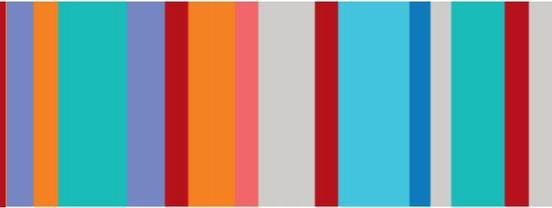




ThinkTank  
Initiative

Initiative  
Thinktank



# Interim Evaluation Report

## Executive Summary

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This first Interim Report of the Evaluation of Phase Two of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) presents initial findings and possible lessons sixteen months after the launch of the Evaluation. The Report marks a first major milestone in the Evaluation, which is investigating the relationship between the provision of TTI support and strengthening of think tanks, as well as the relationship between strong think tanks and changes in social and economic policy. Importantly, this Evaluation is expected “to provide independent, timely and actionable feedback to allow for the adaptive management of TTI, as well as providing rigorously documented and validated learning about the program.” At this early formative stage, the Team was encouraged to maximise the exploration of possible improvements and options for course corrections for the remaining years of the program, with more fully-documented summative assessments to come in later reports. The Report also serves to set the Phase Two baseline for the Evaluation, against which further progress will be assessed to 2019.

The Interim Report has benefitted greatly from discussions with the TTI Executive Committee, the Ottawa team and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Evaluation Division. This has particularly helped to place early findings, evidence and possible lessons to date in the context of the overall TTI learning process and been an opportunity for guidance on the expected process of using this and future reports for broader reflection within and beyond TTI.

A brief introduction situates the Interim Report in relation to the Terms of Reference and the agreed Inception Report for the Evaluation. This is followed by a presentation of the methodology and quality assurance applied, including an acknowledgement of the limitations encountered. The main body of the Report is organized around the three pillars of the Initiative – organizational development, strengthening research quality, and enhancing policy engagement.

The three overall evaluation questions refer to effectiveness, outcomes and broader lessons respectively:

**Question One:** *In what ways does TTI support lead, or fail to lead, to stronger and more sustainable think tanks? How has this been achieved? Where evidence exists that TTI support has failed to contribute to the strengthening and improved sustainability of think tanks, what are the reasons?*

This question is addressed in relation to organizational development and research quality.

**Question Two:** *To what extent do stronger and more sustainable think tanks lead to changes in policy and practice? How has this been achieved? If evidence does not exist that strong, sustainable think tanks lead to changes in policy and practice, what are the reasons? What is the evidence of TTI contributions?*

This question is addressed in relation to policy influence.

**Question Three:** *What lessons can be drawn from the TTI experience regarding effective support to think tanks?*

Some very preliminary conclusions are presented, but this question will primarily be addressed in the Final Evaluation Report.

This Report presents the main findings, baselines, and potential lessons for consideration. Finally, brief sections outline the overall emerging lessons and preliminary conclusions, the approach being taken to evaluating TTI's high-level program learning, and recommendations on future directions for the Evaluation itself.

## DIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABILITY: KEY FOR THE PROGRAM AND THE EVALUATION

Evaluation work so far has confirmed the wide diversity of needs and priorities among grantees in relation to TTI's different objectives and modalities or channels of support. As one interviewee put it, there are very different needs between the 'big beasts' - reflecting their long history, size and often more academic inclination - in comparison with the generally younger, sometime smaller and often more directly socially-engaged think tanks. Receptivity and access for independent policy research in their respective contexts is seldom easy, but can range from merely challenging to extremely difficult. Grantees' funding environments also differ markedly, as does their level of reliance on TTI funding. As had been expected in Phase Two, the challenge for think tanks of building longer-term financial and organizational sustainability is a major strategic concern for the majority of grantees, with the dwindling and redirection of established funding sources for think tank support, and limited apparent alternatives emerging as yet. Most of the responses in this Report to the specific Evaluation questions are placed in the perspective of this central sustainability challenge.

## ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A solid core, perhaps a majority, of grantees show strengthening trends during the latter part of Phase One and the early months of Phase Two in their human resource management, recruitment and staff retention. In most cases, the key contributions of TTI to these trends have been through core funding that supports direct investments in recruiting and training staff, as well as creating better working environments within the grantee organizations. At times these benefits have been reinforced with a modest 'demonstration effect' of good think tank practice. Grantees show commitments to principles of gender equity and measures to enhance the well-being of staff as part of their human resource management procedures. Most grantees have either followed prevailing norms in their countries or had already achieved substantial advances in these areas on their own before receiving TTI support.

Core support has greatly facilitated grantee efforts to plan, think and act more strategically, largely due to the 'space' that these resources give for making independent decisions about organizational development and even the capacity to 'say no' to inappropriate research initiatives. Among the grantees the capacity and opportunity to think strategically and develop their organizations has in some cases been modestly enhanced through TTI support. In other cases TTI has been essential for achieving fundamental improvements. These capacities to think strategically are not always reflected

in formal plans. This is not judged by the Evaluation Team to necessarily be a problem given the relatively strong leadership and governance in most grantee organizations.

