



ThinkTank  
Initiative

Initiative  
Thinktank

**Meeting Report**

# **Evidence to Policy Dialogue Investing in Local Institutions**

**London, UK  
April 3-4, 2017**

# Contents

- Acknowledgments..... 3
- Executive summary..... 4
- Why an evidence to policy dialogue now? ..... 5
- Event overview..... 7
- Session 1: The evolving context for funding evidence to policy processes ..... 8
- Session 2: Policy research organizations as local actors in change processes..... 9
- Session 3: What works (and what doesn't) ..... 10
- Session 4: How funders and local policy research organizations can better work together..... 12
- Session 5: Exploring new policy spaces ..... 13
- Key observations and insights..... 15
- What now?..... 18
- Annexes..... 19
  - Annex 1: Meeting agenda..... 19
  - Annex 2: Participant list ..... 23

## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank all the participants for their thoughtful contributions, perceptive questions and spirit of learning. While there were diverse perspectives and organizations represented, there was definitely a sense of collective engagement in a common endeavour.

We are grateful to the funders of the Think Tank Initiative: the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) for making this event possible, contributing constructively to shape the agenda, and participating actively in discussions.

Finally we would like to thank the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce), London for hosting us, and providing such a wonderful venue for our deliberations.

The **Think Tank Initiative** (TTI) works to strengthen the capacity of independent policy research institutions in the developing world. Launched in 2008 and managed by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), TTI is a partnership between five donors. TTI currently provides 43 think tanks in 20 countries with core, non-earmarked funding. This support, which comprises up to 30 percent of their operating budgets, allows the institutions to attract, retain and build local talent, develop an independent research program, and invest in public outreach to ensure that research results inform and influence national and regional policy debates.

## Executive summary

This report highlights the key insights and outcomes of an Evidence to Policy Dialogue, hosted in London, UK by the Think Tank Initiative on April 3-4, 2017. The Dialogue brought together around 40 key actors who work globally to promote the importance of evidence for policymaking, and who support independent policy research organisations that generate such evidence. Representatives from bilateral and multilateral organizations, foundations, programs and initiatives that support research to policy participated, as did policy research organizations based in low-and middle-income countries who helped ensure that the discussions were grounded in the realities in which they operate.

Not surprisingly, the Dialogue generated more questions than answers. However, all participants agreed on the importance of finding ways to help think tanks contribute to positive change and in looking for ways to ensure that these contributions are effective. Participants acknowledged that think tanks play a key role in ensuring the use of evidence in policymaking across different contexts, and ultimately help inform development outcomes that lead to lasting and meaningful change. There was consensus too that a great deal more work is required to enable policy research organisations to play this role as fully as possible. With this in mind, participants discussed the importance of seeking out opportunities for collaboration and partnership, combined with flexible and innovative funding mechanisms targeting longer-term support to local organizations.

During five sessions, participants outlined key observations and insights for funders and think tanks. The main takeaways for funders relate to how they can support evidence to policy processes, work with think tanks as partners, provide effective funding and seek out new opportunities for cooperation. Think tanks, for their part, must be clear about their principles and align them with policies and practices, adopt a tailored approach to raising funds and consider new opportunities in relevant policy spaces.

We at the Think Tank Initiative view this Dialogue and this subsequent report as a snapshot of an ongoing conversation. In the spirit of building on the event, we invite participants in the Dialogue, and indeed others who are interested, to continue sharing reflections, ideas and recommendations on how to act collectively in furthering evidence to policy processes, including supporting the efforts of policy research organizations. To do so, please email Peter Taylor, Associate Director, at [ptaylor@idrc.ca](mailto:ptaylor@idrc.ca).

## Why an evidence to policy dialogue now?

The Think Tank Initiative<sup>1</sup> has in the past convened meetings, known as Funders Forums, with other funders and programs that support policy research organizations, as a way of sharing what we are learning and learning from others engaged in similar efforts. As we prepared for this latest meeting, we took stock of the current context, which we characterized in the following terms:

1. The value of evidence as a key input towards informed policy- and decision-making is increasingly recognized. There is in fact an upward trend amongst many low- and middle-income countries around the demand for evidence to inform policy decisions. At the same time, with the recent adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and launch of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to which 194 countries signed on in September 2015, there is growing momentum regarding the need for inclusive, transparent, and rigorous action around development challenges. There is also a need to capture credible data with which to measure and analyze progress made towards achieving these Goals. Citizen engagement is increasingly being recognized as a crucial element of policymaking, from design through to implementation and monitoring, contributing to the long-term sustainability of any policy effort.
2. While evidence-based policymaking and citizen engagement in public policy processes are becoming more common globally, this is not the case in all national contexts. In some cases, evidence generated from research is becoming less influential in shaping public discourse and policy, in comparison with perceptions and misinformation that appeal to emotions and personal beliefs. Although such dynamics change over time, there is concern that in some countries the value of expert knowledge is being severely challenged, and that public investments in generating and using data are under threat. This is happening in stark contrast to the types of national contexts where researchers and citizens are in fact working closely together to help drive positive, lasting change.
3. Funders whose mission and mandate is to support research in low- and middle-income countries have an unparalleled, timely and important opportunity before them. Funders have a role to play in conveying the critical role of evidence in policymaking and ensuring that facts and analysis are used to inform policy decisions. They can also play an essential role in protecting the integrity of important local actors like think tanks, who are typically independent, add value by conducting rigorous and impartial research and facilitate engagement with a wide range of stakeholders around policy issues. By working collaboratively with such organizations, as well as with other donors, funders can help improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of local policy processes, and help to counter forces that are ill-informed and ideologically driven.

