

# Designing policy relevant research agendas

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A think tank's research agenda is a vital part of its DNA; it reveals several aspects of an organization. External audiences, whether donors, government officials, other think tanks that can be competing or searching for alliances will try to make sense of your research agenda to determine your unique value added. Although the concept of a research agenda is frequently used among the think tanks' community, it seems ethereal.

How can you – an active think-tanker – benefit from a course on policy-relevant research agendas? This course will be two folded. On the one side, we will explore the concepts and principles that can guide the strategic decisions of a research agenda. On the other, we will review a detailed process to implement these principles.

The course has a reflexive approach to research and design where you will engage actively with examples to see in practice the concepts of policy-relevant research. In this course, we will do three concrete things:

- Discuss the principles of a policy-relevant agenda with the support of some examples.
- Present concrete strategies to plan research agendas in consultation with both internal and external stakeholders.
- Draft a process that you will carry out to refresh an existing agenda or draft a new one.

## Personal and Institutional Agendas

There are two levels of discussion on a research agenda: personal and institutional. If you have attended conferences people might have asked you about your personal or institutional agenda. What is this agenda that everyone talks about? There are no rules to answer these questions, and both individual researchers and research centers tend to develop it as they go, learning from others and from the reception and acceptance of the ideas they propose to their audiences. We introduce this distinction because the process of managing an institutional research agenda has clear implications on the management of researchers and their interests and expectations.

## On personal research agendas

As you accumulate experience in a certain research field, you might come up with a list of research questions that you have developed

through the years and this becomes your research agenda. An initial interest gradually becomes a horizon, a set of issues that you have been addressing for a while and that will continue to address. But a research interest does not turn into a research agenda linearly; it is shaped by your career, peers, and opportunities. Moreover a research agenda suggests that you have been able to place your work in the context of a well-established field and that you are capable of describing how each of the different initiatives (research projects, papers, lectures) contributed to advancing specific knowledge in that particular area. A research agenda though, is not a topic, but the creative pursue of innovative questions or methods. Furthermore, in the case of a think tanker, an agenda of research is linked to an agenda of change: identifying relevant real life problems and solutions. Building a personal agenda requires passion and time. It is a marathon, not a sprint (Niederle, 2011).

Why do we discuss personal research agendas? Think tanks always need to balance personal and institutional interests. As Thomas Carothers, vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, notes, “In think tanks there is a tension between asking people to take part in group activities and giving them the freedom to pursue their own activities” (quoted in Selee, 2013). It is important to maintain a reflexive attitude towards yourselves and others to build an organization that is more than its parts. An institutional agenda, must balance the personal interests and a group vision.

### **On institutional agendas – an initial definition**

As it happens with the personal agenda, an institutional research agenda is a set of issues in which an organization focuses on. In the case of think tanks these interests tend to be relevant at the policy level.

A first and broad approach to a think tank’s research agenda can be found in its mission. Typically, in this statement the organization announces between the lines what are its main interests and in which areas it intends to contribute to the public debate. Through these lenses there are two types of think tanks: generalist (focused on many policy issues), such as Brookings, or specialists such as the World Resource Institute.

From a more detailed approach, a research agenda is a road map that will help a think tank plan and articulate long, mid and short-term goals. Usually, these goals have to do with policy priorities. We must not forget that think tanks’ *raison d’être* is influencing public policies with their research. This means that think tanks not only need to concentrate on current policy challenges but also advance future ones. For this purpose, a research road map is a key tool to help these organizations position upcoming challenges in the public agenda.

A starting think tank might have a more prospective agenda that states where it is heading. An organization that has been able to maintain a research agenda, on the other hand, shows a research agenda through a body of work in a particular area with its unique perspective. This is possible only if we have an agenda and work towards it over a period of time. Moreover, with an agenda a think

tank may attract other interested researchers and stakeholders in working with it.

In a nutshell, a research agenda talks about the think tanks' identity: "A good research agenda will help a stakeholder to recognise your prior successes, your work (ongoing and completed), the relevance of your research, and most importantly, showcase your areas of expertise" (Ravichander, 2015).

