full time. On the other hand, it embodies limitations. One is that the incentive under a fixed-price contract is to do the work agreed in the shortest amount of time in order to maximize the implicit hourly wage rate. Clearly this militates against the analyst experimenting in the analysis with alternative approaches, etc. when he believes the standard approach will be accepted. It also appears that the arrangement results in the Center covering fringe benefits for these researchers from its own resources. That is, there is no charge in the grant from the sponsor for fringe benefits associated with the fixed priced contract. In effect, then, fringes are all paid through the labor contract. It would seem sensible for the two full-time staff to have alternative contractual arrangements under which all compensation flows through the labor contract.

Audit policy. This policy is highly progressive. Beginning with the accounts for 2007, ERC has had an annual financial audit, even though it was not required by law. The audit is conducted to international standards by an Azeri firm or individual auditor. Two sponsors conducted audits of the use of funds for the projects they support. In all cases the audit reports have been positive. The results are shared with the Management Board. One Management Board member is charged with specific responsibility in this area.

Governance

The consultant selected two important areas for assessment: (a) the contribution of the Management Board and the Advisory Board to overall management and the extent of senior researchers' involvement in internal operations, and (b) as presenters of the ERC's results to the policy community and as promoters for ERC in international venues.

¹⁶ Other researchers do not have labor contracts and work only on a project-by-project consulting basis.

The Boards' roles. The Management Board (MB) consists of seven individuals elected by ERC's General Assembly, which is composed of 59 individuals who support ERC with a monthly contribution of AZN10.¹⁷ The MB in turn elects the ERC Chairman. Presently, three Board members, including the Chairman, are drawn from ERC staff and the other four are independent. The MB meets monthly, although emergency meetings can be called at any time.

The MB is very active and essentially every decision of any consequence is made by it. The issues it considers include nearly all management decisions, among them hiring decisions, staff salaries, and confirmation of expenditures for equipment over a low amount. The MB officially approves acceptance of new grants and contracts.

The MB is also very active in determining ERC's strategy. Members fully participated in the development of the recently completed Communications Strategy and will be similarly involved in the Strategic Plan. It also discusses certain ERC policy positions, particularly those where government sensitivities could be involved. In all of these deliberations the views of the Advisory Board are also taken into account.

The overall picture is one where very little decision making, on public policy positions or institutional management, is delegated to the Chairman alone. Based on the interviews with three non-staff board members, it appears that MB operates in a collegial fashion and that the Chairman is comfortable sharing his authority to such a degree.

The Advisory Board consists of five members and meets six times per year. A typical agenda includes a report on the progress made on ongoing projects since the last meeting, with the Board perhaps giving advice. Strategic questions and plans are also discussed. For example, the recently developed Communications Strategy was presented in draft and discussed. Audit results are shared with the Board. Consistent with good practice, the Chairman meets with new Board members to orient them on the Board's work.

Senior staff roles. In the consultant's interviews with international community members during the first three days of his visit, a few respondents noted the Chairman's prominence in ERC's public image. The Chairman, Gubad Ibadoglu, is nearly universally admired for his technical competence, integrity, leadership in the NGO community, effectiveness in the policy arena, and his efforts to develop ERC into a first-class institution. At the same time concern was expressed about ERC being overly dependent on Gubad. Two of these comments illustrate the point:

- "Gubad is a brand, definitely."
- "Gubad is "too much and everywhere. ERC is overly dependent on him. The dependency is clear when he leaves for training for several months—ERC goes into hibernation."

The consultant explored this issue during later interviews, particularly with members of the Management Board. The composite picture is one where Gubad is certainly the most prominent ERC staffer but responsibility is significantly shared. Similarly, in reading ERC's semi-annual activity reports, Gubad's activities are overwhelmingly prominent, especially in terms of meetings and honors.

¹⁷ These funds are critical for ERC because of the arbitrary limitations on overhead rates imposed by donors.

At the same time, day-to-day administrative decisions with ERC flow to the Chairman. In a small organization with a flat organizational structure this may be impossible to avoid. Overall, the international community's views may result from being aware of only part of ERC's activities and strategy for staffing them. For example, they have little reason to know about the extent of participation in international conferences and who is representing ERC.

That said, there are strong indicators of a role that is less than all-dominating:

- The Management Board is dominant in ERC's decision making.
- About half of ERC's presentations and appearances in 2008 were made by staff other than the Chairman.
- ERC has been increasingly active in participating in international events as part of its funding diversification strategy. The Deputy Chairman represents ERC at a significant share of these events.

ERC needs to be vigilant on this point and actively work to diversify those representing it. At the same time, there are numerous occasions where the events require ERC's leader to be present, e.g., a meeting with the Norwegian Ambassador.

