IDEAS REFLECTIONS ADVICE

FROM FUTURE THINK TANK LEADERS 2018-2019

Edited by
Louise Ball

OTTTI fellowship

IDEAS REFLECTIONS ADVICE

Think tanks and governments are facing challenges that are increasingly complex and urgent. This requires a new generation of think tank leader that brings fresh and creative perspectives to connecting research and public policy.

In 2018–2019, a group of young and proactive thinktankers from around the world joined the On Think Tanks (OTT) Fellowship Programme, designed in partnership with the Think Tank Initiative (TTI).

Fellows got a chance to build their skills and knowledge across a range of core think tank areas, and exchange ideas with think tank leaders and specialists. In turn, they brought fresh and creative perspectives to age-old, and new, think tank problems.

THIS PUBLICATION SEEKS TO INSPIRE AND INFORM THINKTANKERS. IT IS A COLLECTION OF IDEAS, REFLECTIONS AND PRACTICAL ADVICE FROM THE OTT-TTI FELLOWS 2018-2019.

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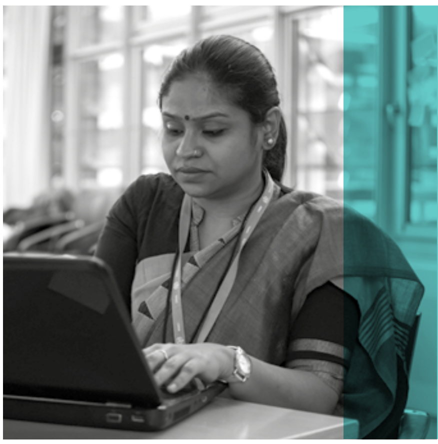

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OTT-TTI FELLOWS
ON LEADERSHIP AND CAREER PROGRESSION

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IDEA

FOUR MYTHS ABOUT LEADERSHIP

BY ALEJANDRA TERAN

Breaking leadership paradigms

As an introverted junior researcher, how can I promote change within my think tank? Isn't leadership for extroverted types? Don't I need a position of authority? These are some of the questions I was asking myself when I joined the OTT-TTI Fellowship Programme,[1] designed to cultivate and strengthen leadership skills.

I realised that I had a lot of preconceptions (and misconceptions) about leadership. In this article I want to myth-bust some of the most common ones, and talk about what this means for think tanks.

Myth one: Leadership is for extroverts

In westernised cultures the concept of leadership tends to be linked to extroversion; quiet and introverted people aren't 'leadership material'.

As Susan Cain points out in her influential book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*,[2] we are a society that values personality more than character, and a person of action rather than of contemplation.

While charisma, confidence and dominance can be effective characteristics for leaders, as people tend to trust and follow people with these traits, Susan Cain argues that introverts can also be very effective leaders. And what's more, they are often the most creative leaders.

Introverts tend to show more commitment, writes Susan. They listen to their teams and get better results.

Introverts, therefore, bring a different set of skills to leadership roles. Unfortunately, society often asks introverts to act as extroverts and, in this process, they lose their authenticity and therefore much of their leadership potential.

Myth two: Leaders are always in charge

A big misconception is that leadership requires a position of authority, such as being a manager, boss or director. This sounds logical, and in a traditional sense of leadership it can be true.

1. OTT-TTI Fellowship Programme: www.onthinktanks.org/initiatives/on-think-tanks-fellowship-programme
2. Susan Cain (2012) *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. Crown Publishing Group.

However, I'm happy to have realised that having a formal position of authority is not a prerequisite for being a good leader. As Ronald Heifetz says in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*,[3] leadership often comes from 'the legs of the table'.

Ronald argues that being a leader without formal authority actually has some advantages. For example, you have latitude for creative deviance, space to focus on one single issue and a closer proximity to people. All this gives the leader without authority a broader perspective to make better decisions.

Myth three: Leaders should be saviours

In a series of different stories, Ronald Heifetz shows that in times of trouble we tend to look for a saviour – a leader who will give us an easy answer.

In fact, what we need are leaders who don't just give out easy and quick answers, but rather ask us difficult questions and make us part of the process of solving problems.

In this sense, the definition of leadership that I found the most helpful was that given by Roland Heifetz: an activity that mobilises a collective to do something, tear down problems or reach a common goal. It is related to actions more than words.[4]

An important ingredient for good leadership is passion that translates into action. Leadership effectiveness depends a lot on our own convictions and how we transmit them to our team. And this can come from extroverts or introverts, from senior and junior positions.

Myth four: 'Leaders are born, not made'

I've heard it said many times that 'leaders are born, not made'. This is a dangerous thing to claim. It means that if people don't have the preconceived characteristics of a leader, they may not get supported or encouraged to share their potential with their teams.

Some of the world's most influential leaders were not 'born' to lead; they do not have big extroverted personalities, nor positions of authority, nor seek the spotlight – but instead have passion and conviction that they turn into action. Just a few examples: Mahatma Ghandi, who led the Indian independence movement, is well known for his introverted personality and lack of formal authority; Rosa Parks, also known as 'the first lady of civil rights', was a regular women with no elected office who inspired people through her conviction and actions; and today Greta Thunberg, a self-proclaimed introvert and young climate activist who has inspired people globally.

What does this mean in a think tank context?

Thinktankers often have to multitask, learn quickly and step outside their comfort zone. I'm a researcher, but since joining INESAD I have had to learn how to manage events and projects and

3. Ronald Heifetz (1994) *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Harvard University Press.
4. Ronald Heifetz quoted in Richman Tom (not-dated) 'Leadership Expert Ronald Heifetz. Interview with Harvard University professor on the qualities and mechanics of leadership'. Inc. Available at: https://www.inc.com/magazine/19881001/5990.html

contribute to communications activities. Our willingness to do this shows that we have passion and commitment for what we do. It also shows that our work is more than just doing good research.

Many (certainly not all) researchers will be introverts. It can be a solitary and reflective role that may attract introverted types. Part of a researcher's skill is to analyse a problem from different perspectives. And this is an important leadership tool. We have an opportunity to contribute out-of-the-box solutions for common think tank challenges, which should be considered.

Also, young thinktankers, in junior roles, can contribute innovative and creative ideas, too. For example, what role can technology play in helping us reach younger audiences?

Think tank teams tend to be diverse. By embracing this diversity and our individual skills and characteristics, we will be able to show, and deliver on, our potential. And these opportunities are open to both extroverts and introverts.

If we don't break these paradigms and bust the myths, there will be a lot of wasted leadership potential in think tanks.

SIX TIPS FOR THINK TANKS WANTING TO OFFER CAREER PROGRESSION

BY AYOMI NANAYAKKARA

Employees are more engaged if they believe their employer wants them to grow and is willing to help them achieve their career goals. So, it's worthwhile for think tanks to invest in staff progression.

A good career development path gives employees opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge, seek promotions and/or transfer to different positions.

Here are six tips for think tanks to give their staff a clear career path and support:

1. Start early

Encouraging young researchers to think about their career goals when they first join your organisation gives you (and them) time to develop the skills and experiences needed to fulfil them.

2. Expand horizons

Senior researchers and management play an important role in helping junior staff understand and think through their career path options. Many researchers may have moved from undergraduate studies all the way through to postdoctoral research within the same department and may not know what else is out there. Support from senior team members can help broaden their horizons.

3. Make career progression work for your organisation

Career development shouldn't be seen as separate – or even rival – to researchers' day to day work. Supporting researchers to identify and achieve their career goals can also help your think tank achieve its mission and goals.

Here are some questions to ask with research staff when assigning project roles: What specific research skills can they develop as part of this project? Are there other areas of the project they could assist in to support career goals? Would involvement in the financial side of the project give them valuable experience? Can they attend conferences to build their (and the organisation's) experience and profile?

4. Don't exclude non-academic career paths

Within the research sector, there is sometimes a divide between those who follow strict academic career paths and those who venture out into more practitioner- and policy-oriented roles.

Some research managers from the academic side can view with suspicion, or even hostility, junior researchers who express interest in looking outside the academic world.

But if you really want to support and develop your staff, it shouldn't be a competition. Let junior staff decide what they want and help them to develop the skills to pursue their goals. In a think tank, having a mix of skills and interests is actually very beneficial.

