ThinkTank Initiative

Strengthening capacity to measure policy influence in Senegal

Project led by the Consortium pour la recherche économique et sociale (CRES) - Senegal

Abstract

CRES and the Initiative de Prospective Agricole et Rurale (IPAR) produce research aimed at influencing decision-makers. In order to increase their impact, both institutions recognized the need to develop a formal "communication-for-influence strategy" as well as a more effective ways of tracking this influence. Through the use of TTI Opportunity Funds, the institutions hired consulting firms to help them carry out key activities and develop systems and strategies that will help them to have greater impact on their country's policies. One of the main lessons learned from the project is that sharing knowledge through collaboration between think tanks can significantly improve their capacity to influence policy. An important outcome of the project is that CRES and IPAR have learned to better work together.

COLLABORATING INSTITUTIONS

The project involved a partnership between CRES and IPAR, both based in Dakar, Senegal.

WHAT THEY DID AND WHY

CRES and IPAR produce research that influences decision-makers. Although recognized by many Senegalese public policy actors, this influence had to date not been exercised through a formally developed strategy. Since their main goal is to meaningfully contribute to the adoption of high-quality social and economic policies by decision-makers, the institutions recognized the need to develop a formal approach in order to increase their impact. At the same time, they also recognized the need to develop more effective ways of tracking this influence by implementing a data management system that would provide them with a better command of research and data produced internally and by external sources.

Through this project, CRES and IPAR carried out a series of activities aimed at achieving two complementary objectives:
1. To implement a formal "communication-for-influence" strategy and
2. To systematize the collection, storage, sharing and dissemination of research and data

For the first objective, the firm Afrique Communication (www.afriquecom.com) was recruited to provide assistance to both institutions. The specific goals were to:
- Collect evidence of influence. The firm met with staff from both institutions prior to holding targeted meetings with institutions that sponsored or used CRES' and IPAR's work in order to find out how research results have been or will be used.
- Map decision-making processes. The decision-making process of decision-makers – as well as their use of CRES and IPAR research in this process – was mapped out, enabling both institutions to better understand how policy decisions are made and how evidence-based research can be better communicated to help inform them.
- Develop a communication-for-influence strategy.

For the second objective, SOLID S.A. (www.solid.sn), a Microsoft-certified IT solutions firm, was hired to provide electronic document management software: Microsoft SharePoint. At the same time, staff members of both think tanks received support from a consultant to help them implement the system within their organizations.

RESULTS

Concretely, the project achieved the following results:
- CRES' influence in the fields of education, social protection and health and IPAR's influence in the fields of land governance and agriculture has been documented and validated.
- A communication-for-influence strategy has been developed for each institution.
- A system for tracking relevant information related to policy influence has been implemented;
- Databases of key resource people, authorities, decision-makers and institutions have been populated;
- A harmonized information management system is now operational within each institution.

Several workshops were organized to achieve these results: **sharing workshops** (consultants' methodology, document filing plan, influence-based analysis of both think tanks), **development workshops** (action plan for influence-based communication, platform architecture for managing electronic documents, organization of content and processes managed in the SharePoint platform), and **training workshop** (SharePoint software).

An important outcome of the project is that the think tanks have learned to better work together. Through the project, the institutions adopted a collective approach to implementing the SharePoint tool, they jointly evaluated technical proposals by consultants, and attended joint training workshops organized by the consultants. This has fostered a better understanding and sharing of experiences and research management tools, such as frameworks for evaluating proposals, monitoring tools and databases.

One of the main lessons learned from the project is that sharing knowledge through collaboration between think tanks can significantly improve their capacity to influence policy. The institutions have learned a lot from each other about how to gain access to decision makers, inform them about their work and develop mutual trust, all of which is key to persuading policy-makers to use research in decision-making.

The project highlighted the importance of capitalizing on experiences. It has encouraged both think tanks to formalize their policy engagement practices. This systematization allows a better sharing of knowledge within each institution while highlighting the approaches to be improved or to be tested for more effective think tank interventions.

The project has also laid the groundwork for the better organization of information use and sharing. CRES and IPAR now have a better idea of their potential and better understand decision-making processes. They now have the tools to initially identify the actors and trends that negatively or positively affect their institutions' activities and to gather useful information to effectively address public choices or demonstrate the institution's influence. The greatest challenge will be to improve the skills of researchers and communication staff and carry out monitoring in areas where the consultants have highlighted weaknesses: public speaking, media monitoring, use of social media, design and production of films.

NEXT STEPS

In the short and medium term, the think tanks intend to:
- Strengthen their partnership by co-organizing events (advocacy, public speaking, debates, relations with digital media and communication) to increase their exposure and influence.
- Allocate more substantial financial resources to communication-for-influence activities;
- Develop their partnership for managing and sharing SharePoint software. Several months of joint effort will still be needed to completely master this tool at both institutions.