ANNEXES

Annex 1

List of Persons Interviewed

International Community

Michael Kunz, Country Director
Counterpart International

Shovkat Alizada, Country Director
Oxfam GB

Farda Asadov, Executive Director
Open Society Foundation-Support
Foundation

Farid Talyshli, Economist
World Bank

Gursel Aliyev, Country Director
Caucasus Research Resource Center

Jon Ramberg, Ambassador
Embassy of Norway

Nailya Safarova, Country Director
Switzerland State Secretariat for
Economic Cooperation

Public Sector

Babek Hussein, Leading Expert
Ministry of Labor and Social Protection
of the Population

Farid Bakshiyev, Head of the
International Department Central Bank of
Azerbaijan Republic

Azeri Non Governmental Organizations

Sanubar Nazarova, Coordinator
Ayatkin Asgarova, Coordinator
NGO Network

Economic Research Center

Chairman
Gubad Ibadoglu, Chairman

Communications Strategy
Nigar Mammadova
Dunya Jamalova

Quality Control
Tural Mammadov
Nurana Ismayilova

Human Resources
Jeyran Nasibova
Lala Jafarova

Financial Management
Anar Bayramov

Research Analysis Department
Vusal Gasimli

Non Staff Management Board Members
Fuat Rasulov
Eldar Gojayev
Elshad Mikayilov

Azay Guliyev, Chairman
Council of State Support to NGOs under
the President of the Azerbaijan Republic

Advisory Board
Naila Balayeva

Annex 2

Scoring Forms and Guides for Report Reviews

2.1 Scoring Sheet to Use in Assessing Policy Briefs or Other Documents Aimed Explicitly at Advancing a Policy Position

Document Name	
Year document was published	
Name of CSO	
City & country	
Name of Reviewer	
Date:	
Document was prepared as part of TAP project?	Yes: No:

	Question	score ^a
A.1	<p>What is the purpose of the paper? (record number in next column)</p> <p>1. Call attention to a pressing policy issue +2. Define an issue and propose a way to address it +3. Other (name) --</p> <p>Reviewers will fill in sections A and D for all documents; and will fill in one of either section B or C depending on the type of document. B is for documents identified above as type #2; and C for those identified as #1. For those identified as #3 select either B or C as appropriate.</p>	
A.2	Purpose of the Brief is clear and the issue well-defined (1-10)	
B	For Briefs that define an issue and ways to address it (item 2) in A.1	
B.1	Is the problem definition supported properly with facts? (1-10)	
B.2	Are options for addressing the issue articulated well? (1-10) (A stronger presentation is one that does advance only a single solution.)	
B.3	Are the criteria for judging the alternative solutions well-articulated? (1-10)	
B.4	Are the reasons for the superiority of the recommended solution clearly stated? (1-10)	
B.5	Is the analysis underlying the recommendation sufficiently explained that the reader can judge it? 1-10)	
B.6	Is the presentation of the recommended action comprehensive, i.e., addresses costs, administrative issues, as well as the program or other action to be taken? (1-10)	
	Points sub-total for Sections A and B	
C	For briefs that define a pressing policy issue	

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C.1	Are the public policy dimensions of the problem well developed and presented, i.e., why is this an issue deserving policy attention? (1-10)	
C.2	Is the dimension of the problem, e.g., the share of children not attending classes, well-developed and based on credible sources and analysis? (1-10)	
C.3	Are “next steps” defined, i.e., now that the problem is defined, who should take responsibility for addressing it in some way? (1-10)	
C.4	Is the recommendation (C.3) sensible and well-justified? (1-10)	
	Points sub-total for Sections A and C	
D	All Briefs	
D.1	Is the presentation engaging, i.e., is the reader motivated to continue to read? (1-10)	
D.2	Is the level of presentation suitable for the policymaker or “intelligent layman”? (1-10)	
D.3	Is the presentation succinct, closely reasoned, and of the appropriate length? (1-10)	
	Points sub-total for Section D	
	Total points for Sections A, B, and D or Sections A, C, and D	
E	Reviewer’s summary rating comments	

a. 1 is worst score and 10 is the best.

