



HIGHLIGHTS:

- A reputation for independence rests on crosscutting organizational strengths.
- Engaging policymakers early in the research cycle helps to ensure uptake.
- Think tanks can play a positive role in engaging citizens in policy processes.

Positioning think tanks for policy influence

TTI Insights distill ten years of learning from the Think Tank Initiative to inform donors, researchers, and practitioners working to strengthen policy research. Here, we explore what it takes for think tanks to achieve influence in policy debates.

What's at stake?

The Think Tank Initiative was founded on the belief that strong and independent policy research organizations play an important role in informing and shaping policies in developing countries. But the process of policy influence is complex, long-term, and non-linear. It demands much more than an ability to produce high-calibre research.

Across the developing world, think tanks operate in varied terrain. Some operate in environments with traditions of civic participation; in others, non-governmental actors have limited input. Some think tanks have grown out of social movements; others have evolved from university research centres; and still others have long-standing ties to government.

Despite these differences, all think tanks must grapple with political realities in their local contexts, as highlighted in [a series of case studies on think tank influence](#) undertaken by Grupo Faro in 2012.¹ As such, these organizations need the internal capacity not just to produce knowledge, but to navigate in complex terrain.

What have we learned?

Think tanks' influence is shaped by many factors, but two are key: their reputations as independent organizations that provide credible research; and their agility in navigating the local policy landscape and participating in policy debates. The first two lessons below relate to strategies that help think tanks strengthen these attributes. Some also played a positive role in fostering civic engagement, which can make a policy environment more receptive to evidence-based solutions. Civic culture and engagement may be more challenging to address, but they are equally compelling.

1 A reputation for independence rests on cross-cutting organizational strengths.

Successive external evaluations highlighted the importance TTI think tanks place on a reputation for independence as a prerequisite for policy influence, and the progress they have made in achieving it. [TTI's second interim evaluation](#) found that most believed their reputations had improved with TTI support.

OUR APPROACH

TTI core funding enabled partners to set their own agenda, rather than meeting donor priorities. Many credit this flexible funding with enhancing their reputation for independent research and enabling them to recruit high-calibre research talent — both crucial to their ability to influence policy.

We also worked with think tanks to target the organizational strengths they need to engage effectively in policy debates. In 2013–14, we supported 13 African think tanks in building their policy engagement and communications (PEC) skills. Working with a mentor, each developed a work plan to strengthen their communications strategies and ability to network and connect with stakeholders. They sharpened messaging and created new tools and skill sets. The resulting [PEC toolkit](#) serves as a resource for others.

We used periodic evaluations to continuously refine our support, working with partner organizations on their advocacy and research skills so they can play a constructive role in policy dialogue.



Photo: Africa Evidence 2018

Independence is closely linked to financial sustainability, which in turn rests on a number of organizational strengths. TTI's final external evaluation noted that core funding has helped position grantees for policy influence by increasing their independence and credibility, staff reputations and communication skills. Sustaining this independence over the long term demands diversifying their revenue sources and strengthening internal capacities, including: their leadership and governance; human resources; communications and networking abilities; and strategic planning.

Initiative prospective agricole et rurale (IPAR)

of Senegal exemplifies the journey that some less-established TTI partners made along a pathway to influence. IPAR-Senegal started as a high-risk organization and was newly registered when it first partnered with TTI. Today, it is seen as a leading policy research organization in West Africa, widely sought after by other donors and stakeholders for perspectives on land tenure, agriculture, and rural development issues. It also works closely with the Government of Senegal in tracking progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. The Ministry of Economics, Finance and Planning has involved producers and other key stakeholders in [dialogue aimed at strengthening Senegal's agricultural subsidies scheme](#), using IPAR-Senegal's research as a foundation.

To reduce institutional risk, IPAR-Senegal used TTI resources to formulate a strategic plan, communications strategy, and resource mobilization strategy. Its financial sustainability relies on a combination of membership contributions, core and project funding, and more recently, work with the private sector. It also addressed key issues such as office space, staff recruitment, and office procedures. Ongoing monitoring has confirmed IPAR-Senegal's performance gains. It has evolved into a strong, independent organization, with only 12% of funding coming from TTI — down from 70%.

2 Engaging policymakers early in the research cycle helps to ensure uptake.

Beyond their internal strengths, think tanks' ability to influence policies is strongly shaped by external factors, especially the shifting openings and barriers in the political context. Their agility in responding to

these shifts rests in part on their skills in engaging with stakeholders, so that they are attuned to the environment. Choosing the right points of entry for policy engagement is equally important.

Participants in a 2018 [forum on evidence-informed policy-making in Africa](#) — co-sponsored by TTI and the Mastercard Foundation — stressed the value of closer collaboration between research organizations and the policymakers they seek to influence so that evidence creation is better aligned with policy priorities. At the same time, researchers need to maintain an ethical and impartial stance, ensuring that multiple perspectives inform their research. Achieving this balance demands considerable skill.

