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OTT-TTI Fellowship Programme

Final technical report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The OTT-TTI fellowship grew out of an initial request from the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) to On Think Tanks (OTT) for support in selecting a more diverse set of participants for the final TTI Exchange (TTIX) in late 2018. OTT suggested that TTI expand their support to younger thinktankers by offering a longer programme of learning beyond their attendance at the TTIX. TTI ultimately agreed to this, with the programme of learning coming to be known as the OTT-TTI Fellowship Programme. Informed by lessons from OTT's 2017 fellowship programme, it was designed iteratively within certain resource, participation and timing constraints.

The programme lasted nine months and comprised two phases. The first was the 'young leaders' phase, which enabled 24 young thinktankers to attend the TTIX and fellowship-related side events, whilst the second 'fellowship' phase provided ten of these young leaders (called fellows) to undergo learning between January and August 2019. Fellows (and young leaders) came from Africa, Asia and Latin America, were mostly women, comprised managers and non-managers and, notably, featured non-research staff such as communication, finance and human resource specialists (in addition to researchers).

The fellowship phase included the following elements: 1) Participation in the 2019 Winter School; 2) Monthly hour-long conversations with an experienced mentor; 3) Supervised virtual small-group work to discuss shared interests; 4) Access to webinars and other resources on relevant themes; 5) Ad hoc participation in key forums; 6) Writing and publishing activities; 7) Peer learning/engaging with a community of practice; and 8) Submission of a final report/output.

CHANGES TO HAVE EMERGED

Given this report was written just after the programme came to an end, we are unlikely to capture the changes that might emerge in the weeks, months and possibly years that follow. Nevertheless, fellows reported a sense of belonging to a community, and the ability to engage with one another as a resource to address both personal challenges and those in their organisations. For instance, two fellows worked together to produce a resource to integrate gender into the research cycle, while two fellows discovered they were both doing PhDs and found it helpful to discuss some of the challenges they were facing in addressing multiple priorities. Fellows reported changes in their 'mindset', improved skills and new practices (in, for instance, fundraising). They also reported being able to rethink certain concepts, or challenge approaches that they or their colleagues had taken (to, for instance, communications or management).

Some fellows reported a better 'sense of self' in relation to their think tank colleagues (not participating in the fellowship). Some had subsequently more confidence, developed the courage to assert themselves more, were more able to make sense of difficult situations and find more comfortable ways of working with colleagues. Others formed new or strengthened existing relationships with colleagues while some were able to change the nature of the conversations they were having with colleagues, for instance by asking challenging questions (about, say, gender or engaging with the public). The ten fellows were not the only ones to benefit from the programme: mentors did too. They were able to develop a professional relationship and widen their own understanding of how think tanks function in different contexts.

LESSONS FROM AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MANAGING THE FELLOWSHIP

Realistic objectives: a programme of this type targeting a cohort of individuals from a range of organisations can only realistically aim to improve those individuals' own thoughts and practices. Intentions to promote changes in individuals' organisations require different interventions.

Targeting younger people: younger thinktankers might be the 'future' and bring fresh perspectives, but their ability to use what they learned in their organisations was limited due to the lack of influence they had. This was especially so for female non-research staff. Younger thinktankers, having done the fellowship, by altering their practices and raising challenging questions could have unpredictable and potentially significant effects on their colleagues. But doing this was risky.

Understanding how people learn and facilitating them to do so: we assumed that fellows would learn through the provision of information and through conversations with other fellows, experts and mentors. We also assumed that different people would take different approaches to learning. Fellows subsequently benefited from being exposed to a variety of activities, including one-to-one learning (mentoring); supervised small group work; large group work (plenaries, attendance at seminars and key notes); engaging with peers (through social media) as well as self-study (of resources). A significant amount of face-to-face time is crucial for learning to take place.

Nevertheless, we could have done more to explore how adults learn and what the implications would be for our 'theory of action'.

Participant diversity: the young leaders and fellows were characterised by a high level of diversity. This created a lot of learning opportunities, but also made it harder for people to engage with each other. A higher degree of diversity amongst fellows created challenges in tailoring content and made it harder for the cohort to 'gel' as a group. Managers curating programmes of learning need to consider this tension when selecting participants.

Linguistic diversity: a requirement to submit applications in English may have been a barrier for some applicants (especially those in Latin America and Francophone Africa). In addition, requirements for fellows to engage in English during the programme may have limited their ability to express themselves. Offering Spanish in addition to English Fellowships would open up learning opportunities to a wider range of thinktankers and deepen their engagement.

Kicking-off: a multi-day workshop to 'kick-off' a programme of learning would help participants get to know each other, set out their key questions, understand what was expected of them (in terms of assignments and supervised group work among other things) and engage in intensive peer learning.

Motivating fellows: some fellows made the effort required of them, while others did not or could not. Fellows may have been able to contribute more to the fellowship if: we had asked senior managers in fellows' think tanks to give them time to work on assignments; think tanks paid for the fellowship themselves; and if we had built in more 'in-person' time among the fellows, which may in turn have created 'peer pressure' to put in the necessary work.