---

<sup>1</sup>A note on terminology: as the Program name suggests, the Think Tank Initiative supports “think tanks”, and defines these as *independent, non-governmental organizations that conduct rigorous and impartial research, are not financially dependent on a single source of funds, are nonpartisan and politically neutral, are committed to publishing research findings in the public domain, and have the ability to set an independent research agenda*. There is frequent discussion on the question of “what is a think tank?”, hence our providing this definition. In discussions, the terms “*policy research institution or organisation*” are also commonly used, and in general we subscribe to this variant given the tendency for the term “think tank” to suggest an ideological bent, and an associated lack of independence of view.

We also wanted to understand how this context was shaping the global funding environment, and what other issues funders might be grappling with along the way. In an effort to provide an evidence base for discussions, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation commissioned a [study](#) on the global funding landscape for think tanks, which was shared with all participants in advance of the meeting.

The study revealed that many funders, particularly bilateral donors, are facing increasing pressure to demonstrate impact from their investments over the shorter-term, and particularly in response to tangible and immediate challenges. It is clear that funders have a diversity of interests in funding such organizations. Funders continue to use a variety of modalities of support to do so, from flexible, long term core support, which has few conditions or requirements, to shorter-term project support, which involves the provision of funding for a specific research project. Project support dominates amongst all modalities. Core support is rare, although there are different types of hybrid funding that combine elements of both. Globally, funding is being cut, and the future is very volatile. But the story varies between regions and countries. In response to this pervasive uncertainty, the study found that many funders were keen to find ways of incentivizing domestic funding. And while uncertainty around funding is likely to persist in the foreseeable future, there did appear to be significant confidence in the possibility of finding innovative ways to support and collaborate with think tanks going forward.

In light of this context, we felt there would be high value in convening a meeting with a broader set of actors in the form of an Evidence to Policy Dialogue (see Annex 1 for the agenda). What follows is an attempt to capture the nature and tone of the conversations that took place, and some of the thoughts and ideas that emerged during this Dialogue regarding supporting evidence to policy processes and the strengthening of policy research organizations. The meeting was held under Chatham House rules, so no attribution to individuals or the organizations they represented is made at any point in the report.

## Event overview

The Evidence to Policy Dialogue was hosted in London, UK by the Think Tank Initiative on April 3-4, 2017. It brought together approximately 40 key actors who work globally to promote the importance of evidence for policymaking, and who support independent policy research organisations, or “think tanks”, that generate such evidence. They included representatives from bilateral and multilateral organizations, foundations, programs and initiatives that support research to policy, as well as policy research organizations based in low-and middle-income countries to ensure that the discussions were grounded in realities of national contexts.

The event aimed to help participants:

- Share perspectives and approaches for supporting evidence to policy processes in the Global South, with a particular focus on what value policy research organizations as local actors bring to these processes;
- Generate critical insights and reflections on approaches to investment in, and support for, policy research organisations, as well as identify innovative measures that can be pursued going forward; and
- Identify possibilities for collaboration and cooperation amongst funders and policy research organisations where interests and agendas align and where opportunities to contribute to positive change are greatest.

## Session 1: The evolving context for funding evidence to policy processes

The first session started with a presentation of the background [study](#) on the global funding landscape for think tanks and followed with a discussion amongst participants of their reactions. The study paper had four broad conclusions:

1. Funders' purposes for funding evidence to policy vary.
2. Funders use a variety of modalities, but project support still is dominant.
3. While global funding for research has seen an upward trend, funding in support of think tanks is declining and the future may be volatile.
4. Despite uncertainty around funding, those interviewed for the study were optimistic and had many exciting ideas and innovations they are ready and willing to explore.

Overall, participants – funders, think tank representatives and other long-time observers of evidence to policy processes - confirmed these conclusions from their own experiences. Many agreed with the point that flexible support for think tanks is important, as it increases their productivity, helps researchers to engage in policy discussions, improves research quality and helps strengthen think tank management, for instance with improved and more rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems. Yet many funders also raised the challenges of gaining support within their organizations for providing such flexible support. Some also raised the question of whether think tanks were the right entry points for supporting evidence to policy processes, and whether other actors, or other points of entry, were more effective ways to strengthen the knowledge ecosystems that enable evidence to policy.

