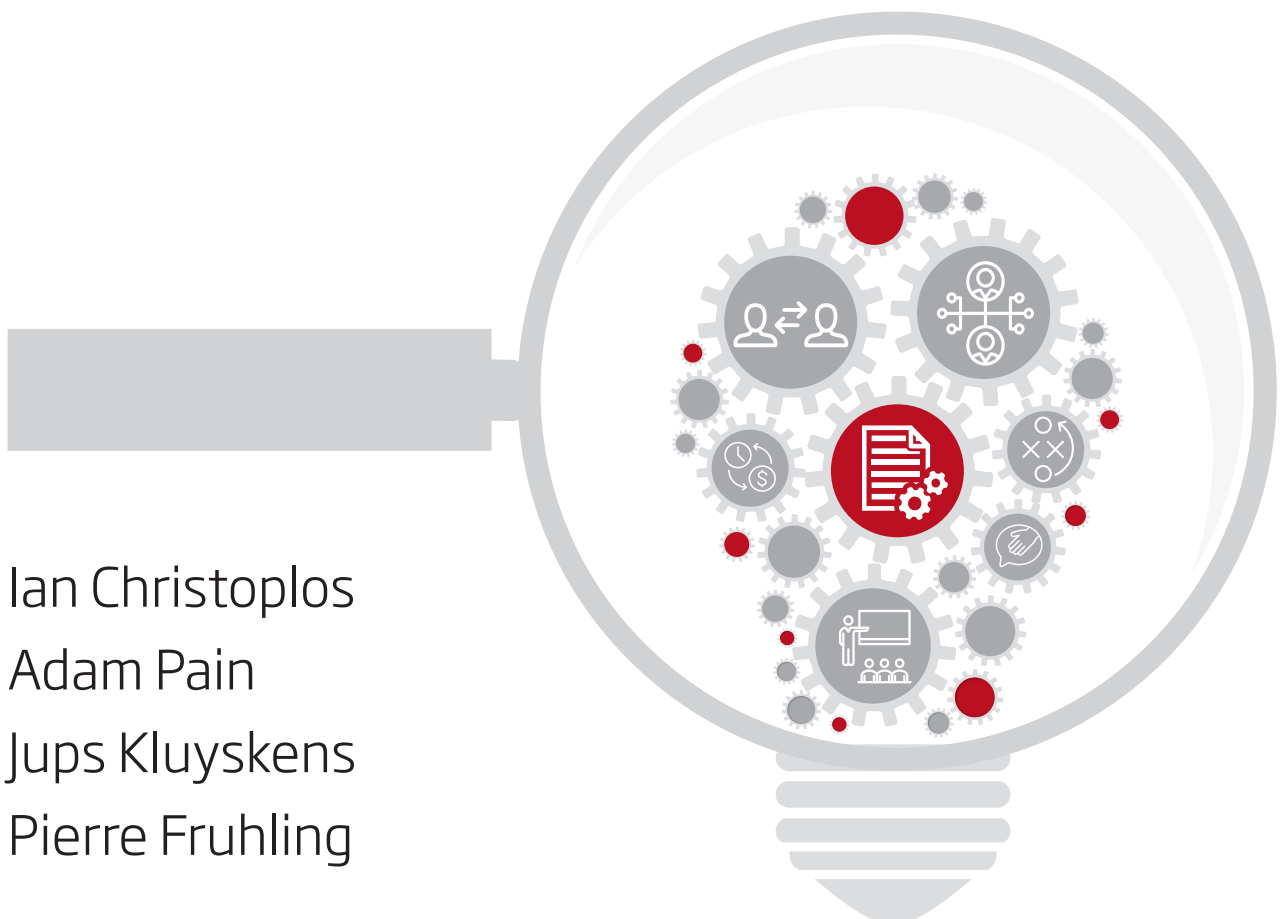


Final Report, April 18, 2019

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# External Evaluation of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) Phase Two, 2014-2019



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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Think Tank Initiative (TTI) was a remarkably ambitious, large and long-term effort managed by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and funded by six donors,<sup>1</sup> with the purpose of supporting selected think tanks. It ran over a period of ten years (2008-2019) and provided support for 43 think tanks in 20 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America,<sup>2</sup> with a total budget of well over CAD 200 million.<sup>3</sup> The overall goal was to strengthen independent policy research institutions in developing countries "to ensure that research results inform and influence national and regional policy debates".

