



Report of 2018 Think Tank Initiative Exchange 12-15 November, 2018 Pullman King Power Hotel Bangkok, Thailand

Introduction

After almost a decade of organizational support, the Think Tank Initiative decided to bring together representatives of think tanks, policymakers, donors and other research-to-policy actors for a final Think Tank Initiative Exchange to mark the last year of the program.

The Exchange was to convene TTI grantees, donors and key actors in the policy research community, with the aim of discussing sustainability strategies for think tanks, exploring opportunities for how think tanks can contribute to future development efforts, and celebrating ten years of TTI efforts to strengthen policy research organizations in Latin America, Africa and South Asia. Also, it would allow participants explore how policy research organizations can further improve their contributions to a sustainable future and what new kinds of collaborations might be required to promote evidence informed policy making as successfully as possible.

Furthermore, the Exchange which was titled: *“Sustainable Organizations for Sustainable Development: How have think tanks contributed to building more equitable and prosperous societies? Looking back, and looking forward”* is expected to help build on a decade of TTI lessons, experiences and insights on the challenges of building and sustaining policy research organizations that are able to maximize the quality and effectiveness of their contributions to policy processes and to improve development outcomes in their countries and their regions.

More specifically, the objectives of the three-day Exchange were to:

- ✓ Promote debate and dialogue on the critical factors contributing to the sustainability and impact of policy research organizations;
- ✓ Generate critical insights and reflections on effective approaches to supporting policy research organizations;
- ✓ Understand the catalytic role that policy research organizations can play in contributing to international frameworks like the SDGs, and how they might work collectively with other key actors to contribute more effectively;
- ✓ Explore strategies and approaches for how best to animate evidence informed policy ecosystems with a view to identifying opportunities for future collaboration amongst policy research organizations, funders and other relevant actors.

DAY 1

Challenges and Collaboration

The TTI Exchange 2018 was finally kicked-off with registration by participants. The main event was presided over by two distinguished facilitators (Nick Ishmael and Valerie Traore). In the opening plenary, Her Excellency Ms. Donica Pottie, the Canadian Ambassador to Thailand, noted that in an era of fake news, collaboration is critical. This was further underlined by Simon Keogh from the UK’s Department for International Development, who referred to a world “marked by uncertainty”. Both emphasized the vital role of think tanks, working collectively, in combating this uncertainty.

This instability was further explored in the following panel discussion. However, while acknowledging the negative impacts of increasing democratic retreat and stagnation in some regions, and a rise in political polarization globally, it was noted that we should not overlook existing and ongoing challenges, such as decolonization. The challenges faced by think tanks are not all new, but the strategies to combat them should be constantly appraised in a collaborative manner to ensure lessons are shared and utilized across the think tank community.

Subrat Das, from CBGA India, highlighted the need to create diversity among think tanks in terms of research agendas. There was growing consensus around the need to shift the focus when constructing research agendas, moving away from identifying problems in the present towards identifying opportunities in the future. This was underlined later in the “Ask a funder” session where panellists agreed that to increase buy in, we have to clearly demonstrate the positive outcomes which can be achieved.

Lessons Learned

In the second plenary, evaluators of the TTI programme shared their learning after looking back across ten years of the project. Ian Christoplos, from NIRAS, noted key strategies, such as building staff capacity, which had had a cumulative impact on the success of think tanks within the consortium. A key element of the learning however, related to the relationships formed both between the think tanks themselves and in their regions. Ian highlighted the central role that the regional program officers had played in this program, enabling more open dialogue between think tanks and local policy makers and civil societies.

The value of the evaluation process was stressed by Dan Peters, from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He highlighted the need to disseminate these findings beyond the TTI community in order to effect real change and enable think tanks to continue to grow and collaborate effectively beyond the life of the project. The value of a regional coordinator, for example, could become part of all effective think tank communities, fostering open and transparent dialogue between research organizations, the private sector, policy actors and civil societies.

