



ThinkTank
Initiative

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Second Interim Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

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PURPOSE AND ORGANIZATION

This Second Interim Report of the Evaluation of Phase Two of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) presents interim findings and suggested midway lessons of this Phase of the Program. It is part of the Evaluation's mandate "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 halfway point, the Report primarily follows up on the Evaluation's Phase Two baselines, established in 2016, which have been used as the basis for data collection here and against which further progress will be assessed up to 2019 in the Final Evaluation Report.

This Report presents the main baselines, findings and potential lessons for consideration. By intent and agreement, it is a limited progress review of emerging findings in specified priority areas centered on the key challenges of think tank sustainability— while conserving Evaluation resources for the comprehensive Final Report. At the same time, this Report reflects wider input on the full cohort (FC) of grantees than its predecessor, and includes findings and insights from 17 evaluation case studies underway with grantees. It also includes a section setting out baselines and assessments of progress to date on TTI's high-level program learning objectives.

In terms of organization, a short introduction situates the Interim Report in relation to the Terms of Reference (ToR) and the agreed Inception Report for the Evaluation, together with a brief review of the methodology and quality assurance applied, noting the limitations that were 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 mainly addressed in the sections on 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 mainly addressed in the section on policy influence.]

Question Three: What lessons can be drawn from the TTI experience regarding effective support to think tanks? [Some preliminary findings are presented in this Second Interim Report, but this question will primarily be addressed in the Final Evaluation Report.]

Other brief sections outline the overall conclusions, recommended course corrections and emerging lessons. Finally, the Report includes recommendations on future directions for the Evaluation itself.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the development processes observed among grantees reflect stability and continued progress towards TTI objectives. A solid majority of grantees do not foresee major problems arising with the end of TTI in itself, although broader contextual challenges are emerging. For those who do have significant concerns, there is a general feeling that the current period may be a 'calm before the storm'. Apprehensions around the expiration of TTI support are primarily related to the prospective reduction of the flexibility and independence that this long-term core support has provided. Many grantees are relatively optimistic that their absolute funding levels can be sustained, but the quality of that funding is likely to decline due to a greater reliance on commissioned research and in some cases consultancies.

During the period under review the organizational situation for the large majority of grantees has been strikingly stable. There are growing concerns among many (but far from all) grantees about future senior staff retention after TTI. This is not just TTI-related, but also due to reduction in other core and longer-term program funding, and other factors.

With regards to capacity development efforts, in the past year several grantees have joined vigorously in TTI-supported action research on business models and resource mobilization. Other support (e.g., for the Latin American Initiative for Public Policy Research —ILAIPP) has generated mixed levels of interest and engagement. The role of core funding in capacity development now seems to be in a consolidation phase in that capacity 'retention' is a more pressing concern than capacity 'development'. There is a growing 'red flag' concern among some of the grantees that have relied on TTI support for (especially) senior staff salaries. But this is seen as part of the overall resource challenge and there are few dedicated strategies to address it. Opportunity Funds have in some cases provided clear, relevant support to capacity development, through helping to develop networks and methods. In others, they have functioned as an additional window for funding research projects or community development activities. Although the latter projects contribute to capacities through 'learning by doing', they have not so far shown themselves to be consistently well-tailored to capacity development goals.

A significant number of grantees are currently/recently developing new strategic plans, and TTI has had an important role in advising them in these processes and providing grantees financial resources that create space to think strategically. However, local factors and informal dialogue dominate strategic planning in most cases. After Phase One of TTI, strategic planning efforts have become largely owned and used by the grantees themselves.

Resource mobilization plans are sometimes being integrated into strategic planning. There are trends towards a stronger focus on funding diversification. Realistic costing is increasingly recognized as important, but the grantees' power to influence the levels of overheads that can be charged is uncertain. It is too early to judge how far the discussions of new approaches, such as endowments, will lead and whether they will support more comprehensive business plans.

Reputational improvements are leading to significant growth in demand for research from many grantees. However, challenges with costing and fears in relation to stability of long-term funding are leading to

hesitance among some in employing the new staff that will be required to respond to this demand while maintaining quality. There are indications among a few grantees of a growing reliance on engaging temporary ‘research associates’ to address these gaps. The Evaluation Team judges this to be a pragmatic approach. But it may potentially become problematic if it is based on assumptions that quality can be maintained without a critical mass of core staff. There are a good number of positive examples of more cooperation with international research institutions, helping to enhance research quality. Negative trends in some countries are generally due to government tensions and weak demands for research from governments and funders.

The evidence in the Second Phase of TTI has not indicated any substantial change in grantees’ research quality assurance procedures per se. Quality assurance is often still informal and more related to process (engagement with policy stakeholders and peers), rather than formal review of outputs, a finding which is confirmed and emphasized by outside observers. The Evaluation Team can conclude that the generally strong ‘organizational culture’ of critical discussion on research quality is being sustained and further embedded among grantees.