5. Don't forget about non-research staff

It's important for senior think tank staff to not forget about non-researcher staff progression – in areas such as IT, communications, human resources and finance. They also should have training and growth opportunities, clear pathways and mentoring programmes. In an increasingly competitive market, keeping talented staff will depend on this.

In some think tanks, managers are implementing formal rotations between key functions – such as finance services and admin – that can help improve talent retention and demonstrate to employees that the organisation is invested in developing them.

6. Communicate clearly and honestly

Finally, managers must communicate clearly to their teams how the organisation can help them grow and develop. They must handle conversations carefully and honestly, not creating false expectations or commitments that can't be fulfilled.

SHORT REFLECTION

PRIORITISING A GOOD WORKING ENVIRONMENT IN THINK TANKS

BY ANDREA VILLARREAL

'We have to talk' is not something you want to hear – whether it be from a loved one or a work colleague. Here, I think I'll stick to the work context! While it is not something we want to hear, I've come to learn that having a trusting environment at work, in which people can talk openly about their issues, is only a positive thing.

A few years ago, I was working for the public sector in my country. It was not a good working environment. Difficult conversations were a day-to-day occurrence. But there was no confidence or trust among peers, so this was really difficult.

I now work for the think tank Grupo FARO in Ecuador, and have had the chance to experience a new kind of relationship with my peers. Here, discussion and debate are welcomed and encouraged. It feels like a safe space. People are direct, specific and empathetic, being open about things that do not feel right and could generate conflict.

On a personal level, I think that knowing how to have difficult conversations is an extraordinary ability, helping to generate a trusting work environment. Of course, having difficult conversations is a lot easier when you already have a trusting environment. It means being assertive and empathetic. It also helps to find the right place and moment to communicate difficult matters.

Generating trust among co-workers is a long-term goal that think tanks must work to build. And there are huge benefits to this way of working. Teamwork, for example, is easily performed. So, I encourage all thinktankers and think tank leaders to reflect on their own working environment.

TO WHAT EXTENT IS THERE A CULTURE OF TRUST IN YOUR THINK TANK? ARE STAFF INCENTIVISED TO HAVE OPEN AND HONEST CONVERSATIONS? IS BUILDING A TRUSTING WORKING ENVIRONMENT A PRIORITY IN YOUR THINK TANK?

**TELL US:
@ONTHINKTANKS**

SEVEN TIPS FOR A THINKTANKER COMBINING WORK AND A PHD

BY FOUNTY ALASSANE FALL

For many young researchers working in a think tank, completing a PhD is an important career step and may win you the scientific credibility of your peers. But do you need to stop working to complete your PhD? Here are seven tips on how to succeed as a thinktanker AND a PhD candidate.

1. Sell the idea of doing a PhD to your boss

Embarking on a PhD is an exciting and rewarding venture. Of course, it has its challenges and naturally some bosses may be concerned that it will affect your work. So how do we convince our bosses that a PhD will benefit the organisation?

Well, it's well known that a PhD will help you to learn quicker, deal with repeated failure and rapidly solve complex problems. The skills learned in a PhD can be used to challenge the status quo and look deeper into the evidence, to find new and better answers, ultimately making you a better researcher.

2. Consider moving to part-time work

Doing a PhD and working full time is a big undertaking. It's stressful and tiring. You may find that you get anxious about the quality of your outputs suffering.

Discuss with your boss the possibility of working part time. Perhaps you could focus on the project management aspects of a programme, rather than doing the actual research?

3. Where possible connect your thesis and think tank work

If your PhD topic is related to the research you're doing at work, you may find it less stressful, as you can apply lessons learned, share data and capitalise on networking opportunities.

4. Tell your colleagues about your decision

Our think tanks are like our second family – some of us spend more time with our colleagues than with our actual families! So even if we have support from people at home, we also need the support of those at work.

By informing your colleagues of your decision to do a PhD you can raise much needed moral support, compassion, tolerance and even solidarity.

They may check in with you on progress, share relevant documents, training material or events. They may also be able to provide technical support, such as proofreading draft chapters, assisting with data processing, problem modelling or analytical framework.

If you have a researcher network in your organisation, don't hesitate to present your work and get their support in working through challenges you're facing.

5. Enquire into possible funding

There is no right or wrong way to fund your PhD. But it's pays off to be realistic and well-informed about what funding options are out there, and what you can afford.

Employer sponsorship may be an option. Make sure your funding proposal details your study plan, how long it is for, the cost, why you want to study it and how it will benefit the organisation.

Depending on your thesis topic and what country you are from, you may be able to find scholarships. And studentships are another popular form of funding for PhD students across the world.

6. Create a work plan and follow it as best you can

Working in a think tank and doing a PhD requires some serious organisation – both to separate the professional and PhD hours, but also to plan the tasks within your PhD.

How you divide up your time is up to you and your organisation. For example, you may work in the think tank in the mornings and on your thesis in the afternoon. Or you may have set days. Or save the thesis for the weekend.

Divide your work plan into clear sections, and be realistic about what you can achieve in a week given your other responsibilities. If you're falling behind, rework your plan or discuss your workload with your boss, so that the plan is realistic and you're not stressed by constantly feeling like you're struggling to keep up.

7. Use social media to build your thesis topic network

In addition to attending events on your thesis topic, social media can be a great way to connect with people in your field, crowdsource ideas and solicit feedback. You may even be able to connect with others who are combining think tank work and a PhD for moral support!

THIS ARTICLE IS BASED ON MY REFLECTIONS AND EXPERIENCE OF COMBINING THINK TANK WORK AND A PHD. I'D LOVE TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES!

To get the discussion going, here are some questions to ponder…

First, to think tank managers: How did, or would, you react to a young researcher telling you that they want to pursue a PhD? How did, or would, you respond to the request to work part time? What sort of support can a PhD candidate expect from their think tank? What, if anything, would change for the thinktanker once they got their PhD? How did, or would, you motivate them to stay after completing their PhD?

Second, to a PhD student: What kind of support do you expect, or would you like, from your think tank, boss and colleagues? What do you think are the challenges of working part time while doing your PhD? Once you have your PhD, how will you progress your professional career in a think tank?

TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES:
@ONTHINKTANKS
@MAMYCHOUKEUR

OTT-TTI FELLOWS
FUNDRAISING AND DONOR RELATIONS

IN THIS CHAPTER:

Six strategies for sustainable think tank funding
By Sulamba Shaban

How to write an aspiring fundraising letter
By Sulamba Shaban

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Four ways to build genuine donor relationships
By Sulamba Shaban

SIX STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE THINK TANK FUNDING

BY SULAMBA SHABAN

I work for an independent think tank in Tanzania, STIPRO, whose core funding for almost a decade has come to an end. We are having to redefine our business model and find new and sustainable funding sources.

Here are six strategies we're using to expand our donor base and to diversify our income sources through additional activities over the next five years.

1. Involve all staff

Create an organisational fundraising culture by training and empowering all staff on the basics of fundraising.

Regular fundraising training, based on the organisation's mission, vision and values helps to bring more hands on-deck, and to make fundraising an organisational priority.
STIPRO has no dedicated fundraising staff members but runs annual inhouse training for everyone – from admin staff to researchers.

Bringing staff along to donor events is another great way to make them feel part of the work, and to better understand the donor's needs.

Make fundraising a core competency of job roles, and a pathway for professional development. For example, in STIPRO a core performance evaluation criterion for researchers is how much they have contributed towards securing funds, such as the number of project proposals they have initiated or led.

2. Scan the donor environment

Make sure you understand which donors are interested in your work. Once you know who they are, you can develop strategies to form a relationship with them, letting them know who you are and what you do.

At the beginning of 2019, STIPRO did a scan of the donor environment in Tanzania. We found 20 potential donors in line with our mission. Most of the donors approached have responded positively.

3. Provide capacity development services

Donors love capacity building services. If you have a niche, be the go-to trainer for donors in that area.

STIPRO is one of the only think tanks in Tanzania specialising in science, technology and innovation. So, we're in a good position to earn income through providing training services in these fields. We've developed a training module and are completing the accompanying handbook.