An important observation was made repeatedly that the context for evidence to policy differs across countries. Using the example of India, one participant argued that the space think tanks have to operate and perform their work has increased as there has been an increase in demand for high quality work in public policy, in contrast with the space for the work of human rights and other advocacy organizations, which is perceived to have shrunk. Increased demand means think tanks in India will need to get creative with finding ways to secure the resources to fund their work. They may do this by approaching Indian philanthropists and developing cooperation models amongst think tanks themselves that can be used as a basis for pitching requests for flexible support to funders. One participant noted that, ironically, the main consumer of research outputs in India is government, and yet they provide the least funding for think tank research, a fact that seems unlikely to change in the near future. Outside of India, engagement with domestic philanthropists seems new although there are notable examples such as the Africa Philanthropy Forum.

In the context of the study, participants noted the consistent pressure on funders to demonstrate impact, which funders then pass on to think tanks. The question of attribution is difficult, and even identifying contribution in a successful story can be problematic. Funders appear often to target support for research on those themes that government does not or cannot pay for, but which are nevertheless still government priorities. Other participants noted, based on their own organization's assessment of the research landscape, that investments were more justified in other parts of knowledge to policy ecosystems such as universities, or in the capacity of governments to use research in support of

decision-making. In terms of how policy research organizations should respond to this funding dynamic, some participants reiterated the importance – caveats about these challenges notwithstanding - of demonstrating the contribution think tank research makes to downstream policy and development outcomes. Others advised against focusing excessively on demonstrating impact, and argued instead that think tanks should try to capture a funder’s imagination through demonstrating their unique ability to convene dialogues amongst stakeholders and their ability to facilitate citizen engagement. However, some of the think tanks present asserted that their most successful impact stories came from core funding, not project funding. The upshot may well be the need for both funders and policy research organizations to approach discussions with an open mind, and seek partnerships that are as flexible as possible, but which still satisfy the priorities for respective organizations.

Participants also affirmed the study’s call for innovation by funders in their approaches to funding and working with think tanks, an imperative in the current moment. Some suggested that policy research organizations should use the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an opportunity to demonstrate their relevance and showcase their potential contribution to helping achieve this ambitious global agenda. Given that the models of development cooperation between the North and the South are under strain, it was felt that there is value in thinking through new models of cooperation. Innovation in how funding modalities are used and combined was also seen as necessary and possible. There are examples, for instance, of where hybrid grants (a combination of project and core funding) have been provided to good effect.

## Session 2: Policy research organizations as local actors in change processes

The second session tackled questions about how the current conditions, within and outside national contexts, are affecting the flow of evidence to policy in the Global South, and what opportunities and challenges exist for policy research organizations in terms of policy engagement and influence. A panel of think tank representatives also provided an opportunity to hear how policy research organizations are learning to respond to these opportunities and challenges.

Panellists noted that policymaking is a complex process that is being influenced increasingly by a wide range of actors – different branches and levels of government, research organizations, civil society organizations, private sector, and citizens. From their experience, there are often limited opportunities or spaces where such actors can discuss their concerns with policymakers and come together to have a stronger voice around issues that affect them. Nevertheless, there is increasing recognition of the unique and cohesive role policy research organizations play in policymaking and change processes, even though, in some contexts, they are struggling to respond to the increased demands for their services and expertise.

Panellists shared many examples of how their organizations work with national governments and other key stakeholders. In one case, these included working closely with the national government on a number of pressing and delicate policy issues, including climate change adaptation, relations with China and civilian-military considerations. In another, these included working with the national government to

help shape and implement the country's new five-year development plan, along with the new rural development strategy. Observations from other contexts demonstrated, through examples, how policy research organizations are acting as "engines of policy ideas". They know how to navigate the political environment and they understand how change happens within their specific context.

Despite these successes, panellists highlighted a number of persistent challenges their organizations face. These include attracting and retaining qualified staff; balancing the need to raise money through project funding with the desire to maintain an independent mission and research agenda; and maintaining the flexibility to respond quickly to new policy windows, or to weather unanticipated changes in context that may affect operations. Panellists also noted that policy research organizations must maintain a delicate balance in terms of actively engaging with key stakeholders without being perceived as advocacy-driven, staying relevant by working on emerging and pressing policy issues while also retaining a neutral position and maintaining their independence, and being able to navigate the local political context effectively while remaining non-partisan. To do all this requires great care to ensure the integrity, quality, and transparency of their work.

### Session 3: What works (and what doesn't) with different approaches for supporting evidence to policy

This session set out to explore the nature of effective partnerships between funders and policy research organizations. Panelists shared perspectives on the value that each side brings to the partnership and focused on key questions like the advantages offered by different actors in seeking to achieve policy change through evidence-informed policy.

Participants in the Dialogue described how they have made or managed investments that support:

- Local policy-related knowledge generation systems and the strengthening of local research capacities;
- Uptake of evidence in policy and practice that responds to local agendas and also contributes to global debates; and/or
- Strengthening of enabling environments for evidence to policy processes and actions at the national and regional level.