Flexibility and adaptability: the fellowship was not delivered as it was planned. New elements were introduced while others were removed. Moreover, underspends in one area were used to fund more work in another. This was facilitated by managers at TTI who provided substantial 'room for manoeuvre' during the delivery of the fellowship to accommodate changes.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	ii
Table of contents	iv
1. Introduction.....	1
2. The project.....	2
3. Emerging outcomes	8
4. Reflections and suggestions	9



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1. INTRODUCTION

The OTT-TTI fellowship grew out of an initial request from the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) to On Think Tanks (OTT) for support in selecting a more diverse set of participants for the final TTI Exchange in Bangkok in November 2018 (beyond the three senior staff from TTI grantees who are traditionally asked to attend). OTT suggested that TTI expand their support to younger thinktankers by offering a longer programme of learning beyond their attendance at the Exchange – which TTI ultimately agreed to. This programme of learning came to be known as the OTT-TTI Fellowship Programme. It was designed iteratively through email and a series of virtual conversations, and was limited by constraints such as the need to target thinktankers from among TTI grantees and the need to not go beyond the formal end date of TTI. The programme was also informed by OTT's first fellowship cycle in 2017.

In this report for IDRC, we aim to provide details of the activities supported by the project, the outcomes that have emerged from it and the lessons learned from the experience.

The report draws on the interim technical report submitted in January 2019. It also draws on a light touch internal review of the project conducted during its last month. The intention during the review was to explore the efficacy of both the theory of change underpinning the fellowship and the theory of action. The theory of change should conceptualise how we think young thinktankers learn and were expected to put this learning into practice, while the theory of action should put this into practice through intervention. The theory of action in particular explored the following:

- Whether the overall strategy was appropriate given the theory of change;
- The day-to-day management and administration of the project;
- The quality of the outputs (attendance to conferences, winter school, mentoring, writing and group work);
- The outcomes and impacts to have emerged from the project.

In addressing these issues the project manager, Ajoy Datta, interviewed other members of the OTT team who were involved in the delivery of this project, representatives of the funders, the TTI, the fellows themselves and the mentors (of whom there were three others in addition to Ajoy). The young leaders (who were invited to the TTI Exchange but not selected to be fellows) were consulted by email. We discuss our distinction between fellows and young leaders as well as other elements of the project in section two.

The report is organised as follows. The next section describes the project activities. Section three describes emerging outcomes, while section four reflects and makes suggestions for future programmes of learning.

2. THE PROJECT

Here we describe what was planned and what actually happened during the project.

THE ORIGINAL PLAN

The OTT-TTI Fellowship initially set out to support young, early/mid-career thinktankers (from amongst TTI's grantees) to become agents of change capable of transforming their organisations and making them healthier, more aligned with global possibilities and challenges, and capable of achieving a larger and deeper contribution to their people and communities. This was to happen within a nine-month timeframe between September 2018 and August 2019.

The programme aimed to do this through the following activities:

- Shortlisted applicants to the fellowship (called young leaders) were to participate in the 2018 TTI Global Exchange (TTIX) in Bangkok (12–14 November 2018). Of those that were selected to attend the TTIX, a subset of ten individuals were to be selected to participate in the longer fellowship programme (through a second selection process);
- The ten fellows were to participate in the 2019 Winterschool in Geneva (27 January – 2 February 2019);
- The fellows would also benefit from one-to-one mentoring based on a personal development plan developed by the fellows (for 7 months);
- They would participate in the OTT School and were to be given access to its library of resources (including how-to notes and webinars);
- OTT would support fellows to reflect and share lessons from their work to promote wider learning (especially on leadership through an OTT working paper).

WHAT HAPPENED IN PRACTICE

Here we describe what actually happened and why. Many of the differences were due to changes put forward by the project manager, Ajoy Datta (and agreed by OTT colleagues and IDRC managers). He was brought in after the initial design stage and had his own ideas (rooted in the theory and practice of capacity development, adult learning and management), which influenced how the fellowship unfolded in practice.

Preparatory work

Before the start of the OTT-TTI Fellowship, the following work was carried out:

- The selection process was revised to emphasise candidates' ability to analyse and understand change processes around them (through the preparation of a short narrative), with less focus on their ability to develop personal development plans – given a view that personal plans were likely to be pulled apart by reality and unpredictable events, especially in the fluid contexts that TTI grantees often operated in. We did, however, ask candidates to identify issues they wanted to explore during the fellowship and to explain why.
- A call for applicants was developed and advertised through agreed channels (including posting on the OTT site). Calls were sent to thinktankers via their directors, which potentially gave them the ability to limit how widely they circulated it within their organisations and to 'pick' employees to apply. We, however, do not have any evidence of whether directors did or did not circulate the calls widely. In any case, we did ask applicants to secure 'sign off' of their application from their directors.
- Finance and human resources specialists showed an interest in applying. We consequently decided to expand the types of staff who were able to apply to include specialists in finance and management, in addition to research and communications staff. In addition, we had received a relatively small number of applications by the time the original deadline lapsed. The deadline was therefore extended. During the extra time, a further 30 people submitted applications. We do not know what motivated these people to apply during the extended period.
- A selection committee was established made up of two staff members from TTI, the fellowship coordinator, the OTT founder, a fellowship alumnus and the director of Southern Voice.