2.2 Explanation of the Scoring for Policy Briefs

	Question	Score ^a =1	Score=10
B	For Briefs that define an issue and ways to address it in A.1 of the scoring sheet		
B.1	Is the problem definition supported properly with facts?	Essentially no facts are presented. There seems to be an assumption that everyone agrees that this is a problem and no further explanation is needed.	Facts are succinctly and effectively marshaled to document the problem.
B.2	Are options for addressing the issue articulated well? (A stronger presentation is one that does not advance only a single solution.)	No options other than the one favored by the authors is even described, not to mention being assessed.	The relevant options are fairly stated and described.
B.3	Are the criteria for judging the alternative solutions well-articulated?	No criteria are explicitly or even implicitly stated. Everything seems to hinge on the authors' judgment.	The criteria are stated clearly and the set is complete, i.e., the criteria are not biased through omission.
B.4	Are the reasons for the superiority of the recommended solution clearly stated?	No. The reader is in effect asked to accept the recommendation simply on the basis of the authors' judgment.	A full discussion of the reasons for the selection of the favored options is presented.
B.5	Is the analysis underlying the recommendation sufficiently explained that the reader can judge it?	The analysis is simply missing or so obscure that the reader really cannot understand it. The author does not reference other documents where a full explanation can be found.	The analysis is carefully explained and presented, given the space limitations of the policy brief. Other supporting studies are cited.
B.6	Is the presentation of the recommended action comprehensive, i.e., addresses costs, administrative issues, as well as the program or other action to be taken?	Little-to-nothing is said about the short-term to long-term costs or administrative issues. The brief does not raise transition issues (from the current to the new policy) that are involved.	The author provides careful and comprehensive cost estimates over a reasonable time period (5-years) and accurately describes the administrative issues that will be involved in the new action.
C	For briefs that define a pressing policy issue		
C.1	Are the public policy dimensions of the problem well developed and presented, i.e., why is this an issue deserving policy attention?	It is unclear why the issue raised in the brief is a matter to be addressed by government action.	A compelling case is made for the public's interest in the issue. Both the most obvious effects of the problem are discussed but also second round effects.
C.2	Is the dimension of the problem, e.g., the share of children not attending classes, well-developed and based on credible sources and analysis?	Essentially no facts are presented. There seems to be an assumption that everyone agrees that this is a problem and no further explanation is needed.	Facts are succinctly and effectively marshaled to document the problem.

C.3	Are “next steps” defined, i.e., now that the problem is defined, who should take responsibility for addressing it in some way?	Essentially no recommendations are made or if they are they are not based on concrete information.	The “next steps” are clearly stated and the sequencing makes sense. Sufficient information about them is presented for the reader to believe he is making an informed opinion.
C.4	Is the recommendation (C.3) sensible and well-justified?	They are missing or appear to be merely the authors’ opinion.	The steps are appropriate to the problem’s degree of urgency.
D	All Briefs		
D.1	Is the presentation engaging, i.e., is the reader motivated to continue to read?	Not at all. The document is poorly written and organized and it is a labor to read.	The brief draws the reader’s attention from the outset and maintains it. The language is lively and the layout engaging.
D.2	Is the level of presentation suitable for the policymaker or “intelligent layman”?	No. The discussion is too technical. Statistical analysis is discussed that is unlikely to be understood by many. There is a lot of jargon.	The document’s language and presentation is excellent. Jargon is minimized and all terms are explained. Graphics and tables are excellent.
D.3	Is the presentation succinct, closely reasoned, and of the appropriate length? (1-10)	The brief is too long, too wordy and presents more information than is needed to make the argument. Reading it is difficult and time consuming.	The brief takes no more space that is really needed. The argument is tight and the right amount of information is provided. “A pleasure to read.”

a. 1 is worst score and 10 is the best.

2.3 Scoring Sheet to Use in Assessing Analytic Reports

Document Name	
Year document was completed	
Name of CSO	
City & country	
Name of Reviewer	
Date:	
Document was prepared as part of GDN project?	Yes: No:

Reviewers are using a 10 point scale to score each report quality, with 1 being the lowest score. Guidance on score values is provided on pages 3 and 4. **Reviewers should use the full range in scoring, i.e., do not score like an examination where 60 would be a failing score. For our purposes a score of 5 is average.**

	Question	score ^a
A	General	
A.1	Is the issue well-defined and the case for its policy importance effectively made?	
A.2	Is the issue defined or structured in such a way that a clear hypothesis or researchable question is stated?	
A.3	Are all the relevant aspects of the issue included for analysis?	
A.4	Are relevant previous studies on the issue in the country cited and built on?	
A.5	Do the authors show knowledge of the relevant international studies on this topic?	
A.6	Has the right type of information and data been assembled to address the issue? If not, what was omitted that should have been included? Where sample data are employed, is the sample correctly drawn to be representative? Is it sufficiently large for the necessary tests?	
A.7	Are the methods employed appropriate? Are statistical tests used where needed?	
A.8	Is the report well-organized and clearly and succinctly written?	
	Points sub-total for Section A	
B	Conclusions	
B.1	Are the conclusions based squarely on the paper's findings? (or do the authors go beyond the findings in effect expressing personal views or political opinions?)	