In contrast with relatively robust evidence on the capacity-strengthening uses of core funding by grantees, the Evaluation has encountered limited evidence of outcomes generated by learning events and opportunity funds over the latter part of Phase One and early part of Phase Two. This may relate to the time lag for the transformations now underway in the TTI capacity development strategy to be recognized by the grantees. It may also suggest a possible need for course-corrections (some of which are already underway). These could include more rigorous needs assessments, design criteria, and analysis of use – and possibly more modest and selective concentration of support in the future.

TTI's multi-year core funding for grantees – especially the financial 'space' to develop their capacities and research portfolios, relevance and communications – is making a necessary but not sufficient contribution to future financial and organizational sustainability. A more intensive and integrated focus on longer-term institutional strength – including governance and leadership, as well as generating new sources of income – will be essential for most grantees to emerge from Phase Two as more sustainable organizations.

## RESEARCH QUALITY

Research quality is judged in varying ways among the grantees. Some of them see having highly qualified researchers itself as an indication of quality. Others emphasize rigorous research methods and data sets. Some view peer-reviewed publications as evidence of quality and even as evidence to ensure that policy makers recognize the quality of their work. Most emphasize developing systems for internal review of evolving research as the most important ways to improve the quality of their research, including both formal and informal research quality control systems.

Findings suggest that emphasis on peer-reviewed publications is highly varied among the grantees. In some, peer-reviewed publication is seen as the most important and impartial way to judge staff performance. By contrast, in the Latin America sample cohort peer-reviewed publications are largely not seen as important or relevant as an indicator of quality. A range of quality assurance procedures has been put into place among the grantees, mostly emphasizing internal peer review, but the extent to which these are consistently applied is not clear. Internal seminars, mentoring and open discussion of research quality may in fact be the most important means for enhancing research quality among the grantees.

The grantees are experimenting with a variety of ways to mentor younger researchers, including engagement with university-based research associates, involvement of Board members and arrangements with senior international researchers. Information about these practices could be more proactively shared among the grantees as a way of promoting mentoring in ways that have a significant chance of replication beyond the end of TTI support.

There is a wide variation among grantees in their depth and commitment to research on gender issues, reflecting their different pre-existing capacities, societal contexts and internal dynamics. This has influenced their response to TTI's efforts to date and suggests that a more differentiated approach should be considered to focus on carefully tailored inputs, undertaken in close coordination with regional program officers and ensuring that the capacities of the stronger grantees are mobilized for peer mentoring.

The quality-enhancing benefits of TTI to date include enabling grantees in the following ways:

- Building the capacities of researchers
- Attracting and retaining qualified staff
- Focusing on research that they recognize as relevant for influencing policy
- Strengthening internal process for research coordination and quality control

These processes should be well-documented and disseminated by TTI for the remaining years of the program as valuable lessons for all concerned with think tank research quality, including potential financial supporters. A more nuanced understanding of how to support 'research quality' in a way that reflects diverse think tank capacity development trajectories and understandings of the links between research quality and relevance could be an important legacy of TTI.

## POLICY ENGAGEMENT AND INFLUENCE

The significant contribution of TTI core support to the grantees' ability to design their own research agendas independently (from both government and Northern agendas) has enhanced their credibility and self-confidence. Reputational strength has been further bolstered in some cases by their selection to participate in TTI, which may signify an important 'seal of approval'. We find major variations in the conditions of free expression and receptivity to evidence-based policy research – and some worrisome widespread trends of decline in both. Nonetheless, we also find that grantee capacities to produce credible research and maintain constructive dialogues with political leaders and civil society - while managing the boundaries between research, advice and advocacy – can do much to create conducive conditions for policy influence.

The roles of the think tanks in policy development and debate, and the ways that TTI has contributed to this, vary according to the following factors:

- Independence from government and international actors
- Closeness of relations with civil society and the broader research community
- Demands from different policy actors for evidence
- Freedom of expression

The Evaluation Team judges that these are largely contextual factors that will profoundly influence TTI's contributions. The program should build on the demonstrated latitude for credible and confident grantees to develop networks within their respective policy communities and gain potential policy influence. Wider and deeper issues of tracing policy engagement and policy influence have received little systematic attention by grantees. Most have developed communication strategies, but the extent to which these transcend dissemination activities and actually guide policy engagements appears limited. The need to trace policy influence is nonetheless widely recognized, and many grantees would welcome more support in this area. A suggested lesson is that TTI should take a more comprehensive approach towards stimulating analysis of how to engage for policy influence. The Evaluation suggests a TTI-facilitated action research project on this subject, with the full engagement of interested grantees, to focus on the uses and effectiveness of particular instruments to promote such engagement and influence, and help strengthen monitoring of influence. TTI might also use this to promote deliberative policy engagement to help capitalize on investments made in communication strategies and communications expertise.

## TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY

In Phase Two, TTI has redoubled attention to using all capacity development modalities to work towards sustainability. However, it is not always self-evident how different modalities are intended to contribute to different aspects of the rather broad concept of 'sustainability'. The Evaluation Team's overall findings suggest that core funding is proving highly effective in feeding into diverse endogenous capacity development processes. In many respects it is an ideal modality for building ownership for needed steps towards strategically driven organizational development. However, there are also concerns that access to this 'cash' has also constituted a temporary 'crutch' that may ultimately prove problematic from a financial sustainability perspective.