This diversity of experience allowed for a rich discussion reflecting on various approaches to supporting evidence to policy. Participants highlighted how the modalities that have been used are diverse and have included everything from institutional support to project grants, from supporting emerging networks to centers of excellence, from providing funding directly from regional or country offices (rather than through headquarters) to commissioning a single study, and from providing seed funding to supporting endowed chairs.

In discussions, policy research organizations emphasized that flexible and longer-term mechanisms of support are of greatest value. These mechanisms create space for them to take greater ownership in setting research priorities, be responsive and test new ideas, maintain their independence, foster enduring relationships that evolve over time, strengthen capacities within their organization and use their available resources more effectively.

Many participants recognized that project grants do not always lead to tangible impacts because of their short-term nature, which often cannot accommodate policy uptake and roll-out. Also, project grants often don't include sufficient funding for effectively communicating research results and adequately engaging with key stakeholders and decision-makers. Policy research organizations also pointed to challenges around appropriate costing – that is, ensuring that the full range of costs associated with carrying out the research and disseminating the findings are captured in the project budget approved by funders. For instance, organizations must consider the range of costs associated with overhead such as facilities, electricity use, technology use, salaries and benefits for non-research staff and transportation. Funders often have limitations in terms of the amount and types of overhead costs that they are willing to cover. As a result, it is not uncommon for organizations to barely cover their true costs or even to run projects at a loss.

The fact that some funders do not contribute enough (or at all) to overheads leads to questions of whether some donors are benefitting from a “free-rider” effect. Such funders are able to work with strong policy research organizations thanks to their performance having been enhanced through capacity building support provided by other funders. In this sense, access to core funding helps to create an enabling institutional environment for project funding. While this benefits those organizations who receive capacity building support, other policy research organizations that do not receive it may be less well positioned to attract project funding, given the risk assessment criteria typically used by funders. Stronger organizations are then favoured, which may distort or weaken institutional diversity, and ultimately reduce the resilience of the institutional knowledge ecosystem. Funders’ emphasis on results also highlighted a concern that the selection of the “usual suspects” able to demonstrate prior success may crowd out organizations that are innovating and working creatively. Such organisations are potentially breaking new ground but lack a record of accomplishment to prove their previous influence on policy.

Despite these challenges, participants noted that core and project support can be complementary in certain circumstances, and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Although it is clear that completely flexible financial support is challenging for many funders, participants emphasized that there is a spectrum of funding modalities, along which different funders may find relatively easy ways to align their granting tools and mechanisms. Several funders noted their recent, gradual shift towards longer term funding arrangements (“patient capital”) as a means of building deeper relationships with trusted research partners, over time. The selling point of this approach is that it helps to reduce transaction costs of repeated, short-term contracts. Others highlighted models that bring developing country researchers together with policy makers from their own country, as well as with international actors, which help catalyze and nurture the relationships that lead to more meaningful policy engagement.

Participants noted that a crucial preoccupation for funders, regardless of the funding modality, is the quality of research produced. Even when funders provide longer term funding and remain at “arm’s length” from research agendas, there is still a desire to ensure research quality. Several funders underscored the point that an assessment of research quality should include assessments of relevance to policy issues and needs, and of the extent to which research findings are positioned for use.

## Session 4: How funders and local policy research organizations can better work together to achieve impact

Building on discussions in the previous session, participants dug deeper into the elements of successful approaches and modalities for supporting policy research, and focused on exploring new possibilities. A key insight that emerged was around the need for funders and policy research organizations to develop a shared vision of the impact that they wish to achieve over the longer term. A shared understanding can contribute towards improved co-ownership, as well as enhanced trust and transparency, and result in stronger outcomes. At the same time, it was recognized that flexibility must be built intentionally into these relationships, particularly around the funding and reporting structures. This would allow space for policy research organizations to respond to unanticipated changes in context, as well as to embrace emerging opportunities.

Extensive discussions revolved around the question of how best to measure impact. This generated reflections on various approaches that funders and policy research organizations can each take, so as to better respond to each other's needs. Funders also need to think critically about the assumptions that underlie their approach to measurement and the purpose behind how results are ultimately used. For instance, is the intent of measurement and gathering results principally to do with *accountability* or is *learning* a desired outcome as well? Two broader questions around measurement of impact arose: Are policy research organizations providing the necessary evidence that will help to influence policies and their implementation? And are they doing the right thing / using the right approach to inform change around a given issue? Funders and policy research organizations could both benefit by having more open discussions on the above questions.

Discussions touched on the point that policy research organizations do not always conduct primary research. Nevertheless, they are still able to offer evidence-based recommendations or analysis of data that help to inform decision-making around complex issues, even where their research is secondary in nature. Measuring the impact of this type of work is often challenging, since it is taking place within dynamic contexts that are subject to a wide range of internal and external factors, including the changing political orientations of local governments. Also, the impact of a given effort may only occur once the funding arrangement has come to an end. This speaks to the need for more flexible and adaptive monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and building in flexibility to allow space for policy research organizations to adjust course in response to changing circumstances or new learning.