B.2	If the conclusions call for action through government programs, is the cost realistically estimated? Is the administrative feasibility and complexity of the program considered? ^b	
B.3	Do the authors consider various options for addressing the issue and the merits of each, or focus exclusively on a single approach?	
B.4	In general, do the authors draw out the full policy implications of the findings and make realistic suggestions for their use in changing current policies?	
B.5	Where appropriate, do the authors suggest what additional data could be collected and/or analysis undertaken to better answer the question posed or to answer additional questions the study raised?	
	Points sub-total for Section B	
	Total points sections A and B	
C	Reviewer's summary rating comments	

a. 1 is worst score and 10 is the best.

a-b. If the paper does not address government programs, enter 99 for the score.

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2.4 Guidelines for Scoring Policy Research Reports

	Question	Score ^a =1	Score=10
A	General		
A.1	Is the issue well-defined and the case for its policy importance effectively made?	Hard to identify the issue under discussion, possibly because it is confused with others; or issue is stated but there is no attempt to explain why it merits public policy attention.	Issue crisply and clearly defined and a cogent case for its policy importance and timeliness is made.
A.2	Is the issue defined or structured in such a way that a clear hypothesis or researchable question is stated?	Difficult-to-impossible to understand the specific question or hypothesis that is the research subject.	The basic policy issue is expressed in a way that makes addressing it empirically straightforward and accessible to the reader.
A.3	Are all the relevant aspects of the issue included for analysis?	Author leaves out key point, e.g., the distribution of benefits or subsidies or the efficiency with which they are employed, while focusing only on the total amount	All relevant elements are noted. (It is not necessary that they all be covered in the paper but enough information should be provided to fully understand the situation.)
A.4	Are relevant previous studies on the issue in the country cited and built on? ^b	No prior studies are cited.	There is a good review of the prior studies and the advances that the current research makes over the prior is clearly articulated.
A.5	Do the authors show knowledge of the relevant international studies on this topic? ^b	Such studies are not mentioned.	This study exhibits knowledge of the relevant literature and states or implies its influence on the current study.
A.6	Has the right type of information and data been assembled to address the issue? If not, what was omitted that should have been included? Where sample data are employed, is the sample correctly drawn to be representative? Is it sufficiently large for the necessary tests?	The selection of data seems arbitrary and not well-suited to the study. Where survey data are used, insufficient information is provided to judge its quality, or the information provided makes problems with the sample clear.	The data employed are ideal for the study. Where survey data are used, the sample is well-described and clearly appropriate for the task at hand.
A.7	Are the methods employed appropriate? Are statistical tests used where needed?	The authors do not employ the relevant statistical tests but rather just describe qualitatively the patterns in the data.	Relevant statistical tests are used throughout. The author interprets the results of the tests effectively.
A.8	Is the report well-organized and clearly and succinctly written?	The report is very poorly structured, with little logic to the sequencing of the presentation. The writing style is very wordy or otherwise makes it hard for the reader to understand the argument	The report is well-organized and tightly written. The flow of language makes it easy to read. There are few extra words. The author exercises good judgment in allocating material to annexes.

		being made and the information presented. Tables are poorly constructed and hard to understand without referring to the text.	Tables are thoughtfully constructed and can be understood without referring to the text.
B	Conclusions		
B.1	Are the conclusions based squarely on the paper's findings? (Or do the authors go beyond the findings, in effect expressing personal views or political opinions?)	There is little relation between the analysis and the conclusion. For example, the author brings in political considerations, e.g., income distribution, when this is not at all the subject of the analysis. Personal opinions are expressed.	The conclusions are firmly based on the analysis. The findings' implications are carefully and fully drawn out.
B.2	If the conclusions call for action through government programs, is the cost realistically estimated? Is the administrative feasibility and complexity of the program considered?	Cost and administrative considerations are not covered.	The author provides defensible estimates of the cost involved and realistically discusses the administrative issues involved. (The extent of detail necessary will vary with the objective of the study.)
B.3	Do the authors consider various options for addressing the issue and the merits of each, or focus exclusively on a single approach?	The authors focus on a single approach with little or no justification for its selection. Other options are not even acknowledged to exist.	Relevant options are presented and criteria by which they should be judged are explicitly stated. The criteria are applied to the options and the superior one selected for recommendation.
B.4	In general, do the authors draw out the full policy implications of the findings and make realistic suggestions for their use in changing current policies? ^c	The policy discussion is essentially missing or is very basic.	Paper does a strong job in drawing out the policy implications of the findings in concrete and useful ways that would be clearly understood by policymakers or market participants.
B.5	Where appropriate, do the authors suggest what additional data could be collected and/or analysis undertaken to better answer the question posed or to answer additional questions the study raised?	There is no treatment of these topics.	It is either not appropriate to make such suggestions or the authors lay out how the data deficiencies they encountered could be remedied in the future.

a. 1 is worst score and 10 is the best.

a-b. The reviewer is not expected to be an expert on the narrow research topic and know the specific relevant literature. Rather, are studies cited that appear to be of the right type for this work.

a-c. If the paper does not address government programs, enter 99 for the score.

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