### Questions to reflect on

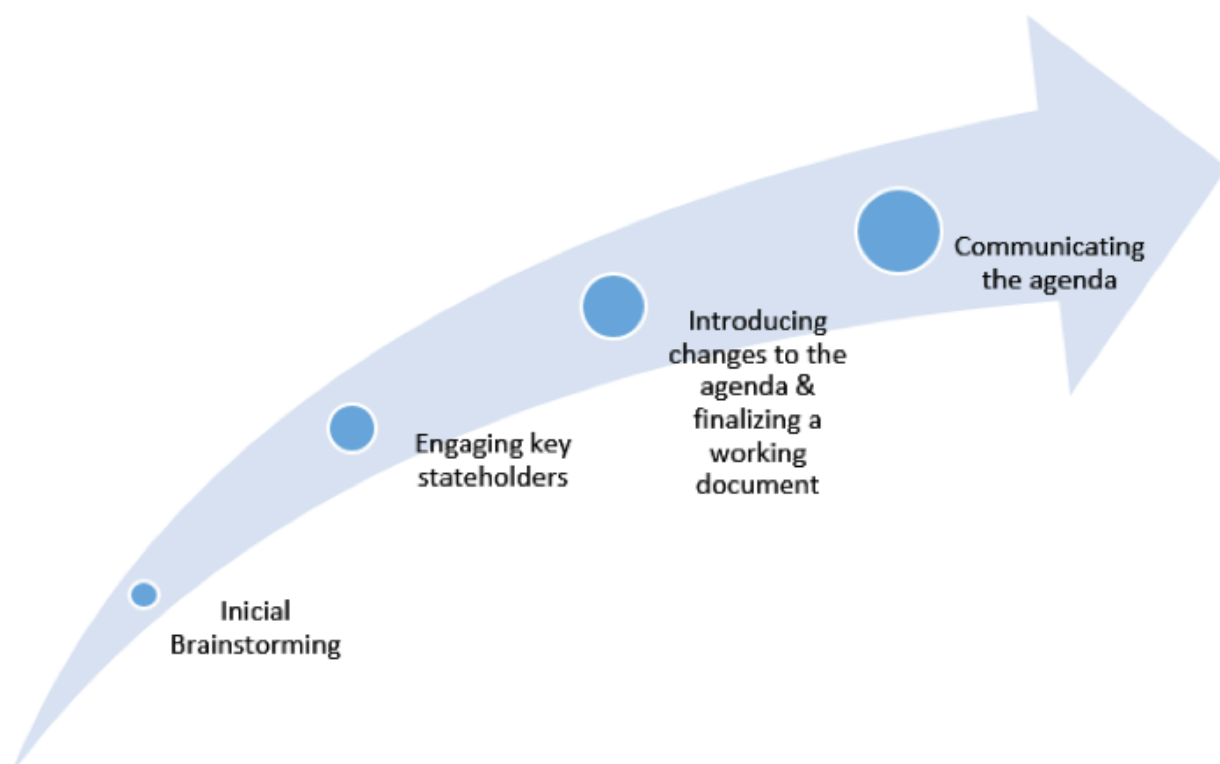
Take a few minutes to reflect on these two questions

- Can you briefly articulate your personal agenda?
- How about your centre's?
- How aligned are personal and institutional agendas in your centre?

### Drafting and validating the agenda

Now, focusing on institutional agendas, it is important to note that the process of developing a policy relevant research agenda is an endeavour that requires both internal organization and planning and external engagement with others who are key for its work. Without connecting our initial ideas and interests with the opinions and needs of others, the research agenda might become only a wish list disconnected from reality, losing social and political relevance. The cycle of developing a research agenda entails four general steps: 1) an internal process of brainstorming and discussions, 2) the engagement with relevant stakeholders 3) the inclusion and arbitrage of the suggestions received and 4) communicating the agenda (see figure 1).

**Figure 1. The cycle of developing a research agenda**



Along this cycle, an organization will have to make decisions on issues such as:

- The desired level of engagement and what is the objective of the engagement with others.
- The method to engage the stakeholders in an exchange to validate the research agenda.
- The extent to which the organization will incorporate feedback received by external stakeholders.
- The best strategy to communicate the process and outcome of the strategic research agenda.

## Principles of policy relevant research agendas

To make these decisions, it will be useful for think tanks to have some guiding principles of what makes research agendas policy-relevant. We have selected seven principles of policy relevant research. These principles relate both to the organizational level, and to individual research projects. Keep in mind these seven principles throughout the course:

- 1. Embedded in policy context.** Instead of talking about rules and standards for the policy-relevant research, we will explore the options in relation to the context. This means that we are not inclined to think that one particular type of research is better, but what is important is to understand the choices we make given the context where we work.
- 2. Internally and externally validated.** Relevant research needs to be meaningful within and outside the organization. Acquiring the perspective of others will strengthen both your research agenda, and each of your research projects. This course will propose different levels of engagement feasible for this validation that you can consider given your context and the characteristics of your think tank.
- 3. Responds to policy questions and objectives.** Many times, it is believed that “research for policy” must be instrumental, that the key is having a slot of “policy recommendations”. But the reality is that policy problems are diverse and the expected contribution of research in each can be different.
- 4. Fit for purpose and timely.** Once you have identified the type of policy problem you face and the questions your research can answer, then can you start defining the methods that are more appropriate.
- 5. Crafted with an analytical and policy perspective.** Policy relevant research goes beyond the obvious and beyond a narrative description of the situation.
- 6. Open to change and innovation: as it interacts with policy spaces and policymakers** – Innovating in research is critical for a think tank to maintain its relevance in the policy process. However, it is important to balance both the capacity to create new things, and to take advantage of the existing capacities of your think tank.

**7. Realistic about institutional capacity and funding opportunities** – Finally, but not least important, a relevant research agenda is realistic.

### **What comes next?**

This course is an opportunity to refresh your research agenda or to draft a new one if you haven't done so yet. Drafting an agenda is as much an art as it is a science. For this reason we will learn not only the concepts behind a policy-relevant research agenda, but also from the practices of think tanks worldwide.

In the first webinar we will explore in details the first two steps of the process: internal brainstorming, and engagement with external stakeholders.

Then, in the second webinar we will explore how to deal with receiving a variety of inputs from stateholders, sometimes even contradictory. Finally, we will review how to communicate our agenda to others.

The course assignment we will encourage you to draft a concept note on how you will approach the process of drafting or reshefing your research agenda.

### **References**

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