Total financial support to each grantee over the period varied from CAD 500,000 to almost CAD 2,500,000. The main part of the support provided consisted of core, non-earmarked funding. This modality was then combined with capacity development, monitoring and advisory support from TTI staff located in the different regions and from external experts, focusing on three broad areas: research methods and skills, policy engagement and communications and organizational effectiveness.

This Executive Summary presents the overall findings, conclusions and recommendations from the external evaluation of Phase Two (2014-2019) of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI). Conclusions related to effectiveness, outcomes and impact are presented, as well as lessons to be learned from the TTI experience.

## TTI support modalities and their different contributions

The greatest effects from the overall TTI intervention came from the core grant, for its instrumental value, its flexibility and how it created an enabling space to put strategies into action. Grantees have used their core grants in different ways in response to their strategic interests and there is little evidence to suggest that it has created a culture of dependence on core funding.

The trajectories of change that each of the TTI grantees has followed over the past decade vary considerably but at the aggregate level four categories or typologies can be discerned. The kind of change experienced by the grantees ranged from transformational progress at one end of the spectrum to survival amid turbulent conditions at the other. However, most grantees were found in the intermediate categories of accelerated change and consolidation.

- For grantees that went through *transformational change*, core funding gave them an opportunity to make a major leap in establishing a critical mass of human resources and in so doing expand the quality, quantity and range of their research.
- For grantees that experienced a period of *accelerated growth with a significant change*, core funding enabled them to develop existing research and focus more on better communications and policy engagement.

- For grantees that could be regarded as having *consolidated their position*, core funding enabled them to reinforce their financial resilience while undertaking long needed investments in basic organizational and physical infrastructure.
- For grantees for which TTI support helped them 'keep afloat' or to *survive and persevere*, core funding enabled them to maintain at least a minimum level of staffing, make critical investments in organizational systems and infrastructure, and maintain a sufficient level of quality and quantity of research to be seen as active and credible actors in the policy sphere.

Apart from core funding, TTI's greatest contributions relate to the accompaniment role provided by the Regional Program Officers (RPOs). The stimulation of demand and subsequent tailoring of capacity development interventions and efforts to ensure synergies and coherence across the different support modalities depended on this guidance. The continued accompaniment role of a trusted and capable external resource person has provided some of the greatest dividends to strengthening think tanks.

Other supplementary capacity development interventions have yielded mixed results. Some grantees report significant benefits, but for many these interventions have not been seen as an important input. Despite concerted efforts to respond to grantee demands and needs, it is difficult to discern clear outcomes. It is questionable whether a global initiative with an extremely heterogeneous range of grantees, such as TTI, can be sufficiently tailored to so diverse needs.

## Sustainability

Progress towards sustainability presents a mixed picture. Most grantees have a somewhat more stable situation today than before receiving TTI support. However, only a few have achieved major progress on resource mobilization. Some are already struggling to deal with the end of TTI funding, falling back to past reliance on more consultancy work and/or a shrinking number permanent senior staff. Sustainability remains strongest among the grantees that already had a fair degree of financial stability even before TTI, often due to long established endowments.

The lynchpin of organizational sustainability has been the ability of grantees to build (and retain) a core of high quality staff who can deliver high quality research outputs and maintain internal mechanisms within the organization for research quality. Where funding volatility is threatening this capacity, there is cause for concern. Implicit assumptions or hopes that long periods of core funding could prevent future funding crises does not hold.

Most grantees emphasized that TTI contributed to strengthening an institutional culture for producing quality research and policy engagement, a culture that is expected to live on after TTI. They judge that these reinforced processes and systems are unlikely to disappear, even if resources decline and their organizations are forced to downsize. However, if key leaders and senior researchers cannot be retained on long-term contracts, and young researchers lose the space they have enjoyed to set their own research agendas, the underpinnings of this culture of engaging with policy makers based on strong evidence may be endangered.