Young leaders' phase (September–November 2018)

Selection process

Forty seven (47) applications were received from young leaders – both men and women, from south Asia, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus on research, communication and management/administration. Despite applicants having had plenty of notice to apply (at least theoretically) many applications appeared rushed. Interestingly, the stronger applications tended to be from better-known think tanks. This might suggest that staff

from these think tanks made more of an effort to engage with opportunities from TTI. In any case, the following actions were taken:

- Applications were reviewed against the criteria, initially by the coordinator along with the OTT founder. A number of candidates with a reasonable level of experience at a think tank, or undertaking think tanks functions, were shortlisted. Their narratives and videos allowed OTT to see their reflections on change processes in their organisations, key issues/questions they want to explore and the contributions they thought they would be able to make to the fellowship. This input was favoured over a simple list of their 'achievements'. We also shortlisted some 'wild cards': people who lacked experience, but wanted to explore an interesting issue, or said they had a useful contribution to make to the fellowship. This shortlist was presented to the selection committee for discussion. The discussion among committee members featured dilemmas such as whether more than one person from one think tank be selected (raising the issue of depth versus breadth).
- The committee ultimately agreed a list of 24 be shortlisted and be invited to the TTI Exchange in Bangkok (more than the initial list of 20, due to additional funding received from TTI and Southern Voice although not managed by OTT). From a gender perspective, 9 were male and 15 were female. From a regional perspective, 10 were from sub-Saharan Africa, 9 were from south Asia and 5 were from Latin America. From a functional perspective, 13 were researchers, 7 were communications specialists and 4 were management/operations specialists.
- The fellowship coordinator and/or OTT founder had voice conversations with all those who were shortlisted – either individually or in groups – to discuss next steps and expectations.
- Feedback was given to those who asked why they or a particular candidate was not shortlisted.

Work before and during the TTI Exchange

The OTT programme manager worked frantically to undertake all logistical work required to get shortlisted candidates (who we refer to as 'young leaders') to, and accommodated in, Bangkok in the time between candidates being selected and the Bangkok conference (a span of five and a half weeks). The biggest concern was ensuring Africa-based fellows were able to secure visas to get to Thailand in time. Despite this, all young leaders were able to fully participate in the TTIX.

During the TTIX, young leaders were able to attend a number of key notes, plenaries and workshops on thematic issues (such as climate change and governance) as well as organisational development issues (such as funding, business models and gender). Young leaders had the opportunity to meet established think tank professionals, policymakers, donor representatives and other people interested in influencing policy from around the world.

Around the edges of this, OTT held fellowship-related 'side events' for young leaders, which were planned and agreed with TTI in advance. Side events during the TTIX included a three-hour session before the conference, a thirty-minute session after both days 1 and 2 of the conference and a three-hour session after the end of the conference.

The objectives of the first side event before the conference were to enable young leaders to get to know one another, provide an overview of the fellowship, provide feedback from applicants/young leaders and explore how young leaders could get the best out of TTIX. The latter involved the use of a learning journal and the identification of people who could offer useful insights. The objectives of the thirty-minute sessions after days 1 and 2 of the conference were to reflect on what the young leaders found interesting and useful for their own personal development

The final session was split into two. The first supported young leaders to reflect on what they found interesting and surprising, consider what questions were left unanswered and identify how they would answer them. The second part focussed on how young leaders could improve their practice as a think tank professional, which they could use as an input to the application process for the fellowship phase (which was described in detail). This included reflecting on how young leaders' own values, beliefs and ideas had evolved over time and how this had shaped their work as a researcher, communicator and/or manager in their think tank. It also included reflecting on a change process that had occurred in young leaders' own think tanks and what they thought the key lessons were. The session included presentation, time for self-reflection, group work and plenary.

Young leaders were also interviewed for communication purposes.

Fellowship phase (November 2018–August 2019)

In this part we discuss the following:

- The selection process
- The Winterschool

- The mentoring process
- Small-group work
- Access to webinars and other resources
- Ad hoc participation in key forums
- Writing and publishing
- Fostering a community of practice
- Promoting fellows and their work
- The final output

Selection process

The selection process to identify the final ten fellows was planned and agreed with TTI. Applications were received from 23 of the 24 young leaders. Central to the applications was a written submission. This comprised three elements: 1) a personal reflection; 2) a reflection on the organisational/group context they were a part of; and 3) key questions applicants wanted to explore during the fellowship.

The criteria we used to assess applications included the extent to which the application illustrated the candidates' commitment to challenge and change one's way of thinking about, and doing, what one does; capacity to know oneself; capacity for reflection; ability to act and think independently; commitment to working with colleagues at work as well as other fellows; commitment to reading or viewing relevant literature and audio/visual material; and commitment to putting aside sufficient time.

We made a point of not basing our judgement of applicants on our engagement with the applicants during the TTI. Different people would have had different experiences of each of the applicants. Making this part of the selection process would also have put undue pressure on applicants to 'perform' and put on a 'mask' during the TTI.

Applications were reviewed by the coordinator and a tentative list of ten shared with the selection committee along with the rationale for each inclusion. The committee met virtually once for a 90-minute period. The subjectivities that different people brought to the committee resulted in dilemmas and issues in applying the criteria to applications. Ultimately, there was not enough time to conclude the final ten fellows. There was a lack of consensus over who the last few places should go to. Consensus was finally reached through an exchange of emails. This was not ideal but the only option given time and geographical constraints. Emails were sent to applicants about whether or not they were successful. Feedback was given to those who requested it. We also reassured young leaders who did not make it to the fellowship phase that we wanted them to stay engaged through the Slack channel, that we would send them a regular newsletter with interesting links and that we would give them access to OTT resources including webinars to help them pursue some of the questions they outlined in their application.

An analysis of fellows' applications showed they wanted to answer a variety of different questions including: how do you attract resources for non-research activities? How do you do research where there is limited data? What role can open data play in facilitating policy change? How do you communicate research in a polarised political environment? How do you manage differences within and between teams in a think tank? How can you help young people to flourish in a think tank? And how can you retain staff?