We have already conducted two training sessions with the University of Dar es Salaam, and a Science, Technology and Innovation policy training session at the Science Granting Councils Initiatives (of Africa), and received really positive feedback for all.

4. Maintain a good relationship with existing donors

Going out in search of new donors doesn't mean forgetting about your existing ones. Make sure you still submit all your donor reports on time, involve them in your activities and events and acknowledge their support.

Set up organisational systems, or designate one person, to send thank you letters. Maintaining and strengthening these relationships may lead to repeat, or additional, funding.

While STIPRO's donor for the last 10 years – the Think Tank Initiative – will no longer be able to support us (as the project has ended), we keep our donors up to date with our activities and have shared our success story with them. We believe that a good relationship with our former funder will mean that they continue to be a valuable ambassador for our work.

5. Engage board members

In our case, many members of our board of directors are PhD holders working in universities, with good knowledge of, and exposure to, proposal writing and project management. We've invited these board members to hold internal seminars on the techniques used to write proposals. In some cases, STIPRO has also asked board members to review proposals before submission to donors.

6. Increase your visibility

Being visible is vital for fundraising efforts. This can be achieved through communicating across varied media, such as a website, blogs, news outlets, public debates, seminars and social media.

The aim is to make sure your potential donors know who you are and what you do. Sharing stories about the impact of your work may be a particularly good way to raise your visibility.

Earlier this year, STIPRO redesigned its website, making it more user friendly and helping to improve our overall image with stakeholders. We have also published a number of newspaper articles on how science, technology and innovation (STI) can solve societal problems through evidence-based policies – making us relevant and visible to donors in this area. And last year, we held a seminar with the committee of parliament on why it is important to address STI policy issues. Following this, we have been engaged in several government task forces.

The Science, Technology and Innovation Policy Research Organization (STIPRO) received funding from the Think Tank Initiative – a 10-year project helping to strengthen 43 policy research institutions in 20 developing countries through a mix of core funding and support for capacity development.

HOW TO WRITE AN INSPIRING FUNDRAISING LETTER

BY SULAMBA SHABAN

Writing a compelling letter is a must for any think tank fundraising strategy. And it's worth investing time and effort into developing your fundraising letters, if you want them to bear fruit.

In this letter, you will tell a story that will catch your potential donors' interest. A good story consists of both facts – demonstrating what your think tank has achieved – as well as your vision for change – cultivating the donor's passion to support your cause.

As Chief Administrative and Finance Manager for Tanzanian think tank STIPRO, writing fundraising letters is part of my job. Here are my top six tips for writing an inspiring and compelling fundraising letter, and a recent example I wrote asking potential donors to support the upcoming international conference AfricaLics 2019.

1. Personalise it

This is one of the greatest ways of establishing individual relationships with your donors. It is important to keep in mind that people, not organisations, give funds. So, avoid 'Dear Sir/Madam'; find out who is responsible for the funds and write to them personally. At the end of letter, it should also be signed by a named person: you as the fundraising lead, or the organisation director.

2. Thank your donors

If you're approaching a repeat donor, it's important to thank them for their past support before asking for more, as a matter of courtesy.

3. State the donation purpose

Make sure that the purpose of the request is clearly defined. This will put you and your funder on the same page. Be concise, to avoid the main points getting lost in too many words. Provide a link to the website in case a donor wants extra information.

4. Be specific about how much you need

It is highly advisable to mention a specific amount of funds. Fundraising letters always asks for money, not support, so it's helpful to mention the exact amount requested.

5. Show how the donor will benefit

Effective fundraising letters should not only talk about your needs. Show how your event/programme fits into the donor's objectives. This will motivate donors to be involved in your cause.

6. Provide contact numbers for queries or clarifications

It is advisable to thank your potential donors in advance and provide an option for them to get in touch if they require clarifications or further information. Provide a name, email address and contact number.

A STIPRO example fundraising letter:

Monday, July 29, 2019

The Managing Director,
[BANK NAME]
[BANK ADDRESS]
Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Dear [MANAGING DIRECTOR NAME],

Re: Request for your contribution of TZS [TOTAL SUM] to fund an Innovation Conference

The Science, Technology and Innovation Policy Research Organization (STIPRO), who is your business partner, is a Tanzanian NGO devoted research that informs decisions in science, technology and innovation.

STIPRO has been requested to help organize the 4th AfricaLiCS (African Network on Economics of Learning, Innovation and Competence Building Systems) Conference, in collaboration with the University of Dar es Salaam and the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology.

The conference theme is: ‘Innovation and transformative capacities for growth and sustainable development in Africa’. It is scheduled to take place from **22nd to 24th October 2019**, at the UDSM’s main campus in **Dar es Salaam**, and will involve about **200 participants**, mostly from Africa. More information on the conference can be accessed from conference’s website: https://2019.africalics.org/

STIPRO recognizes [DONOR NAME], not only as a good business partner, but also an important player in innovation – especially in the banking sector – and we believe it will be in your interest to participate in this very important innovation conference by supporting some of the costs that must be covered by the host country.

The purpose of this letter is therefore to kindly request that your bank contribute TZS [TOTAL SUM] to fund the conference reception dinner at the White Sands Hotel.

Your contribution will be recognized at our event in several ways. As one of the sponsors, your name will be placed on banners and conference materials that publicize the event; included in our pre-conference adverts to mass media within and outside the country; and announced verbally at the event itself.

You will also get a session at the reception dinner to talk about your brand and the innovative products of your bank; you will be the only bank among our partners.

We very much hope to count on you for this cause.

For further information/clarifications concerning this event, please contact us through the below indicated contacts.

Yours faithfully,

[EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NAME]
Executive Director

+255 222 774 699
+255 784 420 850
info@stipro.or.tz
www.stipro.or.tz
Regent Estate St.,
Mikocheni A, Plot No: 351

SHORT REFLECTION

THE UNEXPECTED SKILLS OF A FINANCE AND ADMINISTRATION MANAGER

BY SULAMBA SHABAN

As a finance and administration manager, reporting to donors is my responsibility. And having this direct donor contact means I'm the one who can cultivate, maintain and hopefully strengthen our relationship. It's a pretty big responsibility.

During my time working in a think tank, I began to realise that financial management skills aren't enough. I also need **good interpersonal skills**, to listen to my donors and understand what makes them tick. I need to be a **good storyteller**, motivating my donors to invest in our ideas. I need to be a **good timekeeper**, making sure that budgets and reports are delivered on time. I also need to be **persistent**, following up on important meetings or proposals.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE UNEXPECTED SKILLS YOU'VE DISCOVERED, OR HAD TO LEARN QUICKLY, AS A THINKTANKER?

TELL US:
@ONTHINKTANKS
@SHABANSULAMBA

FOUR WAYS TO BUILD GENUINE DONOR RELATIONSHIPS

BY SULAMBA SHABAN

Getting a new donor is tough and time intensive. But as the think tank space gets increasingly competitive, creating strong donor relations is imperative.

A good donor relationship is founded on genuine engagement and connection. Ideally, there's even a touch of true friendship; donors shouldn't be made to feel like cash cows!

Here are four tips for building and maintaining genuine donor relations:

1. Give the individual touch

Donors are individuals, they are people. So, they will respond well to the personal touch. It's more than likely that you are one of multiple projects the donor is managing, so using the personal touch and standing out from crowd is a good thing.

One way to do this is to use face-to-face communication wherever possible. If it's not possible, make sure your emails are personalised – don't cut and paste from the same old donor template email.

2. Invite them to your organisational activities

Bring them into the fold of your organisation. This will help build relations with your donor. My think tank, STRIPO in Tanzania, usually involves its important stakeholders – including donors – in its annual dissemination workshop. We also invite them to social events, and always acknowledge their participation and support in an event.

3. Ask their advice

When you ask donors for advice and counsel, it proves that you value and trust them. You can ask them in person, on the phone or email, but the idea is that you ask them for advice on something other than fundraising.

In STRIPO we seek advice from our major donors during our strategic plan review. And as finance manager, I often ask donors for advice on how to improve the presentation of our budgets and workplans.

4. Share your successes with them

You should always be sharing your success stories with your donors. And don't always do it when you're asking for more money. It's a way of cultivating relationships and inspiring people with stories of change.

