Think Tank Initiative

Photo: Morakot Theptarathip/TTI

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Sound leadership is crucial to think tanks' effectiveness.

- Boards need well-defined roles that make use of their members' talents to connect the organization to new opportunities.

- A clear leadership transition process is critical to long-term sustainability.

Leadership and governance

TTI Insights distill ten years of learning from the Think Tank Initiative to inform donors, researchers, and organizational development practitioners working to strengthen policy research. Here we present some of the leadership and governance challenges and successes of organizations we supported.

What's at stake?

Strategic leadership and effective governance are critical to think tank sustainability. Leaders attract people, create the conditions to generate ideas, and manage the financial resources that help transform those ideas into proposals and concrete action plans. For their part, members of boards of governors provide strategic guidance and serve as ambassadors and fundraisers.

The leadership and governance of think tanks, however, tend to receive less attention than their research quality, or skill in policy engagement and communications. One reason may be that there is no one model of effective leadership and governance: they are as varied as think tanks' origins, missions, and the political, social, and economic environments in which they operate. They also need to adapt to accommodate changes in context.

Early on, TTI identified sound leadership and good governance as pillars of organizational sustainability.

What have we learned?

Reporting from supported think tanks clearly emphasized how using core support to strengthen governance, coordination, and leadership enhanced their capacity to think strategically.[1] Where needed and when welcomed, engagement by TTI staff and expert advice from consultants helped improve governance and leadership, and redesign organizational structures and systems.[2]

Not all think tanks were willing and able to focus on these issues, however. This led in some cases to missed opportunities, difficult leadership transitions, and loss of funding.

Here we look at how some TTI-supported think tanks overcame leadership and governance challenges.

OUR APPROACH

Our support for leadership and governance grew organically from the relationship of trust and respect between TTI staff and think tanks' executive directors and boards. Our program officers acted as strategic consultants and sounding boards while providing insights from other institutions' experience.

 The external evaluation of TTI's first phase (2008–2014) noted that this support helped strengthen the board function of a number of policy research organizations but that more attention should be paid to longer term organizational strengthening. We deepened our focus on organizational performance during TTI's second phase, including by addressing the importance of leadership and governance issues at workshops and events.

In 2017, we introduced the Leadership, Management, and Governance Fund. This responded to the capacity development priorities of board members, executive directors, and senior managers. It supported executive leadership training for senior managers, for instance, and governance training for board members, among other activities. Our Action Research on Business Models in Africa project also supported organizations' efforts to improve and engage their boards in strategic planning, resource mobilization, and outreach.[4]

Photo: Morakot Theptarathip/TTI

1 **Sound leadership is crucial to think tanks' effectiveness.**

Our experience suggests that leadership is the ability to attract people, create the conditions to generate ideas, and manage the financial resources needed to transform those ideas into proposals and concrete action plans. Strong leaders drive an institution forward by helping to articulate its value proposition and by building a strong organizational culture.

For example, the vision and leadership of the executive director of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) helped it to survive a financial crisis. Prior to TTI support, many senior researchers left, while some staff — including the leader — opted to work on reduced salaries to keep the organization alive. With our support, SDPI was able to rebuild its research complement. Supported by the board, the executive director also explored innovative avenues such as using television and social media to increase its reach. The institute has now changed its senior management structure to ensure a smooth succession and consistent leadership. It has also offered courses on leadership, management, and governance for senior managers.[3]

TTI funding also enabled the Institute for Social and Environmental Transition – Nepal (ISET-N) to build an independent organization with an eminent seven-member board. Recognized as a mentor and a leading intellectual, ISET-N's executive director launched a change process to enhance overall organizational performance. This included creating five new research, training, communications, and administrative units, each headed by senior staff members.

Effective leaders also delegate responsibilities, empowering staff and helping the organization more effectively engage with different stakeholders. ISET-N is a case in point: delegating some of the leaders' functions helped build a culture of trust and empowerment throughout the organization while helping develop future leadership.