Winterschool

Fellows participated in the Winterschool for Thinktankers in Geneva in early 2019. The OTT programme manager undertook logistical work to get the final ten fellows to, and accommodated in, Geneva. During the Winterschool, fellows attended sessions on a wide range of topics related to think tank functioning, including management, research agendas, communications strategies and financial management. That year's speakers included Simon Maxwell (former executive director of the Overseas Development Institute), Stephen Yeo (former chief executive officer of the Centre for Economic Policy Research) and Sonja Stojanovich Gajic (director of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy). Fellows had the opportunity to find answers to some of their questions by establishing relationships and holding discussions with fellow participants as well as speakers.

Mentoring

Shortly after fellows were selected, each was paired with a mentor –an experienced thinktanker with relevant interests and experience. Mentors were identified from within OTT's trusted professional network and featured Orazio Belletini, former director of Grupo Faro; Sue Martin, a strategic communications advisor; Enrique Mendizabal, ex-head of programmes at ODI and OTT founder; and Ajoy Datta, ex-ODI research fellow and associate at OTT. During the mentoring process we encouraged mentors and mentees to develop a supportive

relationship, explore key (capacity development) questions and address challenges as they arose rather than following through on a pre-defined personal development plan.

Three of the four mentors were able to meet their 'mentees' in-person at the Winterschool in January 2019, which helped to establish good relationships. However, this was not planned for in advance. After the Winterschool, mentors and fellows spoke to each other once a month, whilst the mentors met (virtually) a total of three times between January and July to discuss the issues that came up for discussion and what approach they/we were taking to mentoring.

Fellows appreciated feedback on technical questions such as how to prepare a presentation, how to present findings in a report, how to write a fundraising strategy and how to prepare a communications strategy. But technical issues soon came up against relational issues. For instance, how do you influence others with more power to ensure the strategy is taken up by the team? This was a strong theme across all contexts – especially where hierarchy in an organisation was strong – and was particularly pertinent for those who were junior, female and not researchers. Topics for discussion also centred around specific human qualities and capabilities, such as: being assertive and saying no; prioritising and managing time in a context where fellows have multiple priorities and tasks to work on and a skewed work/life balance; having difficult conversations with people both 'above' and 'below'; and managing group dynamics (especially where fellows were leading teams). It also became clear that the career prospects for thinktankers in some countries were limited. And for non-researchers, this was even more so.

Small-group work

We provided opportunities for fellows to take part in group work at the TTI Exchange side events, but did not do so during the Winterschool. Doing this was not in the initial plan. However, after the Winterschool, one fellow wanted to mobilise colleagues to advance thinking around a specific interest – gender in think tanks. At the same time, OTT felt that supervised group work could be beneficial for fellows. For experiences to be internalised, it helps for them to be critiqued, so other people are indispensable. Without them experiences are arguably incomplete. Or, put differently, none of us individually is as smart as all of us together.

Thus, small-group work was formalised and others were asked to mobilise around shared interests. Another fellow mobilised others around public engagement and those who were not part of a group were asked to mobilise around the topic of management and leadership in think tanks. All groups were open to all. The fellowship manager provided some stewardship, nudging convenors or organising meetings directly if necessary.

The **gender** group met six times (virtually) between March and July. Questions discussed included: how can a think tank be gender sensitive? What tools might be useful to encourage conversation about this topic among staff, especially senior staff, and ultimately to bring about changes in people's routine practices? How can research processes, proposals and projects be more gender sensitive? The **public engagement** group met four times, with issues discussed including: who is the public and what is the purpose of public engagement? What are some of the challenges of engaging the public and how do think tanks address these? The **management and leadership** group met three times discussing topics such as: characteristics of a 'good leader/manager' including what qualities they needed to have; whether being an extrovert or introvert says anything about how good a leader/manager you are/can be; and the challenge of influencing senior colleagues/exercising leadership where fellows had little formal authority (as discussed individually with mentors).

Discussion was lively at times and based on what fellows wanted to talk about. On occasion participation was limited – sometimes only two or three people would be present at a virtual meeting despite several reminders. Individuals within the gender group produced two outputs as a result of discussions. The first was a checklist to start a conversation about gendered norms within organisations and the second was a resource to advise researchers how to integrate gender throughout the whole research cycle from setting questions to promoting uptake. With the consent of the group, the fellowship manager brought in an experienced thinktanker with an interest in gender to review the outputs. He followed this up by inviting an expert to talk about leadership practice with the leadership/management group.

Webinars and other resources

Fellows were given access to the OTT School library of video resources. We also commissioned three experts to give webinars (online seminars) to address issues that had arisen during small-group work. They included Simon Burall from Involve in the UK to discuss public engagement, Josephine Tsui, exresearch fellow-at ODI, to discuss gender in think tanks and in the research cycle and Professor Chris Mowles, to discuss leadership practice. In addition, a bi-monthly newsletter was sent out to fellows with information relevant to their needs.

Ad hoc participation in key forums

After the Winterschool, some of the fellows stayed a few days more for the OTT Conference in Geneva, which took place in early February 2019. This provided them with the opportunity to represent their organisations and engage in high-level discussions on a range of issues that had been covered during the Winterschool. This was not, however, an official part of the fellowship programme.