We sometimes get so caught up in thinking about raising money, that we forget how important it is to maintain a positive image in the eyes of our donors. And enabling them to share in your successes is a good way to make them feel a part of your team.

There's lots of ways to share successes – such as via your website, a newsletter, or the confirmation pages after a gift or grant has been made. If you want to catch your donor's eye, make them the hero of the story.

STRIPO's major donor for 10 years was the Think Tank Initiative (TTI). To tell TTI just how awesome they are, we told the story of how they took STRIPO from zero full-time-employed researchers to almost six full-time researchers. It provided us with the support we needed to conduct a review of national systems of innovation, which led to the Tanzanian government deciding to craft a new science, technology and innovation policy, with STRIPO as one of the taskforce members.

OTT-TTI FELLOWS ON GENDER

IN THIS CHAPTER:

Five tips to incorporate a gender perspective in research
By Alejandra Teran

Female leaders as agents of change
By Andrea Villarreal

Towards a gender equal think tank
By Varsha Pillai

PRACTICAL ADVICE

FIVE TIPS TO INCORPORATE A GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN RESEARCH

BY ALEJANDRA TERÁN

As part of the OTT-TTI Fellowship programme, some colleagues and I started talking about how our think tanks could incorporate a gender perspective into our research agendas, as well as our traditional projects and research cycles.

I started to investigate and was surprised to find a vast set of literature explicitly exploring the topic! In this blog I summarise, from said literature, some of the top arguments for applying a gender perspective and some tips for getting started.

Three reasons to apply a gender perspective

1. As researchers, we strive to understand problems and answer complex questions. It seems logical, even responsible, to try to understand all the possible dimensions of a research question or issue, and that includes gender (beyond biological sex, this includes the social and cultural dimensions of gender).

2. Gender differences – and the social/power relations associated with these differences – can actually be crucial to our analysis. I encourage you to read this example by FUSADES[5] that illustrates how some research phenomena can affect men, women and others in different ways. Without a gender perspective, you may lose sight of an important part of the problem and reinforce inequalities or traditional gender roles.

3. A gender perspective helps you recognise the possible biases, preferences, interests and values of researchers. With awareness, it is possible to minimise the influence of these factors on the research, thereby making the output more credible and robust.

Five tips to start applying a gender perspective:

1. Train your research team on gender integration and awareness. It's important to decode what we mean by gender for research. For example, the whole team needs to know key terminology, such as the difference between gender and sex.

2. Integrate values of diversity and equality into proposal design. Try to develop research questions that take into account gender norms and disparities. If possible, promote research topics that would break sexist dynamics and design, from the beginning, methodologies and strategies to address social norms and gender relations. In addition, becoming familiar with the research subject context is very helpful when making sure you are including all voices.

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5. Mario Chávez Claros (2019) 'My Journey Through Gender Analysis'. Gender at Work. Available at: https://genderatwork.org/think-tanks-and-gender/journey-through-gender-analysis/

3. When collecting empirical information, try to find disaggregated data and evaluate the potential to measure gender issues so you can plan to design other instruments. Also, evaluate the use of androcentric variables in your data. At this stage, value the literature that comes from both men and women, and also from different contexts.

4. Consider using gender-integration continuum categories to measure how gender focused your research is, for example those developed by Oxfam.[6] Always remember to ask: who do the research results serve? Do they serve men, women and different gender identities in the same way?

5. When writing your research make sure you introduce gender-sensitive language and include some context through a lens of gender perspective. When presenting the findings, disaggregate the data and go beyond just focusing on women/men to address the subject of gender. Also plan a communications strategy to avoid transmitting stereotypes.

As a first step to actioning these tips, set up a meeting with your research team to discuss them. By discussing these issues within our think tanks we are generating awareness within the sector. This will hopefully have a multiplier effect, generating new methodologies and ideas on how to make incorporating a gender perspective into our work the norm!

If you're looking for more on this topic, I recommend these documents by Oxfam and the European Commission,[7] offering frameworks and tools for applying a gender perspective.

6. Anam Parvez Butt, Namalie Jayasinghe and Maussam Zaaroura (2019) Integrating Gender in Research Planning. Oxfam. Available at: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/integrating-gender-in-research-planning-620621

7. European Commission (2011) Toolkit: Gender in EU-funded research. Available at: https://www.ki.si/fileadmin/user_upload/KINA24840ENC_002.pdf

SHORT REFLECTION

WE NEED MORE FEMALE LEADER ROLE MODELS IN THINK TANKS

BY ANDREA VILLARREAL

When it comes to leadership, there is a lack of women representation – be it in think tanks, the private or public sector. Only 18% of the largest non-profits have female CEOs.[8] And when they do make it to leadership positions, they earn less – the Nonprofit Compensation Report 2017 found that female CEOs earn 21% less than their male counterparts.[9]

It is clear that an organisational culture change is needed to achieve true equity. But breaking paradigms about leadership is easier said than done. In 2014, the World Economic Forum predicted that we will not see global gender parity until 2095.[10] And in 2015, they estimated that the gender gap will not close until 2133.[11]

It may be a long battle, but as more women enter into leadership positions they become role models. And seeing women in positions of leadership, and as experts contributing to public debate, will inspire young women and girls to aim for leadership positions too.

It will also give parents' new aspirations for their daughters. In fact, studies have shown that the presence of a female leader increases the likelihood that parents will want their daughters to graduate, or to study beyond secondary school level or to support studies in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) careers.[12]

Increasing exposure to female leadership is essential for breaking down societal perceptions and dominant cultural norms that are a barrier to capable women leading organisations.

Policy initiatives that support women to achieve leadership positions helpful. For example, leadership initiatives for women, scholarships, capacity building, research grants and female executive programmes.

Think tanks can help to lead this shift, as organisations that promote and support more fair and just public policy and society. My personal experience working in a think tank, is that women can be strong and powerful decision-makers.

8. GuideStar (non-dated) 'New Report Shows Proportion of Female Nonprofit CEOs Decreased in Fiscal Year 2013' Candid. Available at: https://candid.org/about/press-room/releases/new-report-shows-proportion-of-female-nonprofit-ceos-decreased-in-fiscal-year-2013
9. Ben Paynter (2017) 'Female Nonprofit CEOs Still Get Paid Way Less Than Male CEOs' Fast Company. Available at: https://www.fastcompany.com/40464918/female-nonprofit-ceos-still-get-paid-way-less-than-male-ceos
10. Saadia Zahidi (2014) '2095: The year of gender equality at work, maybe' World Economic Forum. Available at: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2014/10/2095-year-gender-equality-work-maybe/
11. Keith Breene (2016) 'Will the future be gender equal?' World Economic Forum. Available at: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/will-the-future-be-gender-equal/
12. Lori Bearman et al. (2012) 'Female Leadership Raises Aspirations and Educational Attainment for Girls: A Policy Experiment in India' Science Author Manuscript. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3394179/

#womenthinktanks

ARE THERE FEMALE LEADERS IN YOUR ORGANISATION?

ARE THERE POLICIES AND INITIATIVES IN PLACE TO SUPPORT WOMEN TO ACHIEVE LEADERSHIP ROLES?

IDEA

TOWARDS A GENDER EQUAL THINK TANK

BY VARSHA PILLAI

Concepts like gender analysis, gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting and intersectionality are often bandied about. But how often do think tanks look within to assess their gender equality, or to understand how gender manifests and is integrated within research, governance, management and communication processes?

This article provides an essential checklist on gender for think tanks to assess where they are on the gender equality spectrum. It is designed as a tool to get think tanks talking about and engaged with gender equality issues.

Defining gender equality

The United Nations[13] says that gender equality does not mean that women and men are the same, but that human rights, responsibilities and opportunities exist irrespective of whether they are born male or female.

Professor Savitri Goonesekere expands on this definition to describe what she calls substantive equality,[14] eliminating discrimination and disadvantage by stressing the need to change institutional attitudes that perpetuate discrimination against women.

Creating a framework to assess gender equality

I decided to use the concept of substantive equality to analyse gender within a think tank. How could I, as a think tank programme manager, gauge my organisation's performance on gender equality?

I created a framework to assess and score my think tank. The framework comprises 11 questions to engage senior management and staff to think about different aspects of gender within the organisation.