Drawing on their experience, several participants highlighted the fact that decisions for granting new or renewed funding rarely are based solely on past results. Insights from some of the interviewees who were approached in the Think Tank Funding Report observed that funding decisions often come down to considerations around the financial management capabilities of an organization and the reputation of the people involved in the research or initiative. It should also come as no surprise that many policy research organizations use different "entry-points" depending on which funder is being approached, recognizing that funders have their own agendas and priorities. However, organizations are not always well versed on how best to pitch their work to meet the changing needs and expectations of different funders.

## Session 5: Exploring new policy spaces

Participants helped shape a collective view on ways of thinking about engagement of think tanks in new and emerging policy processes, as well as indicating ways forward for supporting and facilitating that engagement. There are a number of “new policy spaces” that offer opportunities for think tanks to make unique contributions as members of coalitions advancing global policy dialogue and international governance on critical development issues. These spaces are now more open to the possibilities of – and indeed recognize the crucial importance of - organized southern engagement and inputs of southern research-based knowledge:

- The first and most obvious new policy space within which research to evidence has a key role to play is the SDGs, and the global framework that emerged in the process of their articulation, adoption and early implementation. Opportunities exist at many levels for think tanks to engage with pre-existing processes, or initiate new ones, associated with SDG linkages with domestic plans at the national and sub-national levels, monitoring (including data collection), evaluation and citizen engagement. Concrete ideas emerged around, for instance, building new, or contributing to existing, data portals to help fill data gaps that must be filled to establish proper baselines and ensure SDG progress can be monitored. It would be useful to map the “who’s who” among think tanks working on SDG issues by country, starting with TTI partners, and to some extent this is already happening in regard to certain thematic areas such as health.
- A second obvious policy space is climate change. As with the SDGs, there is a pressing need for international commitments to be translated into practical local action, and articulated with other equally pressing domestic policy agendas such as improving energy access, and fostering the conditions for inclusive and sustainable growth.
- A third “policy space” identified by participants related more to geography, where political or social change is opening up new opportunities to foster and support the creation of organizations and institutions that can help create the research and evidence required of the moment. Particular places flagged in this light were national contexts such as Myanmar, Indonesia, or regional contexts such as West and East Africa, or Eastern Europe.

A second main thread discussed was the importance of connecting to efforts to engage the private sector. There may be opportunities in some contexts to initiate discussions with domestic philanthropy to build awareness and create opportunities down the road for matching grants. International donors may have a role to play in brokering or convening these kinds of discussions. In addition, as important development actors in their right, there is also value in engaging with the private sector on development issues quite apart from any possibilities of funding.

Third, there was a wide recognition of the need to engage with China in a more systematic fashion, if not necessarily consensus yet on how this should happen. Apart from its high profile and geographically widespread investments in infrastructure and manufacturing, Chinese actors are increasingly working with think tanks across the Global South and engaging with related stakeholders like the Asian Development Bank (via the Asian Think Tank Network) and the World Bank. Much of the engagement of the Chinese research community in developing countries relates to research partnership that focus on policy areas where China has much to share from its own recent experience. Or it may be seen in areas where China has much to gain through increased capacity and investment collaboration in partner countries; for instance on topics such as industrialization or urbanization. Participants perceived many opportunities for more strategic forms of engagement that would allow for sharing of experiences on

ways of supporting think tanks and strengthening of research to policy institutional architecture more generally. Suggestions for ways forward including undertaking a China think tank mapping, building on the World Bank China Think Tank inventory (WBI).

Finally, there was some discussion of the value of and need for supporting the “spaces in between” individual organisations or networks of organisations. There are instances where it may be appropriate to provide support to, or take action to influence, the institutional environment that enables think tanks to work. In these instances, emphasizing the context and political economy in which think tanks operate, and investing the time and resources to understand this context, may create more opportunities for think tanks to bring evidence to policy in new or emerging spaces. This may include niche roles within “fit for purpose”, time bound collaborations with other societal actors who jointly identify opportunities to advance thinking or discussions on a topic or issue.

## Key observations and insights

It is not surprising in the current historical moment that the Dialogue ended without practical solutions to some of the more existential questions. There was a strong sentiment expressed during the Dialogue, however, in finding ways to help policy research organizations contribute to positive change, and in looking for ways to ensure their contributions to change are effective. Underneath practical questions of effectiveness, lie deeper questions on how change happens and where agents seeking to support change should focus their efforts to contribute to change. The dynamic and unpredictable nature of social and political change, regardless of context, suggests that these questions must be asked repeatedly, as there is no single solution and answers to them will also change over time. Hence, it is important to keep asking these questions in order to learn as individuals and organizations.

Beyond these more profound questions, there are other more pragmatic and prosaic issues, where the prospect for progress and insight feel distinctly possible. Many observations and insights emerged over the course of the meeting that suggest directions for further discussions and efforts. Some came up repeatedly during the meeting, while others stemmed specifically from the forward-looking focus of the final session, with particular relevance for specific audiences. These are outlined below.