While these changes are not exclusively due to TTI support, none would have been possible without core, non-earmarked, long-term funding.

2 **Boards need well-defined roles that make use of their members' talents to connect the organization to new opportunities.**

Boards are as diverse as think tanks themselves. Some have entirely local boards, combining members from government, the private sector, and academia. Others, such as the African Heritage Institution, have both national and international members. Still others have an entirely international board, while a few are governed by researchers themselves who act as an assembly for the organization.

Regardless of their governance composition, many organizations TTI supported were challenged by their board's general lack of engagement. In our experience, the value of these boards was undermined by ill-defined roles and ineffective use of their members' talents.

TTI's Phase 2 second interim evaluation report found that although most boards focused on management oversight, their involvement in strategic planning was low and increased only slightly in recent years. Most progress had been made in Latin America where this involvement is now being recognized as a useful part of think tank governance and management rather than a donor requirement.

Strategic engagement by TTI staff helped institutions re-evaluate their board composition. Fundación ARU, for instance, expanded its board from four to ten members with a variety of experience, helping to better position the foundation and reach a wider audience. The Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa (CSEA) reconstituted its Board of Trustees in 2015, doubling members and appointing a new chair who has attracted knowledgeable and influential people. Specialized committees were created for resource mobilization and programming, and for finance and administration, considerably improving CSEA's financial position.

There are many examples of how TTI engagement with leaders and chairs of boards helped reorganize board functions and strengthen interaction between boards, management, and staff. Some of this occurred under the umbrella of rethinking business models, particularly in Africa and Latin America.

3 **A clear leadership transition process is critical to long-term sustainability.**

While new leadership brings new ideas and opportunities, transitions can threaten organizational survival. TTI engagement helped organizations think strategically about succession planning and put measures in place to address it.

Leadership transitions were a significant concern during TTI's first phase. This concern abated somewhat as continued core funding in Phase 2 gave think tank leaders the opportunity to weather uncertainty and attract new directors.

Young leaders from the 2018 OTT-TTI Fellowship Programme. Photo: On Think Tanks

As noted in the interim evaluation report of our second phase, think tanks' confidence may be due to the practice of selecting a new director from within staff ranks. This was the case with India's Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, among others. The Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales (ASIES) illustrates the effectiveness of this in-house approach. With some reorganization of functions, its deputy executive secretary took over the executive secretariat, remaining in office for two years, while the outgoing leader became president of the board. ASIES credits TTI support for enabling it to rethink its management structure.

Transitions can be especially problematic when an outgoing leader effectively personifies the institution. Our support has helped organizations in Latin America and South Asia break their dependence on and identification with one respected person and make space for new leadership.

Putting insights into practice

TTI experience shows that there is no one-size-fits-all model of great leadership. It also shows that investing in leadership doesn't mean focusing on a single individual. Building a strong cadre of leaders can ease the hand-off from one to the next and provide stability.

Think tanks should design transparent leadership transition processes that include engagement by the outgoing director, staff, and board. For their part, think tank leaders need to embrace continuous learning — with and from others. And because leadership skills improve with practice and support, space to reflect along the way can reinvigorate organizational systems, structures, processes, and internal and external relationships.

Think tanks need effective board engagement strategies to benefit from the experience, networks, and skills of each member. And because organizational needs vary over time, from start-up to maturity, think tanks need to ensure that board composition and roles evolve to meet the challenges faced at each stage.

1   Christopolos I. et al. 2019. "External Evaluation of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) Phase Two, 2014-2019 Draft Final Report". Allerød, DK: NIRAS.
2   Torat S., Dixit A., & Verma S. eds., 2019. *Strengthening Policy Research: Role of Think Tank Initiative in South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage.
3   Ibid, pp. 94-108.
4   Boateng, A. 2018. "Business Model Project for Think Tank Sustainability in Africa: Mid-Phase Report". IDRC: Think Tank Initiative.