The idea is to, first of all, get people talking about gender. Second, to give a score that allows the organisation to get a sense of where it lies on the 'gender equality spectrum'.

Some of the questions may be challenging to answer, but it is important for think tanks to ask them nonetheless. A gender-equal work place should be the norm, not the exception.

13. United Nations (not-dated) 'Gender Equality'. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/gender-equality/

14. Professor Savitri Goonesekere (not-dated) 'Gender Equality in Sri Lankan Universities: Myths and Realities'. Available at: http://units.kln.ac.lk/cgs/resources/GoonesekereGenderEqualityinSriLankanUniversities.pdf

Such a checklist only works if respondents answer honestly, without bias of compulsion. I received full support from the senior management at my organisation, the Public Affairs Centre (PAC). The questions were answered by the Head of HR and Administration, since many of the questions are about organisational policies.

The questions were formulated after studying institutional good practice on diversity, and framed to cater to aspects of representation, internal policies, hiring processes, communication and even infrastructure.

The essential checklist on gender (ECG):

	QUESTION	YES / NO	EXTRA INFORMATION
1.	Is the think tank representative in terms of male vs female ratio at junior, mid, and senior level?		Questions 1 and 2 are all about equal representation, which is an integral aspect of being a gender-equal organisation.
2.	What is the male/female ratio of board members?		
3.	Does the think tank include gender as an integral aspect of its research?		Question 3 looks at how the think tank includes gender in its research framework, outcomes and organisational theory of change.
4.	Is the think tank an equal opportunities employer?		Questions 4 and 5 are about organisational hiring policies.
5.	Does the think tank include/ acknowledge the LGBTQ communities either in hiring practices or its research?		
6.	Does the think tank have a formal gender policy that has been implemented?		Questions 6 and 7 are asking whether the organisation has a gender policy, and whether or not it has been implemented in its entirety (or drafted and left on the shelf).
7.	Does the think tank also have a written mandate on wage equality that addresses any gender pay gap?		
8.	Has the think tank integrated gender equality into its overall guidelines and strategic goals?		Question 8 aims to understand if the organisation has ensured that gender equality is part of its overall organisational strategy.
9.	Does the think tank have ways in which it communicates aspects on gender equality?		Question 9 seeks to find out if the organisation has a dedicated process to share its commitment towards gender equality – this could be verbally during meetings or on its website etc.
10.	Has the think tank taken steps to incorporate and measure gender inclusion in the workplace?		Questions 10 and 11 are about ensuring a gender-inclusive workplace. Question 10 is about infrastructural and policy requirements (such as separate toilets, on-site child care, post-maternity reintegration policies). Question 11 pertains to policies that the organisation has adopted to ensure safety and security of its workforce, irrespective of gender.
11.	Has the think tank formally adopted the zero-tolerance to sexual harassment policy?		

Scores: every Yes =+1 and every No= 0. The higher the score, the better the institution's result on the gender scorecard.

WHAT DO THE SCORES MEAN?

Score between 10–11: An organisation that has done a lot of work on improving gender inclusion.

Score between 7–9: An organisation that has attempted, albeit in a non-structured manner, to build a gender-equal organisation.

Score below 6: An organisation that needs to start working towards creating a gender-equal organisation immediately to stay relevant.

The PAC scored eight points on the ECG test: an organisation that has attempted, albeit in a non-structured manner, to build a gender-equal organisation.

Even with the PAC's decent score of eight, the absence of a formal policy of reintegration after maternity leave and a lack of women on the board, means that PAC needs to work more towards gender equality. The test has nonetheless started an important conversation, which we hope will inform changes in thinking and practice.

While a score may help raise important questions internally, and put in perspective where the thinking lies on the issue of gender, true change can happen only if there are dedicated strategies that are implemented and backed by the core members of the organisation.

In its silver jubilee year, the PAC has the opportunity as a reputed think tank to build a structured approach towards becoming a good practice, gender-equal organisation. This will involve introducing new policies, standards and processes and abiding by them, to sustain a progressive work environment.

The PAC senior team were receptive to the questionnaire and were eager to know where the institute stood on the ECG spectrum. But any change is difficult: the PAC's journey towards building a gender-equal organisation has just begun.

OTT-TTI FELLOWS ON COMMUNICATIONS AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

IN THIS CHAPTER:

Think tanks: are we asking the right communications questions?
By Paula Pino

Communications M&E: overcoming its complexity
By Paula Pino

Think tanks and new ways of producing knowledge
By Alejandra Teran

PRACTICAL ADVICE

THINK TANKS: ARE WE ASKING THE RIGHT COMMUNICATIONS QUESTIONS?

BY PAULA PINO

This scene might be familiar:

A meeting is held to plan a project's communications. Both the research and communications teams are eager to maximise the impact of the research findings.

A quick communications action plan is written, making use of the think tank's full portfolio of communications tools and channels.

Everyone is happy and ready to get down to work.

Wait. Isn't something missing?

Maybe not at first sight. But something important is missing...

In this scenario there is no clear and shared understanding of the communication goals, and how they support the project's impact objectives. What's missing is the constant and reliable 'north star' that guides each stage of the communications strategy.

As a think tank communications professional, I can relate to this all too well.

I constantly deal with brilliant research, which produces new ideas and recommendations that seek to engage the public agenda. Sometimes we succeed, but often we make a little splash with our research and then it is forgotten about.

As an OTT-TTI Fellow, I've had the chance to reflect on and discuss these shared challenges with thinktanker colleagues and experts from around the world. Here are the two biggest lessons I've learned.

Asking the right questions

Having a good portfolio of communications tools and channels is an excellent starting point for having an impact with your research. But it's not enough.

If you want to avoid the scenario described at the beginning of this article (i.e. if you want to find your communications 'north star'), you have to ask the right questions before you start rolling out the familiar portfolio of tools and channels.

Before writing your communications strategy, bring the research and communications teams together to ask and answer these seven questions:

1. What do we want our communications to accomplish?
2. Who do we want to reach, and what are their information needs/interests?
3. What are the key messages we want to share from our research?
4. Which tools and channels will be most effective to reach our target audience(s)?
5. What skills and equipment do we need, and are they available to us?
6. What threats could undermine our strategy?
7. How can we measure and assess our strategy?

Remember, what worked in a previous successful campaign will not necessarily work now. And what didn't work before, may be suitable now. Communications plans should always be tailored to the specific research, guided by that north star at every point of the journey.

The prioritised, planned and unexpected

For think tanks that work across multiple areas (like mine) prioritising engagement resources and activities is difficult. In his article 'Communications as an orchestra',[15] On Think Tanks founder Enrique Mendizabal suggests that one strategy for prioritising is to focus on policy processes, developing a plan to engage with the opportunities to have the most influence – such as in the lead up to elections, when specific policy issues are being debated, or when big events are being held on a topic.

For communications teams, regular prospect meetings with the research team will help to define engagement priorities and the level of communications support required for each project.

But having policy influence requires a think tank to both plan and be flexible – preparing to influence at strategic policy moments, and being prepared to respond when unexpected windows of opportunity arise.

15. Enrique Mendizabal (2015) 'Communications as an Orchestra'. On Think Tanks. Available at: https://onthinktanks.org/articles/communications-as-an-orchestra/

PRACTICAL ADVICE

COMMUNICATIONS M&E: OVERCOMING ITS COMPLEXITY

BY PAULA PINO

Monitoring and evaluating (M&E) communications is an important, but sometimes intimidating, task. At my Lima-based think tank Group for the Analysis of Development (GRADE), we recently redesigned our communications M&E approach. And faced a lot of challenges!

Luckily, as an OTT-TTI Fellow I had several stimulating conversations with peers about my concerns, successes and sticking points for communications M&E, and thanks to these conversations and resources I now feel much more optimistic (and less intimidated) by the task.

Here I share the main ideas and resources I have acquired and incorporated into my work:

Why is M&E so complex?

To talk about communications M&E, we first have to talk about M&E more broadly. The question: Why is M&E so complex? was posed to us by OTT advisor Stephen Yeo[16] at the WinterSchool for thinktankers. And four clear answers emerged during the discussion:

First, fear of showing failure or finding fault, especially when there is a lack of consensus among the people whose efforts are being evaluated. M&E is often thought about in terms of success and failure, rather than a collaborative, iterative exercise in learning.