### ***For funders:***

#### *1. Reflect on your overall approach to supporting evidence to policy processes*

- Where feasible, invest in long-term organizational strengthening and capacity building for policy research in order to help achieve development outcomes, such as those articulated in the SDGs.
- When engaging in evidence to policy processes, let the nature of the policy problem – and the theory of change behind any interventions to address it - be a guide to funding prospective partnerships and collaboration with think tanks.
- Where it makes sense, invest more broadly in the institutional environment that facilitates evidence to policy, which can help enable think tanks to operate more effectively and facilitate the impact of their work.
- Think about the broader ecosystem, and avoid being too fixated on organizational form. Hybrid organizations or different institutional arrangements for evidence to policy may be possible; this may actually help think tanks make a more effective contribution in the end.
- Reflect on measures of success: be realistic and clear about what you are trying to achieve; where relevant focus on positioning of research for use, and not necessarily always on policy impact.

#### *2. Think of policy research organizations as partners, not as implementers*

- Build collaboration and partnerships between funders and think tanks that go beyond the think tank simply as a “recipient” – broader relationships can help deliver innovative, creative approaches to addressing wicked policy problems.
- Consider supporting policy research organizations to undertake organisational self-assessments, drawing on their own tools for measuring change and impact, in relation to their vision, and research priorities.
- Where possible, take small steps in reforming granting processes that can have big effects, such as incorporating more flexibility into funders’ monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

- Where funding is possible only for specific, desired policy outcomes (rather than broader organisational support), consider moving away from fixed monitoring and evaluation frameworks; ensure alignment with desired impact without being overly prescriptive on the process to achieve it.
  - Support think tanks to explore new business models that facilitate their partnerships with funders and with other actors in the knowledge to policy landscape.
  - Look for ways to help engage, and facilitate think tanks engagement, with “new” and emerging actors like China and domestic philanthropists.
3. *Maximize flexibility and responsiveness to different contexts when providing funding, and push the boundaries where you can*
- Design grant budgets for flexibility and responsiveness, for instance by including “contingency” or “opportunities” line items.
  - Explore ways to enable think tank use of grants to maintain and contribute to their financial reserves, promoting longer-term sustainability and reducing dependency on short-term funding flows.
  - Increase the transparency around the processes and criteria used to make funding decisions, especially through funders’ websites.
  - Explore ways to incentivize domestic funding and philanthropy (although how to do so remains a topic to explore).
4. *Look for ways to cooperate with fellow funders and seek new opportunities for collaboration*
- Supporting evidence to policy is not the responsibility of a single funder, and as such there is value to exploring new ways of collaborating and enabling joint action amongst several funders.
  - Collaborate where progress is possible on particular issues, such as facilitating funding to think tanks from the private sector or domestic philanthropists.
  - Look for ways to “collectivize” responsibility and action, such as by creating mixed modality basket funds or using a common results framework when providing support to think tanks.
  - Where possible, work together to develop common reporting tools to help ease the burden on funding recipients.
  - Share lessons around the effectiveness of different kinds of institutional support arrangements, particularly regarding assessment of results, and approaches to incorporating learning into practice.

***For think tanks:***

1. *Be clear about your principles, and align them with your policies and practices*
- Stay relevant while maintaining neutrality. It is possible to engage with political agendas while maintaining an independent perspective and providing policy options based on evidence. Combining relevance with independence contributes to organizational credibility.
  - Actively engage with key stakeholders, and use your credibility to offer neutral platforms and spaces for engagement with different interest groups.
  - Don’t neglect research quality; another key dimension of organizational credibility, which differentiates think tanks from advocacy organizations.

- Take advantage of new technologies but ensure that the approach is appropriate to the audiences being targeted.
- Work to the outcome level (i.e. areas that are within your organization's sphere of influence, such as shaping policy options), whilst demonstrating the link with desired impacts (development outcomes).

## 2. *Reflect on and tailor your approach to raising funds*

- Demonstrate to funders the alignment between the goals of your work and your vision as an organization. Communicate your work, position, and strategy in a way that shows funders how it is all connected.
- Focus on how ideas are 'pitched', while also demonstrating impact, in efforts to acquire funding.
- Be realistic about what is actually within your sphere of control when pitching your work.
- Derive credible data for the true costs of research and include this in research and policy engagement budgets.
- Use existing resources, such as the relationships and networks of Board members, to initiate strategic discussions with domestic philanthropists and private sector actors in securing additional resources.

## 3. *Consider new opportunities*

- Engage in policy spaces (e.g. around the SDGs, health or climate change) that offer opportunities to link requests for support to pressing and relevant global agendas.
- Learn actively from other policy research organisations on good practices, and adapt as needed to strengthen the work of your own organization.
- Seek evidence to policy collaborations with other organisations that bring comparative advantages together for a greater effect, nationally, regionally and globally.

## What now?

From the perspective of the Think Tank Initiative, we view the Evidence to Policy Dialogue and this subsequent report, as a snapshot of an ongoing conversation. We invite participants in the London meeting, and indeed others who are interested, to continue sharing reflections and recommendations, as well as ideas on how to take some of these ideas forward. To do so, please email Peter Taylor, Associate Director, at [ptaylor@idrc.ca](mailto:ptaylor@idrc.ca).