## Outcomes in enhancing organizational effectiveness

Organizational strengthening within TTI has significantly transcended technical and administrative aspects. Access to a large, stable grant has generated conditions that allow grantees to act more strategically and intentionally in strengthening research quality to achieve policy influence. Context counts, and so does the capacity to strategize in navigating that context. TTI support (notably core support) was particularly effective in encouraging critical reflection and stakeholder consultation as a basis for continuous strategizing.

Effective organizations, high quality research and policy influence are all fundamentally dependent on attracting and retaining high quality researchers, and continuously strengthening staff skills. An important element of ensuring that grantees remain competitive in this regard has been investing in creating attractive working conditions, and TTI core support has had a major impact in this regard. For grantees that went through transformational change or experienced a period of accelerated growth with a significant change, TTI resources helped significantly to 'put the grantee on the map' in terms of having a critical mass of researcher staff and in some cases even being more visible on the map due to better physical infrastructure. For grantees for which TTI support was of great importance for 'keeping them afloat' - or to survive and persevere in the face of adverse conditions TTI often helped to reach at least a minimal level of staffing and attractive working conditions.

## Outcomes in enhancing research methods and skills

For policy think tanks, research quality is multi-dimensional, requiring both scientific merit as well as properties of relevance and perceived independence. The TTI grantees have followed diverse paths to achieve this. But the relationship between research quality and policy influence is complex. Influence depends on their standards of credible evidence and solid argument, together with the relationships that can be built with policy actors. TTI has contributed to grantees' capacities to produce credible analyses and to develop relationships with other research institutions and with policy actors, further underpinning their credibility. This reflects the grantees' awareness of the need to tailor their quality focus to those areas that are expected to enhance their influence on policy.

Through its emphasis on research quality, TTI has clearly raised attention to its significance. For many grantees it has encouraged a move towards more systematic and formal procedures to ensure good research quality. Given the different dimensions of research quality and the diffuse processes of policy engagement and influencing, tracing the effects of the TTI contribution through to outcomes is difficult. Among all of the grantees who have achieved transformational or accelerated change, research quality is not in question. They can often be seen as subject leaders or influencers in the areas in which they work. That cannot always be said of grantees who have consolidated or simply survived, although they generally do meet appropriate quality standards. Improving research quality is a difficult and long-term process.

Grantees have a range of approaches to assure the quality of their research. Formal external peer review is common, but is by no means the same cornerstone of quality assurance as it is with academic institutions. Informal and often internal peer discussions, staff seminars and coaching of junior researchers by senior colleagues are generally more important, as is validation with stakeholders from the policy community. This illustrates how research quality is specific to purpose.

At the end of TTI the main overall research quality outcomes were a combination of stronger researchers being in place and greater commitments to ensuring research quality as part of a culture that encourages and rewards research quality. However, there is a risk with a few grantees that they may lose research coordinators and senior researchers who currently ensure that procedures are followed and who can provide quality peer review and coaching of junior staff

## **Outcomes in communications and grantee positioning for policy engagement**

The position of a given think tank in the 'policy ecosystem' determines what research qualities are likely to generate influence. This positioning demands a high degree of nimbleness given the instability of institutional and political landscapes. Unpredictability about what is recognized as 'truth' and 'evidence' frames their positioning. The grantees have shown a diverse and impressive array of positioning tactics and strategies to keep the policy dialogue going amid often adverse and shifting conditions, with a strong emphasis on maintaining their independence. Relevance is a key value for the grantees and is seen as a central aspect of the bridge between efforts to pursue research quality and policy influence. But relevance is a contingent quality and is influenced by shifting politics and interests. Grantees have to work continuously to maintain relevance through their networks and relationships.

TTI contributions to policy influence have often been indirect but significant. Not least by emphasizing the need for systematic and strategic thinking around policy engagement, TTI has encouraged greater intentionality and overt reflection on policy influencing processes. The specific support that TTI has provided to developing communication capacities has undoubtedly enhanced policy engagement, widened the audience with which the grantees engage and increased their ability to convene key policy discussions. In terms of outcomes, for those grantees that have gone through transformational change or accelerated growth, their ability to engage in specific policy arenas and widen their reach has undoubtedly been a result of a more deliberate approach to policy influencing. For those who have consolidated their position or have simply survived there may not be so obvious a shift. Policy engagement has almost universally been strengthened, but outcomes are less evident.