Second, it is an afterthought. Gathering data takes time. But it's common to leave it to the last minute, when the donor has asked for a report or the board meeting approaches.

Third, the person doing the M&E doesn't have the necessary skills. It's not uncommon for administrators and assistants to be given these additional duties, rather than making it a core part of someone's role.

Fourth, influence or impact is difficult to define when it comes to policy research. As is determining the contribution you, versus other factors, have made towards a change. Stephen shared two tips to avoid despair when trying to rethink M&E:

- **Use existing data.** All institutions will have implemented some type of M&E, even if it's not systematic. Take advantage of what you already have and use it to structure your reports.

16. The On Think Tanks Team: Stephen Yeo: https://onthinktanks.org/resources/the-on-think-tanks-team-stephen-yeo/

- **Tell compelling stories.** Base your stories of influence on your theories of change. Suggested approaches include Outcome Mapping and Harvesting,[17] the RAPID Outcome Assessment[18] or the links of policy influence[19] approach.

Overcoming its complexity for communications

There's not a lot of guidance out there specifically on communications M&E. One useful resource to help overcome the complexity is the ODI's Communications monitoring, evaluation and learning toolkit.[20] I'd like to highlight two ideas from the toolkit:

First, we can't monitor and evaluate communications if we don't know what we were trying to do in the first place. To ensure that our work is strategic and high quality, we must plan and manage our communications activities and outputs well.

Second, we need to go beyond the common metrics for measuring 'success' that typically are all about reach. Instead we can address three dimensions: reach, usefulness and uptake.

Reach is the most basic level of communications M&E, related to the breadth of distribution of our work (number of downloads or retweets). Assessing usefulness takes our M&E strategy to a higher level, covering the quality and applicability of information disseminated, and how it is received or is relevant and useful to users. Uptake is the highest level, assessing if and how your work is being used. The ODI toolkit offers a wide set of questions and indicators to measure each dimension.

Challenges to implementation

There is an old belief that M&E processes are separate to outcomes and impact. This misconception must be overcome in our organisations. M&E is an essential learning tool that supports outcomes and impact. There needs to be a shift from occasional monitoring when donor reports arise, to more systematic processes throughout the research and communications cycle.

In GRADE, for a long time I felt that our communications M&E efforts were somewhat detached, lacking a clear institutional framework. But the good news is that we were probably on the right track without realising it. We were constantly collecting monitoring data for our periodical donor reports, transparency reports and institutional end-of-year reports, or in preparing research dissemination strategies.

Recently, my team prepared a presentation on understanding the impact our researchers can achieve. We went beyond the traditional way of scoring publications based on download numbers,

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17. For more on Outcome Mapping and Harvesting, see BetterEvaluation: https://www.betterevaluation.org/ar/node/5097
18. For more on RAPID outcome assessments, see ODI: https://www.odi.org/publications/6800-rapid-outcome-assessment
19. For more on links of policy influence, see Politics and Ideas: https://politicsandideas.org/how-to-analyze-the-results-of-policy-influencing-lessons-from-a-new-method-under-construction/
20. Caroline Cassidy and Louise Ball (2018) Communications monitoring, evaluating and learning toolkit. ODI. Available at: https://www.odi.org/publications/11040-communications-monitoring-evaluation-and-learning-toolkit

to look at other ways in which our researchers are engaging people, such as meetings with policymakers or collaborators.

The work of progressing these ideas at GRADE is being achieved through a combination of trial and error, and the support of our executive board, which has encouraged me to propose ways of improving our M&E practices.

But even if researchers are enthusiastic and keen to cooperate, it is difficult to add new tasks to existing ways of working. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges is to reconcile willingness with timing and capacity.

Nonetheless, these discussions have set us on a promising path to strengthen our research communications M&E efforts, and its role as a barometer for our influence and impact.

This is an edited version of an article that first appeared on the On Think Tanks blog.

IDEA

THINK TANKS AND NEW WAYS OF PRODUCING KNOWLEDGE

BY ALEJANDRA TERAN

Over the last few decades, the ways think tanks produce and communicate knowledge has changed. For think tanks, this is an opportunity to hear more voices and to engage with society in new ways.

The transition from old to new

Más Saber América Latina[21] studies the relationship between think tanks and universities in nine Latin America countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay). The book discusses the challenges that come with transitioning to the new mode of knowledge production in the world of think tanks and academia.

Mode 1, the 'old' mode, is traditional academic research production. It is characterised by strong disciplinary theory. Knowledge is produced for and legitimised by the scientific community. It includes different voices, but in a 'vertical' flow of information, in which academics are the ones producing the ideas, results and conclusions.

Mode 2, the 'new' approach, introduces new and different mechanisms for generating ideas, involving more actors and disciplines. The relevance of the knowledge generated is defined by society, generating highly contextualised results. Knowledge generation is horizontal, with different institutions and the public co-creating.

This shift requires some serious organisational change, specifically in the most 'academic' institutions. It pushes think tanks to enter into new practices and new relationships with society and other institutions.

Why are we seeing this shift?

Globalisation and the expansion of information and communication technology have opened up knowledge and empowered people to access and demand it.

The emergence and growth of the middle class with increased access to information has resulted in further demand for democratic participation in knowledge production and public debate.

In Bolivia, where I work, this shift is apparent. Social and political changes over recent years (such as the growth of the middle class, greater recognition of indigenous rights, empowerment of women) has increased awareness among the public about how policy decisions affect their day-to-day life, and they have become more empowered to participate.

21. Adriana Arellano and Orzalo Bellettini (2014) *Más Saber América Latina: Understanding Think Tank – University Relationships in Latin America*. ThinkTank Initiative. Available at: http://www.thinktankinitiative.org/sites/default/files/Mas%20Saber%20English.pdf

If think tanks fail to include the diversity of interests and voices, the recommendations we make to policymakers will have gaps and disconnections and ultimately will lead to the ineffectiveness of policies.

In Bolivia, as in other countries, development paradigms are sometimes imposed and result in failure or ineffectiveness. Every country's reality is so diverse and complex that some policies can be rejected by the people because they did not adequately represent them. And if policies are not well focused and contextualised, they might not have the desired or intended impact on people's wellbeing.

Embracing the shift to Mode 2

These new ways of knowledge production are undoubtedly closer to the democratic and inclusion values that many of our institutions aspire to. And think tanks around the world are embracing Mode 2, looking for new ways to actively involve different actors, including the public, in their work – see for example Policy Kitchen,[22] ACODE[23] and Grupo Faro[24]. But for many think tanks, moving beyond traditional academic methodologies can be a challenge and have high costs.

I would argue (and I'm not alone) that this new context offers think tanks a fantastic opportunity that should be embraced. But really, think tanks don't have many options – this knowledge production shift is happening worldwide and soon there will be little room left for Mode 1.

In today's world, Mode 2 is essential for what we think tanks do: bridge research and policy by bringing fresh, evidence-based ideas.

22. Read more about the Policy Kitchen by foraus – Swiss Forum on Foreign Policy: https://www.policykitchen.com/
23. Read more about ACODE's Local Government Councils Scorecard Initiative: https://www.acode-u.org/LGCSCI
24. Read more about GRUPO Faro's work on a ten-year education plan: https://grupofaro.org/educiudadania/

OTT-TTI FELLOWS ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

IN THIS CHAPTER:

What happens when expert and public opinion clash?
By Joseph Ishaku

Public engagement: three considerations for think tanks
By Varsha Pillai

Citizen voice and think tanks: a Nigerian case study
By Joseph Ishaku

Operationalising public engagement: four reflections for think tanks
By Joseph Ishaku

IDEA

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN EXPERT AND PUBLIC OPINION CLASH?

BY JOSEPH ISHAKU

Something that has always interested me is this: should policy priorities be based on evidence promoted by policy support organisations (like think tanks) or public opinion? And what happens when these are fundamentally opposed? In many countries, like Nigeria, public opinion often trumps evidence, with politicians keen to win votes. This means that think tanks will have to start engaging the public to get their evidence listened to.

Cost-benefit analysis vs values and beliefs

A simplistic example to illustrate this potential dilemma is public expenditure – a central policy issue with substantial impact on the public.