We are committed to continuing this Dialogue in a collaborative way, and to seek further opportunities to advance the conversation and incorporate the lessons into our own programming. Hopefully others will be keen to do the same, and also to collaborate in so doing. Please consult our [website](#) to find out how we are following up on some of the ideas generated at the Evidence to Policy Dialogue.

## Annexes

### Annex 1: Meeting agenda

#### Meeting agenda

<b>DAY 1: Monday, April 3, 2016 (8:30 to 17:00)</b>
---

#### **Arrival and registration (8:30 – 9:00)**

Coffee/tea and light refreshments will be served.

#### **Welcome and introductions (9:00 – 9:30)**

Speaker: Andrew Hurst, Think Tank Initiative

This introductory session will set the stage for the Evidence to Policy Dialogue. It will include a brief background on the context for the meeting (including reflections on the concrete impacts of recent geopolitical and economic changes) and will present its overarching goals and objectives.

#### **Session 1 – The evolving context for funding evidence to policy processes (9:30 – 11:00)**

Moderator: Ruth Levine, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

Format: Presentation by Jenny Lah, Consultant, followed by discussion

This session will introduce and present key findings from the landscape study “Think Tank Funding in Developing Countries: Status and Outlook”. The presentation will be followed by group discussions at tables and in plenary.

#### **Health break (11:00 – 11:30)**

#### **Session 2 – Lessons from the ground: How policy research institutions contribute to positive change in the Global South (11:30 – 13:00)**

Moderator: Fred Carden, Using Evidence Inc.

Format: Chat show with the following speakers:

- Tausi Kida, Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF) in Tanzania
- Abid Suleri, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Pakistan
- Guy Lodge, Kivu International

This session will include an engaging “chat-show” discussion with representatives from policy research institutions, in response to the following key questions:

- How are current conditions, within and outside national contexts, affecting the flow of evidence to policy in the Global South?
- What current opportunities and challenges exist for policy research institutions in terms of policy engagement and influence?
- What are policy research institutions learning about how to best respond to these opportunities and challenges?

## **Lunch (13:00 – 14:00)**

### **Session 3 – Partnerships for lasting change: How funders and local policy research institutions can better work together (14:00 – 15:15)**

Format: Chat show

Moderator: Julie Brittain, INASP

Speakers:

- Sarah Lucas, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
- Anshu Bharadwaj, Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP) in India
- Ibrahima Hathie, Initiative prospective agricole et rurale (IPAR) in Senegal
- Mark Lewis, Evidence and Lessons from Latin America (ELLA)

Through an engaging “chat-show” debate between different evidence to policy actors, this session will explore the nature of effective partnerships between funders and policy research institutions in working jointly towards social and economic change. Panelists will share perspectives on the value that each side brings to the partnership, such as funding, access to different networks, local understanding and connections, mentorship, etc. This session presents an opportunity to discuss new ways of conceptualizing funder-recipient relationships, and will be focused around the following key questions:

- What are the advantages that each actor offers in terms of seeking to achieve change through evidence-informed policy?
- What are good practices and modalities for balancing policy research institutions’ need for flexibility with some funders’ more targeted tools?
- What examples exist of productive partnerships between funders and policy research institutions? What made them productive?

## **Health break (15:15-15:45)**

### **Session 4 – Exploring what works (and what doesn’t!) with different support approaches and modalities for evidence to policy (15:45 – 16:50)**

Format: Fishbowl group discussion

Moderator: Sue Szabo, International Development Research Centre

Building on the previous session’s focus on improving relationships between funders and policy research institutions, this “fishbowl” session will assess and validate (where possible) the elements of successful approaches and modalities for supporting policy research, as well as explore new possibilities. This session will also identify “hot topics” for deeper examination on Day 2 of the Dialogue. The following key questions will help to drive the discussions:

- What makes for effective approaches to supporting evidence to policy (e.g. via support to organizations, networks, and knowledge ecosystems)? What evidence do we have of their effectiveness and what alternative approaches could be explored?
- What are the benefits and limitations of regional or country-focused approaches, from the perspective of funders and policy research institutions?

- What are the benefits and challenges with different modalities (e.g. different types of funding, technical assistance, training, facilitated peer learning, etc.)? What determines the optimal mix of modalities?
- Is there potential to get more value from existing funding modalities, in terms of institutional support, flexibility for policy response, and exploration of emerging policy research priorities?

**Wrap-up for the day (16:50 – 17:00)**

Speaker: Andrew Hurst, Think Tank Initiative

**EVENING COCKTAIL (18:30 to 20:30)**

TTI will host an evening cocktail evening in the Gin Palace room at the [Strand Palace Hotel](#) (375 Strand, a short walk from the Royal Society of the Arts). Hors d’oeuvres and light refreshments will be served, and a cash bar will be available.