In the field of communications almost all grantees show clearly positive results. Most grantees have improved their output of 'traditional' communication products - media releases, publications, websites and participation on social media. Many have also evolved beyond past approaches that saw these outputs as a support function or ends in themselves, and now perceive communications as a core dimension of strategic importance in the effort to use research and evidence to

achieve policy influence. While the end of TTI is likely to imply fewer resources for communication activities, most grantees state that the skills and the new approach acquired will continue to be a central priority for their organizations.

## Overarching lessons

The complex story in this evaluation report reflects a decade-long learning experience. The length of this relationship and the space for grantees to make their own decisions have been foundational. During this period grantees have in many cases transformed their organizations. At the end of the decade of TTI support, the large majority are stronger and most have been able to use these strengths to play a more central role in the policy discourse.

A first overarching lesson from TTI is that, for a transformational change to occur, ten years has proven to be an appropriate timeframe. The values of core funding have been about being able to think (and act) in an intentional manner based on the grantees' own strategies. For those that, at the outset, did not have a clear role in the 'policy ecosystem', or lacked staff capacities to assume those roles, a ten-year timeframe was essential. For those that already had a strong position, such a long timeframe was useful but probably not essential. For those that have only just managed to survive, it has taken a decade to clearly determine whether they would transform or merely survive. Even if in hindsight a long-term grant failed to 'make a difference', this could not have been accurately predicted at the outset. Risks, such as investments in weak think tanks, require a long-term perspective and a willingness to accept that some will not prove to be sustainable or successful.

Flexibility and grantee discretion have been central to achievement of outcomes since the choice of what is the most appropriate public policy to adopt on a specific issue at a given time and context is never predictable or straightforward, even under the best of circumstances. There are usually many uncertainties regarding the potential effects of specific policies. Often there is no consensus among civil society, experts and decision makers as to how to prioritize competing or conflicting policy goals. For these reasons, what constitutes 'good' evidence underpinning a policy choice and the interpretation of what that evidence means is always up for debate. While some may wish to conceive of think tanks almost as impartial, rational, evidence producing 'machines' that generate the truth, this is not what they actually do. TTI has contributed to enhanced conditions for grantees to take part in salient policy debates, particularly as they are more respected as being relevant, engaged actors with credible, experienced and well-educated researchers.

## Supporting think tanks in complex and volatile environments

Implicit in the policy-influencing model of TTI is something of a linear concept that moves from good researchers working in an enabling environment, to good research products, to policy influence and impact. Moreover, there are also inherent assumptions about the demand for evidence,

about the rationalities of bureaucracies in responding to 'good evidence', and about what it means to engage in different but interlinked state, private sector and civic spaces. The efforts of the TTI grantees reflect a recognition of how policy influencing processes are based on relationships and networks. That is why '*Who you are*' and '*Where you stand*' in the policy debate can override '*What you say*' - regardless of the quality of the research products. Furthermore, the relevance of these relationships and positioning for influence waxes and wanes as governments change.

Manoeuvring within this landscape requires iterative engagement and relationship-building. Strategic practices of policy engagement range from direct dialogue with senior politicians 'under the radar' of the public debate, to public data activism and partnerships with advocacy organizations, to formal evidence-informed debate. All these modes substantively address the 'political', recognize the need for a short-term tactical and long-term strategic game, and recognize the inherently conflictual nature of politics in policy debates. In sum, a holistic vision of how policy influencing works in different political communities is needed in order to understand what a program like TTI could and should do.

### **What lessons does this carry forward for how best to support the sustainability and influence of think tanks in the future beyond TTI?**

**Firstly**, core funding devoted to organizational strengthening and giving think tanks the flexibility to be both tactical in the short-term and strategic in the long-term is the best investment. The think tanks themselves know how to manage their own tactics and strategies and they should be empowered to act accordingly. They need a modicum of financial sustainability to apply their contextual knowledge and be skilful in policy engagement.