The government can look to the research sector for evidence. For example, a think tank may use a cost-benefit analysis to make recommendations, such as those conducted by the Copenhagen Consensus Center,[25] to identify the programmes/sectors that return the best value for every dollar spent.

Alternatively, policymakers can rely on public preferences to prioritise which programmes/sectors to invest in. In democratic settings, voters can express their fiscal policy preference by voting for either conservative or liberal candidates and their manifestos. In addition, periodic opinion polling can reveal pubic preferences.

The public's preference may be radically different from the position of the think tank. A good example of this is the case of energy subsidies in Nigeria. Public opinion is at odds with experts' views.[26] The public view subsidies as their share of the country's oil 'wealth'. Whereas, the evidence suggests that such subsidies, worth over USD 13.6 billion in 2011, disproportionately benefit the well-off.[27]

In these examples, the think tank policy positions offer more efficient or cost-effective choices. The public's preferences on public expenditure, however, come from a position of lived experiences coupled with beliefs about the value of such spending for their well-being.

25. Copenhagen Consensus Center: https://www.copenhagenconsensus.com/top-outcomes

26. Ruth Olurounbi (2019) 'The rising cost of Nigeria's petroleum subsidy'. *The African Report*. Available at: https://www.theafricareport.com/418/nigeria-the-cost-of-cheaper-petrol/

27. Josiah Aramide et al. (2012) *A Citizens' Guide to Energy Subsidies in Nigeria*. IISD. Available at: https://www.iisd.org/library/citizens-guide-energy-subsidies-nigeria

Politicians are incentivised to go with their voters

Politicians are often happy to sacrifice the empirical think tank evidence in favour of public opinion. The incentive structure for politicians is to veer towards popular policies, as they rely on popular votes to remain in power. This practice is prominent in Nigeria where political considerations trump other social or economic considerations, as this article explains.[28]

Think tanks need to convince the public

In settings such as Nigeria, where the culture of relying on evidence is under-developed, it is vital that think tanks build a strategy around public engagement.

This strategy should aim to keep the public informed on pertinent issues as a way of influencing their perceptions and eventually enabling them to take evidenced-informed policy positions.

At the same time, it should aim to mobilise their voices to complement the policy advocacy efforts of the think tanks.

Incorporating citizens' voices in think tanks' evidence

Incorporating citizens' voices in evidence generation is not so straightforward. To what extent should the pulse of the general public be monitored and taken into consideration by think tanks? How much influence should the public have over the research? Some thinktankers may cringe at the challenges of trying to combine 'expert' and 'lay' evidence.

For think tanks in settings like Nigeria that want to develop a strategy around public engagement, building trust with your public by giving them agency will be critical. Engage them beyond just provision of information by seeking greater collaboration. Trust will be the foundation upon which evidence from think tanks can be accepted by the public.

Another way to build trust is to work with the public to ensure that their concerns are understood, considered and reflected in your research. This will encourage them to support the experts' policy advocacy effort.

You can also stimulate demand for evidence by pointing out clearly not just how 'good' sound policies are but also how 'bad' poor policies can be.

A combination of trust and public support for think tanks and other policy support organisations may be the catalyst for driving progress towards a more evidence-informed policymaking landscape.

28. Douglas Arent et al. (2017) The Political Economy of Clean Energy Transitions. Oxford Scholarship Online.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: THREE CONSIDERATIONS FOR THINK TANKS

BY VARSHA PILLAI

How does your think tank visualise ‘the public’? Is it an amorphous sea of faces, where you know they are there but you can’t make out any defining features – much like the familiar silhouette of a graphic novel?

Public engagement has become somewhat of a think tank buzz word. But to what extent have think tanks really pondered who their ‘public’ is? Does their vision of the public represent all the people they want to reach? How can they de-mystify their work, and really engage the public in meaningful ways? These are difficult but important questions for think tanks that seek solutions to bring about change on the ground.

Over the last seven months, On Think Tanks has explored the topic of think tanks and public engagement through a range of article and interviews.[29] This article draws on my own experience as Programme Manager of Policy Engagement and Communications, with the Public Affairs Centre in India, to explore three important considerations.

1. Defining ‘the public’

In my experience, think tanks need to dig deeper and wider to find their version of the public. There are communities within communities, and these sub-groups are the microcosms of what makes communities tick and holds them together.

Essentially, if think tanks don’t carefully define its public for research, how can they craft the right messaging or use the right communication channels?

For a country like India, our concept of ‘the public’ is often very one-dimensional. It tends to be viewed as a group, community or communities that are naturally male-led.

In conceptualising our public, can think tanks look across the larger community spectrum to ensure that their definition represents women, the disabled, the elderly, sexual minorities and marginalised groups, among others?

Of course, full representation may not be logistically or fiscally feasible. But what’s important is for think tanks to identify who it needs to reach, to be inclusive and open.

In the Public Affairs Centre (PAC), we placed emphasis on understanding citizens from the outset, through our Citizen Report Card (CRC). CRC is a simple but powerful tool to provide public agencies with systematic feedback from the users of public services. This provides a basis for dialogue and engagement between communities, civil society organisations and local governments on public service delivery.

29. See the On Think Tanks 2018 Annual Review on Public Engagement. Available at: https://onthinktanks.org/publications/2018-annual-review-public-engagement/

2. Demystify think tanks

In the past think tanks have seen themselves as being somewhat intellectually superior to the public, and made no attempt to make their research understood. Public engagement, therefore, tended to be rather transactional and one-directional: disseminating research findings.

Increasingly, think tanks are positioning themselves as mediators between the public and policymakers. In order to do this, think tanks must demystify their work. This requires making a conscious effort to 'de-jargonise' research, so that it is accessible to the pubic (non-specialists).

Some of the ways we work to do this in PAC are: communicating our research to community members (with whom we work) through special *Gram Sabhas* (community forums) and through our local/community-based partners. Our community-based partners are our eyes and ears on the ground, keeping us in touch with the communities for whom and with which we're working.

3. Involving the public

Increasingly, discussions around think tank public engagement recognise that it's not all about disseminating findings (the public functioning as just passive recipients), but rather involving the public within the scope of the research, looking at them as co-curators within the ambit of the knowledge generation.

Do think tanks have a larger role to play in making research and recommendation-generating processes more inclusive, and therefore representative?

If the public is non-specialist in a topic, how far will, or should, a think tank go in building knowledge among the public on a particular issue? And what sort of investment (time and money) would it take to sustain this?

In the PAC, we're working hard to contextualise and tailor our engagement work to the individual communities we're working with. Take, for example, a recent rural sanitation project in two Indian states: in one state the community was already invested in the importance of toilets, so our engagement work centred around improving the understanding of technical and maintenance matters. We worked to demystify this process using wall paintings, which received a great community response. In the second state the focus was on creating awareness around, and support for, toilets. Quite organically, women from the communities joined our awareness campaign, becoming our foot soldiers of change, leading to 12 additional villages being declared Open Defecation Free villages.

Think tanks have to evolve with the times. They play an important role as contributors of evidence-based research. It is vital that they stay relevant and find allies amongst the public, and this calls for constant engagement with community citizens.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

CITIZEN VOICE AND THINK TANKS: A NIGERIAN CASE STUDY

BY JOSEPH ISHAKU

There's a common perception that top-down development approaches have failed. And public agency is playing a bigger role in policy discussions and in politics, as Stuti Khemani's research highlights.[30] This has put pressure on think tanks to involve the public more in their work.[31] But there are still a lot of questions about how to do this.

In this article, I share my organisation's experience in Nigeria, of deliberate efforts to facilitate meaningful engagement with the public in knowledge production for policy use.

In February 2019, we held Education Awareness Workshops across five Nigerian states. The workshops aimed to facilitate constructive discussions between political candidates and other stakeholders around education, in the lead up to elections.

Elections offer a unique opportunity for informed and interested community members to engage with political candidates on important policy issues, as politicians are keen to engage with the public (their voters).

The workshops were part of a research project[32] evaluating the role of the implicit social contract between newly elected officials and education stakeholders in influencing school governance and learning outcomes.

First, we prepared a two-page brief on what publicly available data says about basic education in each state. The exercise highlighted pressing issues and was useful for preparing questions to engage stakeholders.