In addition, three African fellows joined the Africa Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) summit in Nairobi. Roughly 200 attended the event. Most were managers and leaders from African think tanks. Fellows were pleased to have the chance to present ideas and engage with participants. They received positive reviews both on the content and the format of their presentation. A non-researcher fellow felt she had a lot to say about her think tank. They were able to generate new and interesting insights, while their engagement provided them with a greater degree of optimism about what they had to offer

Writing and publishing

The writing and submission of assignments was introduced after the Winterschool. This directly addressed our intention to encourage fellows to share lessons from their experiences and learning. The primary aim was to encourage fellows to learn, clarify ideas, or assimilate and consolidate knowledge that they might otherwise forget. We also hoped it would encourage deeper thinking and reflection. Participation in the conference, Winterschool, the mentoring and group work all provided significant space for reflection, which we now wanted fellows to make tangible. And if the writing was good enough, we would consider having the work published on the OTT platform.

Fellows were asked to submit three assignments between February and July 2019. Assignments were to be written like online articles with a length of 750–1000 words. They were to be written based on a topic or question selected by the fellow (but agreed by the fellowship coordinator). The first and second round each yielded eight articles and the third yielded four articles. Most fellows struggled with the assignments, needing several reminders. Finding sufficient time was an issue, as most were busy. Although the focus was on getting people to reflect on the 'here and now' and be specific, drawing on their own experiences, the writing tended instead to be normative and general. Most fellows, including researchers, tended to struggle to write short-form articles and make clear arguments. In some cases, though, people were writing in their second or third language – which clearly made writing more difficult. We encouraged fellows to share their writing with others (through the Slack channel – see below), but uptake was limited.

Fostering a community of practice/peer learning

We gave fellows the opportunity to sign up to an online community (using Slack) to facilitate communication among themselves, as well as with fellowship alumni and those that were shortlisted for the fellowship. This was especially important after the Winterschool, as there was no further forum where fellows could meet 'in-person'. The space gave fellows the opportunity to share questions, spread news of interesting and useful practices and explore joint work together. However, use of the Slack channel was limited. The fellowship coordinator used it to post notifications and updates, but even that was not effective (as not everyone was signed up while others did not receive notifications). Some fellows suggested that using Slack required downloading an app on one's smartphone, which required a substantial amount of memory that not everyone had. The coordinator thus resorted to email during the last two months of the fellowship.

Promoting the fellows and their work

To promote and make more visible the fellowship, the fellows and their work, OTT produced, edited and published [videos](#) of young leaders based on interviews they gave to OTT during the TTX in Bangkok. OTT also produced [videos](#) of fellows based on interviews they gave during the Winterschool. Fellows also produced or co-authored nine articles (many of them based on assignments they had submitted).

- [Why intersectionality matters for think tanks: reflections from PAC](#) by Varsha Pillai
- [How deeply should think tanks engage the public](#) by Varsha Pillai
- [Investing in a robust public engagement and communications plan for India's Public Affairs Index](#) by Varsha Pillai
- [Six lessons from the 2019 Winterschool for thinktankers](#) by Varsha Pillai
- [Bridging the policy design and implementation gap: the role of think tanks](#) by Founty Fall, Joseph Ishaku and Sulamba Shaban
- [Learnings from the Winterschool and the OTT conference](#) by Founty Fall
- [The role of citizens' voice in think tanks' body of evidence](#) by Joseph Ishaku
- [Breaking paradigms about leadership](#) by Alejandra Teran

- [Monitoring and evaluating research communications: overcoming its intimidating complexity](#) by Paula Pino
- [Towards a gender equal think tank](#) by Varsha Pillai

Final output

A programme of learning often ends with exams or a significant assignment, like a thesis or dissertation. In this case, the initial intention was for fellows to prepare a workshop for, or presentation to, their colleagues about what they had learnt and how that might be useful for them. But as the fellowship wore on, we heard how fellows were already engaging their colleagues with new ideas they had or difficult questions they wanted to raise. So, we broadened out the final output requirement to include the option of either preparing a presentation to colleagues (and writing up and sharing the proceeding discussion) or submitting a video with some more personal reflections. However, as with the assignments, some fellows submitted this while others did not.

Ongoing work to be completed after the end of the fellowship

OTT (and in some cases the fellows) are (at the time of writing) in the process of doing the following:

- Editing the assignments produced by fellows (which have not already been published as articles) and publishing them on the OTT platform.
- Repackaging and pulling together key messages from these assignments as one output.
- Finalising text in the piece on incorporating gender in the research cycle and laying this out as an OTT output (similar to those produced as part of its Good Practice Series).
- Generating content for an OTT working paper on the qualities that managers and leaders in think tanks do and need to have to govern successfully.
- Producing three articles on e.g. 1) lessons from managing a fellowship or a programme of learning; 2) issues that early- to mid-career thinktankers are worried about; and 3) managing conflict and differences in think tanks.
- Producing two animations to communicate the fellowship to a wide audience: one about the fellowship and one articulating lessons learnt.

These outputs should all be ready for publication by late October 2019.

3. EMERGING OUTCOMES

Here we describe changes in thoughts, feelings, relationships and practices that fellows reported took place in and between them. Given the programme has only just come to an end, we expect that many of the outcomes, if they are to emerge, will do so in the weeks, months and possibly years after the project. We will therefore not be able to capture those in this report.

Nevertheless, fellows felt a sense of community. For instance, some fellows are contacting each other – they are colleagues and friends – using each other as a resource to address personal challenges and those in their own organisations/contexts. Two fellows are working together on a review of literature focussing on integrating gender into the research cycle. Another two fellows have discovered they are both doing PhDs and have found it helpful to discuss some of the struggles they are facing and how to balance their various work/life priorities. One fellow suggested they had found solidarity with other fellows who were experiencing similar challenges, knowledge of which came as a relief and helped them feel less anxious.