There are a number of cases of collaborative research leading to capacity development opportunities, but this is not consistently supported under prevailing funding modalities. The grantees reluctantly accept the reality that most funders focus on products and have limited interest in investing in capacities for quality research. But they also highlight that strong think tanks are able to influence this in some instances.

Grantees commonly perceive modest but positive trends towards more and, in some cases, deeper gender focus, but their ambition levels and capacities still vary widely. TTI’s contributions have mostly been through training and experience-sharing. Some mention that other donors are playing a leading role in support for stronger gender focus in research.

Some grantees describe a ‘calm before the storm’ situation in terms of maintaining future independence with the approaching end of TTI support. Their ability to maintain independence and credibility vis-à-vis funders is stable for now, but there are risks on the horizon to ensuring credible policy influence if they, as some expect, will need to ‘chase consultancies’. Overall, grantees have found diverse and creative pathways to policy influence, with the common denominator being their ‘positioning’ in their respective national (and occasionally international) policy discourses.

With regard to communications, the findings show a clearly positive trajectory. There is strong evidence of learning underway in these areas and general confidence among grantees that these gains will be maintained. The Evaluation Team notes some warning signs, however, related to heavy reliance on TTI support for communications units, combined with uncertainty about whether increasingly project-oriented funders will cover the costs of maintaining these units within project. Finally, the Report reviews TTI’s own activities –underway and planned– to meet its essential learning and lesson-sharing objectives. It examines both ongoing, internal learning and adjustments in the Program, and the high-level learning and lesson-sharing from the Program. The First Interim Report of the Evaluation, supplementing internal learning based on monitoring and interaction with grantees, proved to be a learning landmark –virtually

all the conclusions and recommendations helped point to course corrections that are now being pursued. The TTI Strategy for Program Communications and Engagement (C&E), revised in January 2016, provides the basic framework and baselines for assessing progress toward the objectives of wide lesson-sharing. This Second Interim Report summarizes progress to date against the Strategy's sub-objectives and its plans and steps to reach its targeted audiences, convey TTI's main messages, and to deploy each of its selected tactics or tools, including different knowledge products and events.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COURSE ADJUSTMENTS

Naturally, in the 'last lap' of a long-term program the focus of attention shifts from internal dynamics to distilling useful lessons from TTI to future relationships and partnerships in supporting think tanks. The recommendations of this Second Interim Report emphasize steps that should be considered to ensure that the TTI legacy contributes to the wider realm of policy research and reflection in the grantees' regions and sectors of operation. The Evaluation Team recommends the following course corrections during the remainder of Phase Two:

1. Consider developing a specific output as part of its work on what is tentatively entitled the "TTI insights on think tank sustainability" to draw attention to the factors that pro-mote or obstruct staff retention. This could highlight the importance of stable financing of core staff for think tanks to remain resilient and to thrive over time.
2. The positive experience of the action research on business models and resource mobilization can be reinforced through tailored combinations of training and advice.
3. The experience of the Opportunity Fund suggests priorities for investing in capacities to operate 'above and below' the conventional research foci. These would include both capacities to engage in national/regional/international networks, and in research, data collection methods and perhaps training focused on sub-national governance.
4. Realistic costing is central to think tank sustainability, but it is an area where think tanks sometimes feel rather powerless. TTI could consider developing a communications product as part of its "TTI insights on think tank sustainability" work to inform prospective funders of the importance of recognizing actual costs.
5. The Evaluation Team suggests that TTI's work on sustainability insights ensure that reference is made to concrete minimum standards for maintaining core functions. This could be done by complementing the 'good practice' standards with some 'red flag' warnings of what may indicate major risks to sustaining a 'critical mass' of capabilities.
6. The Evaluation Team suggests in the future commissioning a 'light touch' ex-post re-view of how grantees have continued on their capacity development paths approximately two years after the end of the TTI program.

7. TTI's work on producing "TTI insights on think tank sustainability" would benefit from an explicit focus on the importance of sustainably positioning these organizations for in-dependence as a way to ensure credibility in the future.

8. To better support learning, adjustments could be considered in the Stories of Influence approach to encourage a more analytical narrative, including a focus on describing the conceptual and strategic 'positioning' of the grantees, beyond the instrumental dimensions of policy influence.

9. It is recommended that the Regional Program Officers give priority to querying grantees with regard to their commitments to ensuring that communications departments remain staffed. As part of the recommendation above concerning recognition of actual costs, special note should be given to encouraging funders to cover the costs of having communications units in place.

10. TTI should consider also developing a specific TTI insight product on the role of funders in promoting think tank sustainability (i.e., to send a clear message that sustainability is not just a matter for think tanks themselves, but also of the donors which support them), to be jointly launched by the grantees and donors at the end of the Program.

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