In planning the workshop, we spoke to a wide range of education stakeholders – such as teachers, parents, PTA representatives, school management committees, school administrators, government education officials, NGOs and community leaders. Interacting with these stakeholders revealed gaps in the data and provided context to the statistics.

We merged data gathered through preliminary engagements with the initial brief, to write a new brief that we presented at the workshops as a primer to discussions.

At the workshops, political candidates were exposed to community members' demands and experiences, with a better-informed understanding of the issues they'd need to deal with if elected.

30. Stuti Khemani (2019) 'Outsized focus on cash transfers is missing the point'. Brookings. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2019/04/19/outsized-focus-on-cash-transfers-is-missing-the-point/

31. Ajoy Datta (2019) 'Engaging the public: lessons from history'. On Think Tanks. Available at: https://onthinktanks.org/articles/engaging-the-public-lessons-from-history/

32. Read more about the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) programme: https://riseprogramme.org/

Our role as a think tank was to facilitate the sharing of experiences and ideas related to the policy issue of education with the policymakers. And to document the results of this engagement in a coherent manner for future policymaking decisions.

The human and financial resource needed for this type of engagement is a crucial consideration. This can make it difficult for some think tanks. But this doesn't mean that it's impossible. Think tanks have to find creative ways to fund public engagement activities. Including public engagement as a funded research activity can be helpful, and it is important to make the case for it with donors during fundraising.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

OPERATIONALISING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: FOUR REFLECTIONS FOR THINK TANKS

BY JOSEPH ISHAKU

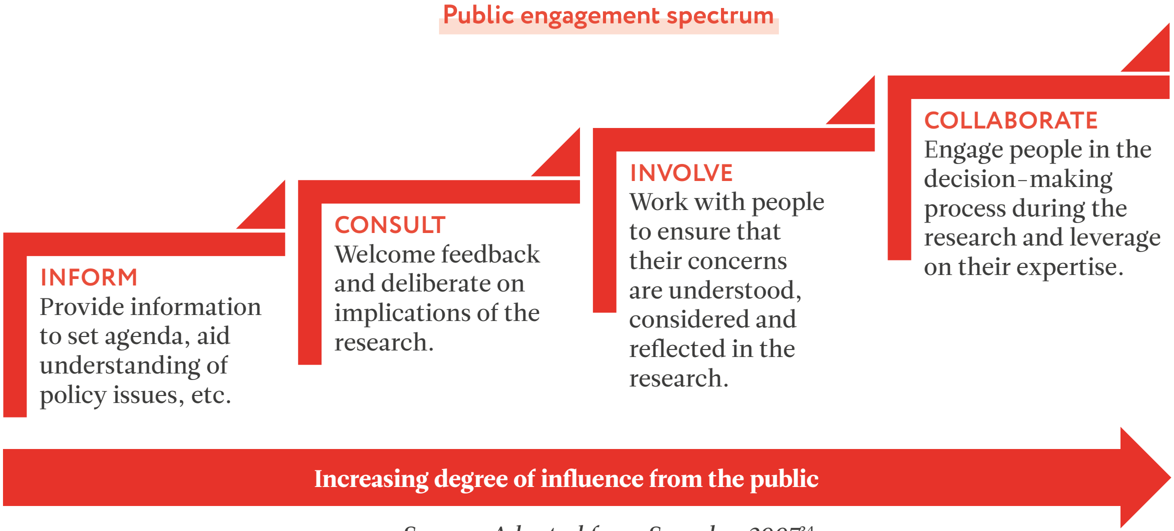
In a previous article,[33] I reflected on how citizen voice and public engagement can increase the quality of research, as well as the credibility, relevance and perception of think tanks. In this follow-up article, I contend with how to operationalise this, providing an overview of some of the key things to think about, and the benefits and challenges of direct and indirect approaches.

1. Defining the purpose of your public engagement

For starters, a think tank will have to decide *why* it wants to engage the public, and to *define* the people that make up this 'public'.

I think this spectrum is a helpful starting point to think through different levels of engagement, which will ultimately determine the choice of methods and tools:

Public engagement spectrum



Source: Adapted from Swanke, 2007[34]

2. Assessing the public's willingness to engage

Before you engage with the public, it's helpful to gauge their attitudes and willingness to participate, relative to the degree of engagement sought. How likely are they to want to support,

33. Joseph Ishaku (2019) 'The role of citizens' voice in think tanks' body of evidence'. On Think Tanks. Available at: https://onthinktanks.org/articles/the-role-of-citizens-voice-in-think-tanks-body-of-evidence/

34. Denice Swanke (20007) 'Methods of Public Engagement'. Proceedings of the 2007 George Wright Society Conference. Available at: http://www.georgewright.org/0742swanke.pdf

or be interested in, the work of a think tank or research centre? This will inform the strategy and approaches for engagement.

For instance, a lot of people don't actually know what a think tank is. A challenge with public engagement I have observed is that on first contact, some citizens perceive think tanks to be donors or NGOs.

There is an almost immediate change in attitude when you provide better clarity about the role of think tanks. However, a word of warning: in my experience in Nigeria, sometimes the public can be less enthusiastic or interested in engaging once you've explained that a think tank's role is to support policymaking and practice, as this may feel removed from their day-to-day lives, whereas NGO and donor initiatives may deliver more immediate benefits or changes.

3. Methods for facilitating public engagement

There are several methods and options available to think tanks to inform and engage the public in their work. This table highlights some of these ways:

Engagement methods and techniques, based on reason for engagement

INFORM	CONSULT / INVOLVE	COLLABORATE
Reports / policy briefs / blogs	Surveys / questionnaires	Consensus workshops
Newsletters	Feedback forms	Stakeholder dialogue
Debates / lectures / talks	Focus groups	Partnership brokering
Television / radio	Public meetings	Steering groups
Websites	Ballots / voting	Online platforms
Social media	Advisory panels	Open space events
Exhibitions	Citizen juries	Mediation

Source: Adapted from University of Bath[35]

4. Direct and indirect approaches for engagement

Methods for public engagement (beyond just providing information) can be divided into two main approaches: direct and indirect.

Direct approaches rely on the presence of the participating public in a shared space at a given time. An important characteristic of this approach is that the time and space for engagement is bounded and relatively short.

Direct engagement can be achieved through convening events, interviews or even virtual meetings. I described an example of a direct method of engagement in my previous article, whereby CSEA held a series of consultations and convened awareness workshops with education stakeholders.

35. University of Bath (2019) 'How to Engage'. Available at: http://www.bath.ac.uk/marketing/public-engagement/what/how-to-engage/

Some of the benefits of direct engagement approaches include:

- contributions from the public are gathered quicker; and
- greater ability to structure and guide contributions from the public.

Indirect public engagement involves the harvesting of public input in a research process, facilitating contributions over a longer period of time. For instance, this could be facilitated through an online space or analogue suggestion box.

A good example of indirect public engagement is the foraus Policy Kitchen,[36] which creates a space for informed and interested members of the public to collaborate and share ideas on issues of mutual interest. Decision-making web applications, such as Loomio,[37] also facilitate indirect public engagement.

Some of the benefits of indirect engagement approaches include:

- longer time period allows for greater reflection and coherence of thoughts; and
- greater flexibility on timing.

Both approaches have their challenges, such as:

- balancing information overload on the one hand and struggling to generate interest and contributions on the other;
- potential trade-off between mass participation of non-experts and research output quality;
- ensuring that online platforms are secure against bot invitation, polarising agenda peddling, bullying or other risks of online participation;
- exclusion of people who do not have online access, or cannot attend physically; and
- moderating forums, aggregating comments and the political exercise of summarising/filtering some contributions and excluding others.

36. Read more about the Policy Kitchen by foraus – Swiss Forum on Foreign Policy: https://www.policykitchen.com/
37. Loomio.org

IDEAS
REFLECTIONS
ADVICE

ON THINK TANKS FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME

Every year, On Think Tanks opens its doors to young and promising think tank leaders to co-develop a new global leadership paradigm. The 2018-2019 OTT-TTI Fellowship Programme has been designed in collaboration with the Think Tank Initiative.

www.onthinktanks.org/fellowship-programme

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