The fellowship provided non-researchers with new opportunities to engage with other thinktankers. One fellow said that attendance at the Winterschool and conversations with a mentor changed her mindset, especially when it came to fundraising. She improved her stakeholder engagement skills and is now able to write to potential funders asking for resources. Another said she was able to rethink how she approached her and the organisations' communications work. Yet another experienced a breakthrough in her understanding of leadership and was able to dispel myths and stereotypes about the traits that leaders are supposed to have. Another fellow suggested that the fellowship provided a space for self-reflection, helping her to identify strengths and weaknesses.

Some fellows felt more recognised by others in their organisation. Fellows suggested they had more confidence in going about their work, with one fellow saying they felt more emboldened in negotiating terms with a new employer. Some were able to make sense of difficult circumstances with colleagues and managers, and to 'live with' them. They were also able to identify ways of relating that would ease tensions and make life a bit more comfortable, partly by finding ways to express oneself to colleagues, to managers and to people they are managing. Some were able to form relationships with new people in their organisation (for instance researchers working with communications staff, and vice versa). Some were inspired and developed the courage to ask difficult questions in their own organisations about, for example, gender and public engagement. They were also able to engage in difficult conversations or change the nature of conversations with colleagues.

The ten fellows were not the only ones to benefit from the programme: mentors did too. They were able to develop a professional relationship and widen their own understanding of how think tanks function in different contexts.

4. REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Here we reflect and make suggestions in the following areas:

- The objectives of the fellowship and how they would be achieved (the theory of change);
- The overall approach or strategy to meeting objectives (the theory of action);
- The day-to-day management of the programme;
- The design and management of some of the core activities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE FELLOWSHIP AND APPROACH TO ACHIEVING THEM

Here we discuss the planned objectives versus what motivated fellows to join the programme; the targeting of younger thinktankers; and how they were expected to learn, change and improve their contribution to the development of their think tank.

Objectives of the programme

Planned: the programme (designed by OTT and approved by TTI) hoped that that the fellows who were recruited would become agents of change capable of transforming their organisations to make them better able to address the challenges presented by a changing world.

Fellow's motivations: however, those recruited said they were motivated to join the fellowship to improve their technical skills to do research, engage with policy, undertake communications and manage projects. Some wanted to improve their abilities to lead and manage others. Some wanted to know what they could do improve gender equality in their own think tank. Some (including both research and non-research staff) sought to identify opportunities to develop their own careers. And some wanted to compare and contrast their think tank and the challenges they were facing with those being faced by others elsewhere in the world.

Actual outcomes: in practice, based on the preliminary outcomes that have emerged, the fellowship helped to inform thinking and practices of individuals working in think tanks. The fellowship did this by stretching fellows intellectually and practically as well as experientially. And ultimately, what fellows got out of the fellowship depended on what they put in.

Targeting younger thinktankers

The benefits of working with younger people: the fellowship focussed on younger thinktankers, initially because TTI capacity development work had so far mainly focussed on senior staff. Younger people were seen as the 'future'. Targeting younger thinktankers was not just about social justice but also about changing the nature of the conversation that took place in high-level meetings, as well as ultimately in the TTI-supported think tanks. Even if fellows did not stay with their think tank, they could go on to work elsewhere in the sector or a different sector, ultimately benefiting their country in some way.

Limited influence: but younger thinktankers had less power in their organisations. They lacked control over how they used their time, with many fellows struggling to make time to do the work that was required of them by the programme. Limited power meant they had limited abilities to change their own practices or ways of working. Some in the OTT team argued that the fellowship should have targeted executive directors, who were seen as having more influence over others in their think tank. However, they were not in complete control of their think tanks, so their influence would have limits. All staff played a role, with how they related to one another being the crucial factor. Nevertheless, younger thinktankers, having done the fellowship, could have unpredictable and potentially significant effects on their colleagues by changing their practice, introducing a new idea, voicing concerns and raising challenging questions – if fellows are willing to take a risk.

How people learn and change

We assumed that fellows would become change agents through the provision of information, through conversations with other fellows, experts and mentors and through a growing optimism about what they had to offer (that is, they would grow in confidence). We also acknowledged that different people learn in different ways. Nevertheless, we could have done more work to explore how adults learn and what the implications would be for our 'theory of action' or strategy.

THE OVERALL STRATEGY

In this part, we reflect on four elements: the selection process; working with a diversity of fellows; the broad structure of the programme; and motivating fellows to put in the necessary effort.

Selection process

Reaching out directly to applicants: we could find ways to reach staff in think tanks directly with the call for young leaders/fellows, and not necessarily go through directors, who could exert control over who responded.

Language: a requirement to submit applications in English (through the narrative and the video clip) may have been a barrier for some applicants (especially those in Latin America, Myanmar and Francophone Africa). Offering fellowships in other languages would address this to some extent.

Interviews: where people were not able to express themselves well in written English, interviews with candidates may have been helpful, especially where they were considered a 'maybe'. But this requires additional time.

Affirmative action: one IDRC regional officer suggested having positive discrimination criteria to ensure representatives from weaker institutions or those that had never participated in a competitive process were also represented among the fellows.

Reaching consensus: ideally the selection committee would meet face-to-face to discuss the list of candidates chosen – this would have facilitated and sped up the process. However, it's unlikely that time and resources necessary to do this would be made available. Additional time and two virtual calls (instead of one) may have been sufficient for both stages.