**Secondly**, TTI's other forms of support have been most effective when built around ongoing advice and dialogue. Our analysis clearly shows the importance of bilateral dialogues between the grantees and the RPOs for bringing the TTI instruments together. By contrast, there is evidence which questions the overall utility of much of the specific capacity development initiatives for such a diverse cohort and range of contexts. Networking has shown to be highly valued by many grantees, but this has primarily been successful when the grantees have found their own partners, rather than necessarily via participation in TTI-led efforts.

**Thirdly**, investing in think tanks will always be risky due to the volatile nature of the ecosystems in which they operate. The TTI experience shows that enabling think tanks to foster awareness and respect for research can significantly improve the likelihood of making policy dialogues more transparent and evidence-based. But the risks involved are ultimately about becoming more influential in ongoing processes within these largely national ecosystems. It is not a matter of simply being able to register policy influence 'wins'.

As TTI comes to an end, for a significant proportion of the grantees there is uncertainty about whether and how they are going to be able to maintain and build upon the advances achieved with TTI support. In this context it must be recognized that no form of assistance, with the possible



exception of investments in sizeable endowments, can vaccinate against threats to financial sustainability and related challenges to staff retention in competitive environments. If senior researchers can be retained and key research coordination, financial management and support to junior researchers are maintained, prospects are good. If not, research quality, credibility and also sustainability may be increasingly threatened.

### Summary of recommendations

- Enhancing the effectiveness of think tanks should be supported through core funding. If this is not possible, alternative approaches should be designed that explicitly focus on predictably supporting think tanks to make their own decisions about how to position themselves in the policy debate and for investing in their own human resources over time.
- Capacity development should not be pursued through one-size-fits-all or piecemeal efforts.
- Investments in policy influence should be about positioning. Communication is a major aspect of this. Efforts that focus on achieving specific 'policy wins' (rather than longer term and flexible capacities to engage) ignore the ongoing role that think tanks play in their respective ecosystems.
- Contextually appropriate support for think tanks requires a presence and an ongoing dialogue. Funders should ensure that they have means to provide this.
- Think tanks need to have the confidence (and courage) to tell funders what they really need. TTI has provided an evidence base that they can now use to make these arguments. The TTI legacy relies on the think tanks themselves leveraging this experience to demand changes and not falling back into acceptance of 'business as usual'.
- This will require changing the narrative so as to transcend expectations that a project can produce a specific policy change, to instead emphasize the capacities that need to be fostered to underpin their credibility and relevance within ongoing policy dialogues.

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### Endnotes

- 1 The donors included the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, UK Aid, Norad, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and the Canadian International Development Research Centre. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands only contributed to the first half of the programme (2008-2014)
- 2 During Phase Two.
- 3 During the period in question, the rate between CAD and USD was close to 0.9 (USD per CAD).



## Abbreviations and acronyms

ACBF	African Capacity Building Foundation
ARSD	Annual Review of Social Development
ATR	Annual Technical Reports
CAD	Canadian dollar
CADEP	Centro de Análisis y Difusión de la Economía Paraguaya
CBGA	Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability
C&E	Strategy for Program Communications and Engagement
CPR	Centre for Policy Research
CRES	Consortium pour la Recherche Économique et Sociale
CSEA	Centre for the Studies of the Economies of Africa
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
EDRI	Ethiopian Development Research Institute
FC	Full cohort
FUSADES	Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social de El Salvador
GIZ	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
Grupo FARO	Fundación para el Avance de las Reformas y las Oportunidades
HR	Human resources
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IEA Ghana	Institute of Economic Affairs
ILAIPP	Latin American Initiative for Public Policy Research
IPAR Rwanda	Institute of Policy Analysis and Research
IPS	Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka
KIPPRA	Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MISR	Makerere Institute of Social Research
NAEB	National Agricultural Export Board
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OO	Outside Observer
PCS	Policy Community Survey
QA	Quality assurance
RPO	Regional Program Officer
RTI	Right to Information
SC	Sample cohort
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
Sol	Story of influence
SPDC	Social Policy and Development Centre
ToR	Terms of Reference
TTI	Think Tank Initiative
TTIX	TTI Exchange
WATTNET	West African Think Tank Network

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