<b>DAY 2: Tuesday, April 4, 2016 (8:45 to 13:00)</b>
--

**Welcome (8:45 – 9:00)**

Coffee/tea and light breakfast will be served.

**Session 5 – Diving deeper: Discussions around key issues (9:00 – 11:00)**

Moderators: Peter Taylor, Julie Lafrance, Diakalia Sanogo, Think Tank Initiative

Format: Table discussions, followed by plenary

This session will review key points from the previous day and use an adapted open space format to allow participants to engage in group discussions around the “hot topics” that were identified in Day 1 of the Dialogue. Each group will then share the main discussion points around their “hot topic” in plenary. Discussions may be guided by the following questions:

- From the perspective of different funders (e.g. a bilateral donor, large private foundation, or multilateral), what is the importance of promoting evidence-informed policymaking?
- Under what conditions and through what modalities would different funders provide flexible, multi-year support to policy research institutions?
- What are the essential practices that constitute good partnership between funders and policy research institutions in the Global South? Between Southern and Northern policy research institutions? Between funding organisations?

**Health break (11:00 – 11:30)**

**Session 6 – What next? Reflections, insights, and follow-up actions (11:30 – 13:00)**

Format: Panel and plenary discussions

Moderator: Peter Taylor, Think Tank Initiative

Speakers: Panel discussion with the following speakers:

- Jo Birckmayer, Bloomberg Philanthropies
- Simon Keogh, UK Department for International Development (DFID)
- Tausi Kida, ESRF

A number of participants will be invited to share their reflections and key insights from the two days of discussions, as well as offer suggestions for some follow-up actions. These interventions will be followed by a plenary discussion.

**Lunch (13:00 – 14:00)**

**Roundtable on health and the SDGs (14:00 – 16:30)**

See the separate agenda for this roundtable event.

## Annex 2: Participant list

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Sandhya Venkateswaran	Deputy Director
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Raj Ghosh	Deputy Director
Bloomberg Philanthropies	Jo Birckmayer	Tobacco Economics Coordinator
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	Tom Carver	Vice President, Communications and Strategy
Center for Study of Science, Technology & Policy	Anshu Bharadwaj	Executive Director
Department for International Development	Phillipa Moir	Deputy Programme Manager, Civil Society Team
Economic and Social Research Foundation	Tausi Kida	Executive Director
Evidence and Lessons from Latin America (ELLA)	Mark Lewis	Programme Director
Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social	Jose Angel Quiros	Executive Director
German Society for International Cooperation	Daniel Taras	Executive Director
NIRAS Indevelop	Ian Christoplos	Team Lead, TTI External Evaluation
Global Affairs Canada	Lilly Nicholls	Director, Development Research
Iniciativa Latinoamericana de investigación para las políticas publicas	Michel Rowland	Executive Secretary
International Development Research Centre	Sue Szabo	Director, Inclusive Economies
International Development Research Centre	David Schwartz	Director, Donor Partnerships Division
International Development Research Centre	Peter Taylor	Associate Director, Think Tank Initiatives
International Development Research Centre	Andrew Hurst	Program Leader, Think Tank Initiative
International Development Research Centre	Julie Lafrance	Senior Program Specialist, Think Tank Initiative
International Development Research Centre	Nicole Lulham	Program Officer, Think Tank Initiative
International Development Research Centre	Antonio Romero	Senior Program Officer, Think Tank Initiative
International Development Research Centre	Diakalia Sanogo	Senior Program Specialist, Think Tank Initiative

International Development Research Centre	Samar Verma	Senior Program Specialist, Think Tank Initiative
International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications	Julie Brittain	Executive Director
International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications	Clara Richards	Director
Kivu International	Guy Lodge	Director
Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation	Kari Moe Jacobsen	Adviser, Section for Research, Innovation and Higher Education
Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation	Karstein Maseide	Assistant Director
On think tanks	Enrique Mendizabal	Founder
Open Society Initiative for Europe	Masa Djordjevic	Program Manager
Open Society Initiative for Europe	Vlad Galushko	Program Manager
Overseas Development Institute	John Young	Head of Research and Policy in Development Programme
Royal Society for the Arts	Natalie Nicholles	Director, RSA Global
Royal Society for the Arts	Adanna Shallowe	Manager
Sustainable Development Policy Institute	Abid Qaiyum Suleri	Executive Director
Transparency and Accountability Initiative, Financial Transparency Coalition	Jenny Lah	Independent Consultant
UK Department for International Development	Peter Evans	Team Leader - Governance, Conflict & Social Development Research Team
UK Department for International Development	Simon Keogh	Evidence Broker
United States Agency for International Development	Annica Wayman	Global Development Lab Centre for Development Research (including PEER)
United States Agency for International Development	Karen Fowle	Monitoring & Evaluation Advisor
Using Evidence, Inc.	Fred Carden	Principal
William and Flora Hewlett Foundation	Ruth Levine	Program Director, Global Development and Population
William and Flora Hewlett Foundation	Sarah Lucas	Program Officer
World Bank	Deryk Brown	Senior Governance and Public Sector Specialist