Funding

Strengthening relationships was a pertinent lesson to bring to the final plenary of the day which gave the platform over to the funders. Whether it was understanding the diverse drivers of domestic funding, as discussed by Yamini Aiyar from CPR India, or increasing the flexibility of think tanks to work in collaboration with non-research organizations, the value of trust and open dialogue was made evident.

Earlier in the day Somkiat Tangkitvanich, president of the Thailand Development Research Institute, highlighted something which was reiterated in this session, the need for empathy- acknowledging that producing evidence is not enough, it must be interesting to those who need it. Communication of results is critical to achieving policy influence, but, as the funders pointed out, so too is the communication of potential outcomes to secure funding.

Sara Lucas from the Hewlett foundation spoke passionately on the need for think tanks to place the end goals in plain view when engaging with funders. She called for a shift away from requesting core funding to support sustainable institutions and to structure communication which clearly illustrates the broader impact of the organization, looking beyond traditional processes of research and engagement and moving towards more integrated and collaborative approaches. This was reiterated by Peter Taylor, from IDRC, who noted the importance of opening dialogues which relate to the interests of the funder, as he put it “start where they are coming from.”

As well as the plenaries and panel sessions, attendees were asked to co-create ambitious agendas for sustainable think tanks which responded to the evaluation findings.

It is unsurprising that as TTI nears its end the conversation tended toward issues surrounding continued collaboration: strengthening networks; working collectively; increasing the scope of individual think tanks to effect change through broader more systemic methods; side-stepping the risks posed by agendas such as the SDGs which can narrow the vision of think tanks and thus their ability to anticipate impact more widely.

The first day of the exchange helped articulate the real challenges facing think tanks, not just those within the initiative but more widely. It was apparent that there is a real desire to harness the momentum of the TTI program and enable the think tanks to move forward together from this ten-year program and to share good practice with think tanks beyond the consortium.

DAY 2

Exploration and engagement on day two

Day two was markedly different in format to the opening day of the Exchange. It centred firmly around group discussion, participation and peer interaction. The day provided space for the questions, which arose in day one, to be discussed in more detail and through specific research lenses. The conversations were more diverse, more detailed and allowed for consideration of contextual practice.

Alex Awiti, director of the East Africa Research Institute of the Aga Khan University in Kenya, started the day off with a keynote speech which encouraged disruptive and innovative approaches to research agenda development and outreach. He pointed out the unique position of think tanks as civic actors, occupying the space between the state and the people. He argued that we need to push against assumptions driving large developmental state agendas; without testing these assumptions, think tanks miss opportunities for new kinds of impact. One of the takeaways from his short keynote speech was that “There will be no public action without the public. We (as think tanks/researchers) need to speak a language that the public understands.”

Think tank making a difference: A marketplace

The keynote address paved way for 45 think tanks to showcase their achievements and the impact the research, policy engagement and advocacy has had across the policy landscape at national, regional or international levels. At the marketplace the different think tanks in the exchange were seen in their respective allocated ‘market booths’ where they are expected to display their posters, publications and all other materials that would attract buyers to them. CPED was not in any way left out in this; the team presented and sold to visitors its completed intervention research project on maternal, newborn and child healthcare implemented in Okpe local government area of Delta state with emphasis on good health and wellbeing; and quality education.



Different booths at the marketplace

Parallel Sessions: Taking of the future

The first parallel sessions for the event followed. Sessions (1-8) were held concurrently in the breakout room with valuable topics discussed. One of the topics of this parallel sessions titled “Promoting gender equality in research” was presented by Engr. Job Eronmhonele, a senior program officer of CPED.

The second parallel sessions (9-16) went underway after a break. Like the first, this was also held concurrently in the breakout room with another CPED staff, this time the executive director, Prof. Andrew Onokerhoraye, among the different presenters/discussants. His topic was titled “Gender in think tanks”.



CPED staff leading discussions in their sessions

DAY 3

The moment is ripe for a change

The third and final day of the TTI Exchange 2018 started with keynote address by Andrea Ordonex. In her speech, the director of Southern Voice, delivered a clear call to action. “Collaborate, build networks of think tanks and strengthen the voice of research from the Global South. This is the end of an era but not the end of the community.” Her words encapsulated the sentiment of the Exchange and its outcomes going forward.