The Evaluation has found that TTI's support to the grantees has primarily resulted in progress towards the establishment or reinforcement of a 'critical mass'<sup>1</sup> in relation to:

- Well-functioning organizations
- Capacity to produce quality research
- Grantees with the self-confidence to engage proactively and from a position of credibility in engaging with the policy community

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<sup>1</sup> This term is borrowed here from physics, where it denotes the amount of fissile material needed to maintain a self-sustaining chain reaction. As elaborated in this report (see especially section 3.1.6) it is applied in the case of think-tanks to refer to a sufficient mix of key elements – human and intellectual, material, organizational and reputational – needed to sustain a viable think-tank over time.

TTI's ultimate impact, and with that its legacy, will be determined by the grantees' abilities to sustain and build upon this critical mass. The Evaluation work to date leads the Team to judge that this is likely to continue to be shaped through eight processes:

- Developing capacity and 'space' for thinking strategically
- Strengthening leadership and governance
- Contributing to various 'technical' aspects of capacity development
- Improving the physical and organizational working conditions in the grantee organizations
- Helping the grantees expand/improve staffing on the assumption that these new staff will eventually attract the support needed to cover their costs
- Contributing to (and especially 'nudging' towards) stronger networks and greater capacities and commitments to engage with the policy community
- More concerted reflection and action on the 'business models' that could sustain these achievements
- Creation of national, regional and global networks of think tanks to join forces in comparative studies, exchanges of experience, dissemination of best practices, etc.

The Evaluation has found significant examples of progress in all of these areas. It has varied in relation to the different ways that the grantees have needed TTI's support and how they have taken advantage of the opportunities provided. We have also noted the quality and relevance of different types of TTI support, with critical advantages and appropriateness demonstrated in the modality of core support.

Many of the factors of success and failure can be traced back to the situation of the grantees at the outset of TTI and the extent to which gains have been consolidated or made sustainable. In many cases TTI began by 'picking winners' in the sense of supporting think tanks that were already very strong. These grantees have been strengthened further with TTI support and the Evaluation judges that it is very likely that these gains will be consolidated further in the future. In other cases TTI took a significant risk in investing in think tanks that showed significant potential and (apparently primarily due to strong leadership) most of these grantees were able to leverage this support to make significant progress towards achieving the elements of a critical mass, even though capacity to sustain it after TTI remains uncertain. In a small number of cases, due often to circumstances in their national contexts, the support from TTI has primarily served to keep the grantees 'afloat'. Among these grantees significant progress towards a more solid critical mass and with that a trajectory towards sustainability is difficult to discern.

TTI emphasizes the importance of strengthening grantee capacities to think critically about their own capacity development processes and break out of a "business as usual" mindset. Evaluation findings indicate that the grantees are indeed innovating in a variety of ways and are striving to think and act creatively and strategically. TTI is making significant contributions to these processes, mostly by creating space for the grantees to focus on this reflection. TTI's capacity development planning

processes are not as central to such processes as is perhaps implied by the Capacity Development Strategy, but the Evaluation Team judges that this is not a problem, given the need for this to be an adaptive and endogenous process within each grantee organization, particularly as TTI moves into its final years. This suggests emerging lessons regarding the importance of modest and appropriate ambitions for a global program supporting strategic capacity development among '43 categories of think tanks', rather than a critique of failure to achieve all of the aims in a strategic plan.

As they have been encouraged to do, grantees are drawing on TTI contributions in direct and indirect ways to strengthen their base for the future. These contributions include enhancement in their skills-base, quality and relevance, credibility and communications. A significant number are also exploring a range of financing and 'business model' options in their different contexts, including different ways to generate income based on core products, mobilization of local philanthropy, educational activities, etc. Often, however, the focus is on individual actions rather than a broad and integrated approach to building financially sustainable organizations. The Evaluation has not yet seen evidence of comprehensive strategies for financial sustainability emerging. In other words, while the importance of using TTI Phase Two resources to build for future sustainability has been widely recognized, and many efforts launched in that direction, it is not clear that this predominant TTI objective has yet taken a sufficiently coherent shape to help the grantees as much as it could.

Evaluation work so far has confirmed the wide diversity of needs and priorities among grantees in relation to TTI's different objectives and modalities of support. These findings confirm the wisdom of TTI's primary reliance in Phase Two on core funding directed to individual grantees to support their particular strategic objectives, combined with intentions to ensure more responsive, tailored support for additional capacity development activities, events and supplementary funding. To date, however, the Evaluation judges there to have been a lesser level of engagement by grantees in many of these aspects of the program than might have been expected. Together with a number of possibilities - through TTI-facilitated action research- for stronger 'legacy' contributions on recognized critical issues by TTI, the Evaluation's analysis to date suggests important lessons for future programming about realistic expectations and incentives for participation by different sets of grantees, new approaches to needs identification and activity design, and/or perhaps a more selective strategy to focus resources for greater impact.

For the full report, please click [here](#).