May 2016 marked the adoption of a [National Fertilizer Policy](#) in Uganda, culminating years of research and collaboration by the [Economic Policy Research Centre](#) (EPRC), whose foundational study highlighted the declining fertility of Uganda’s soils and the need for a national policy to improve agricultural yields. With support from the [Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa](#), EPRC supported the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF) in a five-year process of developing and seeking buy-in on a new policy framework to guide the manufacture, distribution, sale, and use of fertilizers. This entailed multiple rounds of consultation to ensure policy development was informed by farmers’ and industry groups, and other key stakeholders. EPRC’s partnership with MAAIF was also instrumental in conducting a [regulatory impact assessment](#) of the policy, and developing the [National Fertilizer Strategy and Investment Plan](#), which guides its implementation.

In some cases, working at the local or state level offered a more fruitful entry point. In India, for example, the federal government’s New Education Policy targets increased education spending — but funding for education has declined while responsibility has shifted towards the states. A 2016 [study](#) by the [Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability](#) (CBGA) found widespread funding shortfalls for public education, especially in poorer states: teacher salaries and training, school monitoring, and support for children from marginalized communities were falling through the cracks.² After presenting its findings at the national level, CBGA is focusing more on the state level — providing hard evidence for education

functionaries to work with, and for civil society organizations to hold them to account.

3 Think tanks can play a positive role in engaging citizens in policy processes.



Photo: A Velazquez/Oxfam Paraguay

Strong think tanks alone are insufficient to create a culture of evidence-based policy-making. Citizens must be able to demand accountability and participate in decision-making. With TTI support, several think tanks involved community representatives, the media, and advocates for marginalized groups directly in research, from project proposal to completion stages. This strengthens research design while helping communities understand the value of evidence — and their own participation in the policy-making process.

In Nigeria, the [Centre for Population and Environmental Development](#) (CPED) galvanized citizen participation in building lasting peace in the oil-rich Niger Delta region. With support from IDRC, CPED helped to develop a process that would give communities affected by violence a voice in amending the government’s 2009 Amnesty program, which largely benefitted ex-militants. Led by multi-stakeholder implementation committees established in five local government areas, community representatives were trained in data collection methods. Through surveys, interviews, and discussion groups, they tapped the views of women, youth, elders, former militants, and others affected. Through successive rounds of consultation, a comprehensive new Amnesty program is emerging. In addition to securing key demands — such as for infrastructure and social welfare investments to benefit the wider population — citizen groups are now actively holding their elected representatives to account.

In Latin America, some think tanks have leveraged election periods to engage citizens on public policy issues. In the run up to Ecuador's 2017 presidential election, **Grupo Faro** led "Ecuador Decide", a non-partisan initiative aimed at encouraging democratic participation. Ecuadorians of voting age were invited through Facebook to access the **Ecuador Decide** website and learn more about the eight presidential candidates. Voters with limited internet access were engaged through partnerships with local radio stations.

In Paraguay, **Centro de Análisis y Difusión de la Economía Paraguaya** and **Instituto Desarrollo** partnered with NGO networks to monitor the 2013 election process and promote public debate. The consortium opened new pathways for civic participation by hosting an election information website and a series of roundtables, amplified by conventional and social media. The consortium has since established **Paraguay Debate** as a permanent platform for citizen engagement.

Putting lessons into practice

Our experience suggests that achieving policy influence takes a "whole organization" approach. The reputation for independence that think tanks strongly associate with their capacity for influence demands crosscutting strengths: effective leadership and strategic planning, financial sustainability strategies, high calibre research and administrative talent, and skills in communications and networking.

Donors can help position think tanks for influence through flexible funding arrangements that provide for organizational strengthening, while reinforcing think tanks' independence. *This means letting them set the agenda.* Think tanks themselves are best situated to identify the areas they need to strengthen, just as they are best positioned to identify issues and entry points for influence — in consultation with policymakers and other key stakeholders.

Think tanks and their funders need to give more attention to the wider policy-making context, with an eye to building a healthy environment for civic debate and evidence-based policy-making. By bringing stakeholders directly into the research process, action research can enhance citizen participation while closing the gap between researchers and policymakers.

- 1 Andrea Ordóñez et al. 2012. "Influencing as a learning process: Think tanks and the challenge of improving policies and promoting social change". Quito: Grupo Faro.
- 2 Protiva Kundu et al. 2016. "How have states designed their school education budgets?" New Delhi: Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability.

*The **Think Tank Initiative** helped strengthen policy research organizations in 20 developing countries across South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Launched in 2008 and managed by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), TTI was a partnership between five donors.*

www.idrc.ca/en/initiative/think-tank-initiative