Managing diversity

The process was opened up to include non-research staff. This initially focussed on communications staff but was then widened to include finance, administration and human resource specialists. Fellows came from Africa, Asia and Latin America. They were mostly women. Some fellows had responsibility to manage others, but most did not. Diversity created a lot of learning opportunities, but paradoxically the differences also made it harder for people to come together (as they had less in common). Moreover, more diversity among fellows meant it was harder to tailor content. In addition, there were a wide range of personalities within the fellowship. It is hard to say if they gelled as a cohort, as they had limited time to interact with one another 'in person', which would have brought out more differences. Future programmes will need to consider how much diversity is embraced and how trade-offs are managed.

Structure of learning

Programme length: the fellowship started with the Winterschool in January and finished in August 2020 – nine months in total. However, learning can potentially take a long time. For instance, full time master's degrees are a minimum of a year. Part time courses are two years. The fellowship was probably too short. By the end we expected a lot (assignments, group work, mentoring and the final output) in a relatively short amount of time. Nevertheless, the fellowship was allowed to go on beyond any other TTI project (as TTI came to an end in August 2019).

Introduction to the fellowship: although young leaders (including those that were to subsequently become fellows) met each other at the TTI, time for the actual fellows to interact and gel as a cohort at the Winterschool would have been useful. The time could have been used to clarify and share key questions and hold further discussions.

Learning plan versus improvisation: initially, fellows were to design a detailed learning plan which they would follow through during the fellowship. But this was replaced by key questions that people were asked to outline during the application process and pursue during the fellowship. They were not held to account for this, however. We provided flexibility for people's questions to evolve/change as their work and organisational context evolved (often very fluid) and as they engaged with colleagues, mentors, experts and other fellows.

Motivating fellows

Lack of commitment among some: some fellows put in the work required of them, but others did not. Fellows struggled to find the time to make the necessary contributions to the fellowship. For instance, one fellow struggled to set aside time to talk to his mentor (despite it being a monthly call), while another failed to submit any assignments and did not respond to any follow up emails. Sending successive direct messages, getting in touch with the fellow's mentor and suggesting that we would contact their director had little/no impact on those fellows who were not engaging with the fellowship. What might explain this?

Lack of time: fellows tended to work for long hours, often multi-tasking, doing further studies (with two doing PhDs and another doing a master's programme in their own time), managing teams and/or trying to satisfy the requests of multiple 'principals'. Moreover, younger thinktankers lacked the power/authority to for instance, say no to projects and requests from colleagues. They did not have control over how they spent their time. The fellowship was in some cases the thing to suffer.

Overworked: this lack of time was also reflective of contexts where people were doing their best to take advantage of short policy windows, and an insecure funding environment where you could not say no to a funder for fear that they would not return in future. There were also think tanks that charged themselves out at a rate which left them underfunded, and had to seek more projects than they could handle.

Funding: in addition, learning programmes are usually paid for by individuals or their organisations. This was externally funded. This begs the question: if think tanks had paid for the fellows to participate in the fellowship (say, through their core funds from TTI), would fellows have put in more time/effort, handed in assignments on time and participated in more group discussions? It is hard to say.

Suggestions: we could ask think tanks to pay for future programmes (from their core or institutional funds if they had them). Further, fellows' senior managers (and possibly the think tanks director), could be made aware of the commitments that fellows need to make during the course of the programme and what repercussions there might be, if any, if they were not able to do so. Moreover, more face-to-face contact among the fellows and between the fellows and the coordinator (through, say, a residential weekend) could have created some 'peer pressure' among fellows to put in the necessary effort.

THE DAY-TO-DAY MANAGEMENT OF THE PROGRAMME

Here we reflect on the day-to-day management of the programme, highlighting four issues: taking an adaptive approach to managing the programme; internal communication; continuity in management/coordination; and logistics.

Adaptive approach: new elements were introduced while other elements outlined in the proposal that were deemed inappropriate given the context were scaled down/removed. We were able to use underspends in one area to fund more work in another (for instance facilitating virtual group work and arranging attendance of Africa-based fellows to the ACBF summit). This was facilitated by IDRC providing substantial flexibility during the delivery of the fellowship to accommodate changes.

Internal communication: during the first half of the fellowship, various members of the OTT team were sending emails to managers at TTI (although with others in copy). This may have been confusing for all involved. OTT, during the second half of the fellowship, did channel all communication through Ajoy, the manager. This should have been done from the beginning. Similarly, it was not always clear who fellows should get in touch with for different issues. We could have made it clear who fellows would need to turn to for what issue.

Continuity: Ajoy, the fellowship coordinator, went travelling for two months (during April and May). Although he went with the intention of continuing to work on the fellowship, the lack of internet in some places meant some of the work suffered – namely the organisation of the group work and feedback to assignments. However, he was able to make up for lost time on his return.

Logistics: there was a lot of pressure on OTT to put in place arrangements for the young leaders to attend the TTI Exchange in a short space of time, once the young leaders had been selected. Some young leaders only just made it to Bangkok on time. In future, we need to allow eight weeks to process visas and need to make this clear to fellows from the very beginning. Moreover, there was concern among fellows about the quality of the accommodation during the Winterschool. OTT staff and fellows stayed in accommodation of differing quality. More information about this could have been provided upfront. But we should also consider providing the same quality of accommodation for both facilitators and participants, which would require additional resources.