She noted that the TTI community had shifted its focus over the course of the program, from having a largely national impact in 2012, to a regional and global impact in 2018. The community is now following more innovative and collaborative practice, as it adapts to increasingly complex and challenging contexts.



Group Photo of Participants at the Exchange

Andrea referred to the need for think tanks to position themselves within the global policy arena and challenge inherited notions of northern research as universal and southern research as contextual.

To achieve this, she outlined practical steps towards effective collaboration, drawing on her own experience with the Southern Voice Network. The need to think horizontally within think tanks, to democratize decision making and, particularly, to create space for different people within one organization to network and collaborate with other think tanks, were identified as critical enabling factors. Think tanks that are adaptive, flexible, and ‘culturally aware’ make good partners, she said.

Last Parallel Sessions: Collaborative opportunities

The last parallel sessions were more exploring opportunities to collaborate as think tanks. The purpose was to identify complementarities between organizations and determine how different strengths could be pooled in collaborative efforts going forward. In the breakout room small groups formed to brainstorm ideas around future scenarios for think tanks, and in parallel sessions, attendees continued to discuss strategies around gender equality, knowledge systems and effective policy engagement.

There was an evident desire to use the space provided by the Exchange as a practical starting point for new partnerships with shared objectives. These shared objectives, as highlighted by Andrea, were not limited to research. The community was thinking more broadly, looking towards changing regional, national and global policy landscapes through collective approaches.

Closing Plenary

Peter Taylor, IDRC, and head of TTI, in his closing plenary, spoke with passion on the bright future which lies ahead for the TTI think tanks. He emphasized that the end of the TTI program was just one step in a collective journey.

Peter referred back to Andrea Ordonez' comments from the start of the day and the need to move away from seeing the northern development agenda as universal. He emphasized that the community is already made up of global actors who are pushing boundaries and establishing a fresh symmetry of power and legitimacy.

Conclusion

As the TTI program winds down and those involved mark the end of an era, the energy and momentum, demonstrated during the 2018 Exchange in Bangkok, make it very hard not to believe that it is also the start of a new one.

GENDER ACTION LEARNING PROJECT (GALP)

CPED also attended the peer-learning meeting of GALP organized and supported by the gender arm of IDRC.

The main goal of the GALP is to promote gender equality at the workplace, and CPED is one of the five (5) think tank organizations selected to be part of the project. The meeting which was presided over by Rosemary Viswanath and Tania Principe, started with a brief self-introduction by each participant.

Thereafter, the five participating think tanks were told to share experiences, learnings and challenges in implementing change projects to date by way of presentation. CPED

through Mr. Osagie Aitokhuehi presented to the participants what the 'gender change team' has done till date and some of the challenges encountered so far. There were comments and discussions at the end of each presentation. These comments were very instrumental in repositioning ideas and profiling solutions to some of the difficulties encountered by each team.



Presentation by a CPED staff at the GALP meeting in Bangkok

The next on the agenda was for each team to state their next line of action as well as the assistance they would need, in order to achieve their goals. For the CPED team, our plan/focus was to develop a 'gender policy' document for the organization. There were discussions on how to accomplish a good gender policy document and what the document should capture.

In her closing remark, the IDRC program officer on gender, Dr. Shannon praised all the different teams for their hard work so far and promised she would try and influence her organization to see if the GALP can be taken to another dimension.

In all, the meeting was a very successful one especially for the fact that we were able to establish that despite what many people assume, gender equality is not strictly limited to creating advantages for women. "Gender equality" means simply that every employee has access to the same benefits, which is why equality is an "everyone" issue.



Participants at the GALP meeting held in Bangkok

CPED team present at the TTI Exchange 2018 and GALP meeting were the Executive Director, Prof. Emeritus Andrew Onokerhoraye, the senior program officer, Engr. Job Eronmhonsele, a policy maker in Delta state, Dr. Francis Onojeta and program officer and member of the gender change team, Osagie Aitokhuehi.



CPED staff at the TTI Exchange 2018, Bangkok

Report compiled by Osagie Aitokhuehi