THE QUALITY OF SOME OF THE CORE ACTIVITIES

Here we discuss participation in the TTI Exchange and side events; the Winter School; participation in ad hoc events; the mentoring; group work and peer learning; and the writing and publishing activities.

Participation in the TTI Exchange and side events

Participation in the TTI Exchange was a good way for young leaders to start the process. Some would have gone anyway, as they were part of panels. Friendships amongst young leaders were formed quickly. There were several networking opportunities, which some were able to realise. Some were able to engage the more experienced thinktankers. Others took information in but did not necessarily engage. Fellows' engagement during the main conference sessions depended on confidence levels and previous experience in attending conferences. It was interesting that, the fellows (who were mostly women) made up about ten per cent of TTI Exchange's total participants. As a result, the dialogue and nature of conversations was different to those in previous TTI Exchanges. The fellowship-related side events, however, gave young leaders a chance to engage more deeply, which most took full advantage of.

The Winterschool

Initially, during the design of the fellowship, TTI staff thought this was better suited to executive directors. Nevertheless, it worked well for the younger fellows. The school provided a lot of guidance for fellows, covering all aspects of a think tank's functions. It was an intensive course, with both theory and opportunities to reflect on practice. Although fellows were not interested in all discussions, they selected and engaged with those sessions that were of interest to them. One fellow said that the sessions by Simon Maxwell and Soapbox were particularly striking. However, some fellows suggested that overall, too many of the speakers were from the UK and the Global North. They would have benefited from more contributions from thinktankers based in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Participation in ad hoc events

Fellows who attended events on an ad hoc basis gained a significant amount of learning from doing so. Future programmes could identify appropriate spaces/places (through a calendar of events and a discretionary budget line) for fellows to participate and enable them to 'inject' some of their ideas for comment and feedback, thus helping them to grow in confidence.

Mentoring

Benefits: fellows overwhelmingly appreciated being mentored. With the programme over, most fellows said they would miss having their monthly hour-long conversation with their mentor. Although time consuming, it was time well spent. Fellows suggested that mentors were able to provide a 'sounding board', especially when fellows were experiencing difficulties at work. They were able to ask questions that 'got to the heart of a matter', provided alternative perspectives and gave advice on how to face difficult circumstances.

Similarities/differences between mentor and mentee: Some fellows found it helpful that their mentor was from a similar context and spoke same language. However, others appreciated having a mentor from a different context.

The relationship: Some fellows would have liked to have known their mentor well in advance of the programme starting. Ensuring confidentiality was key as this helped fellows and their mentor to develop a trusting relationship. Resources could have been set aside for all mentors to attend the Winterschool so they could establish a relationship with their mentees face to face.

Approach: some fellows were unclear if mentoring had to end in concrete completion of a task or goal. In any case, mentors tended to be flexible, addressing the issues that were concerning the fellow, which often changed from month to month, given the fluid contexts they operated in. Mentors agreed that they needed to take different approaches to mentoring with different people, given individual personalities as well as organisational and political contexts. There was subsequently no 'right' or 'wrong' advice. Sometimes listening to issues from fellows and helping them to clarify their own thoughts was sufficient. Moreover, many of the fellows worked in very fluid organisational and political environments, where events tended to be more unpredictable and planning far in advance became difficult (which made planning for the calls hard). It was difficult for mentors/mentees to follow through on one issue. Discussions tended to focus on important issues as they arose.

Support to behavioural and cognitive dimensions: Mentors found that some fellows were good at initiating work but not necessarily good at completing, and others appeared to have a high degree confidence (at least outwardly) whereas others did not. Part of the mentoring process included helping fellows to develop their own character, but also encouraging them to work with others to ensure all the qualities necessary to 'get things done' were covered. Only in a very few instances could fellows get things done on their own.

Group work and peer learning

More group work at the Winterschool: acknowledging that learning is a social process, we wanted to promote peer learning over the course of the fellowship. Attendance at the TTIIX and fellowship side events facilitated this. Given the usefulness of group work and the importance of community, more time and resource could have been set aside during the Winterschool for young leaders and then fellows to come together face-to-face, to discuss both similarities and differences in their experiences.

Virtual supervised group work: promoting peer learning was harder after the Winterschool ended. More supervised and virtual group work could have been built into the programme from the beginning to help fellows reflect on their experiences, support them in completing assignments and develop stronger relations with others.

More face-to-face time: There was little 'face-to-face time', with most of the activities being carried out online. Future programmes could build in more 'in-person' time, say, through a residential programme. However, this would have required significant additional resources.

Learning from MOOCs: nevertheless, some Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) tend to achieve a considerable amount virtually. More work could be done to learn how successful MOOCs have promoted learning and engagement.

Using appropriate social media: given the limited uptake of Slack, we suggest considering the use of WhatsApp and email, as most fellows appeared to use those two platforms.

Making connections with alumni: we could have done more to connect current fellows with previous years' fellows, especially those from the same country, which may have been helpful.

Writing and publishing

Structured assignments: fellows could have been given structured assignments to complete from the start (some of which could be edited for publication). These might have informed the discussions between mentors and their mentees as well as virtual small group work.

Emphasising writing during selection: we could have placed more emphasis on the writing element during the application process and provided more support to people at the start, through, for instance, training on writing short online articles.

Language: for people whose first language was not English, we could have asked them to write in their first language and subsequently arrange a translation.

Self-expression: for those who were not comfortable expressing themselves in written form, we might have found other ways for them to do so.