SCHOOL for THINKTANKERS

Andrea Baertl &
Cristina Ramos

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On Think Tanks

SCHOOL FOR THINKTANKERS 2021

#schoolforthinktankers2021

On Think Tanks

INTRODUCTION

The School for Thinktankers (which has been running since 2017[1]) is designed to prepare the next generation of think-tank leaders. A think-tank leader cannot rely solely on being a great researcher – they also must be managers, networkers, and communicators. Unfortunately, many researchers and thinktankers do not get to build many of these skills during their careers – and by the time they are ready to take on leadership roles it is (almost) too late. The School for Thinktankers wants to remedy this problem by creating a space to learn about the many dimensions of working in, and leading, a policy research centre.

Taught by senior thinktankers and expert practitioners, the programme takes a practical approach, and aims to:

- Prepare and inspire the next generation of think-tank leaders.
- Build a community of emerging think-tank leaders to support and learn from each other.
- Encourage participants to reflect on their own organisation and how to support its development.

Our approach to developing and delivering the Online School for Thinktankers:

- Is based on evidence: it draws on adult-learning theories, and builds on lessons learnt during the delivery of previous courses (both online and on-site).
- Encourages participants to reflect critically on their experience, and on the lessons and experiences shared in the programme.
- Helps participants to address ongoing professional dilemmas.
- Enables participants to experiment with new approaches in their workplace.
- Promotes engagement between participants, trainers, and course facilitators to form a sense of community, as learning and improvement is usually a social process in which conversation and feedback is vital.
- Enables participants to receive guidance from a range of experienced thinktankers and experts.

1. The first four editions (2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020) were held in Geneva and co-organised with our partners foraus and the Think Tank Hub.

2021 PROGRAMME

In 2021 the School for Thinktankers was carried out entirely online for the first time, which posed the challenge of delivering the school's key features: the knowledge that participants acquire and the networks they build, in an online setting. Thus, the structure and delivery of the course were planned to ensure learning and to maximise engagement between participants and facilitators.

The programme ran from 25 January to 6 February and featured the following components:

- *Live sessions.* The school held live zoom session from 12:00 to 15:00 GMT. Trainers were experienced thinktankers and professionals who gave a presentation and then engaged in group work or dialogue with participants.
- *How-to videos.* Fifteen-minute pre-recorded lectures structured to convey information and explain an issue, emphasising good practice approaches.
- *Networking activities.* Embedded in the programme were networking activities for participants to get to know each other, and facilitators.
- *Study groups.* Participants had the option of being assigned a group to work on a task (based on their interests), which they then presented to the whole group at the end.
- *Background materials.* Participants received a background note for each topic the school focuses on, including a reading list, to prepare for each module.
- *Discussion with peers and experts.* Through a dedicated platform and during the live session, participants engaged in guided discussions to enhance their practice and knowledge.
- *Website.* All materials, access to zoom calls, session videos, and presentations were uploaded to the course website, which acted as the home-base of the course.
- *Slack engagement.* We used Slack for day-to-day communications. All participants and trainers were part of the slack channel, as well as participants of past School for Thinktankers editions.

The school was structured around six modules, comprising two or three sessions each. The key modules were:

- Think tanks and evidence-informed policy
- Governance and management
- Policy-relevant research agendas
- Communication strategies
- Fundraising and financial management
- Monitoring, evaluation, and learning of policy influence

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2021 HIGHLIGHTS

The 2021 cohort comprised 32 participants from 23 different countries. These were joined by 18 trainers (one of whom was a participant in 2019), making it our biggest and most diverse group so far.

This document is a testament to the engaging and interesting discussions we had during the 2021 School for Thinktankers. We summarise in it the key ideas, reflections and advice provided by the trainers and participants, and we also share the resources used by trainers and participants during the live sessions: books, webinars, blog posts, articles and toolkits.

Since these takeaways cover a variety of activities related to think tanks' activities, they can help thinktankers in their daily work, in their planning for future activities and in their interactions with different departments inside their organisation.

By briefly compiling key messages across different areas of the work of think tanks, this document can also provide an important overview for anyone interested in this field to better understand the different functions of think tank staff. Being

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aware of these different sections will help thinktankers have a global vision of their organisation.

The school is designed to prepare and inspire the next generation of think-tank leaders, to build a community of thinktankers and to encourage participants to reflect on their own organisation and how they can support its development. We hope this document will help readers think about their work and whether there is room for improvement in any of the areas discussed here. Since the document is divided into modules, it does not have to be read from the beginning, but it can be used as a guide in any area.

We hope you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed the 2021 School for Thinktankers experience.

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SCHOOL for THINKTANKERS

MODULE 1.
THINK TANKS AND EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICY

SESSION 1.
WHAT IS A THINK TANK? HISTORY, ROLES AND MODELS IN DIFFERING CONTEXTS

Trainer: Enrique Mendizabal

Enrique, founder and director of On Think Tanks, presented a discussion on the definition of think tanks, as well an overview and a description of the sector and its history.

The definition of a think tank is elusive and changes with context (region, political environment, time in history, etc.), and so it is helpful to define them by their functions. These 'functional' descriptions allow us to describe them, for instance, as organisations that *generate* policy-oriented research, analysis and advice , or as research institutes that study a particular policy area *seeking to educate* policymakers.

According to Enrique, in practice, think tanks all carry out the following functions:

- Advancing and promoting policy ideas and solutions.
- Providing legitimacy to policies and politicians.
- Acting as spaces for debate and deliberation.
- Providing a financing channel for political parties and other policy interest groups.
- Attempting to influence the way the policy process works.
- Acting as auditors or social monitors.

Additionally, there is the issue of boundaries. Because of think tanks' many functions, they occupy a porous space in between several fields. Author Tom Medvetz has shown how think tanks simultaneously occupy the fields of knowledge production, the media, politics and economics.

Depending on which domain boundaries think tanks operate in, their teams need to have the skills to:

- Understand and undertake research (boundary with academia).
- Communicate effectively to broader audiences (boundary with the media).
- Undertake analysis and deliver solutions (boundary with consultancy).
- Analyse policy and provide actionable recommendations (boundary with policy and politics).
- Work with citizens to develop new ideas and solutions (boundary with NGOs).

Some comments and questions raised by participants around the definition of think tanks also highlighted the issue of independence, inquiring whether this was a defining characteristic of think tanks or not. The conclusion was that it is not, as many organisations are affiliated to governments, political parties, or even networks, and they are nonetheless think tanks (based on their functions).

Another important factor to consider when exploring an organisation, is the context in which it exists. This refers to both macro and micro contexts. For instance, there

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are think tanks that are clearly academic in nature. Therefore, to understand it the academic sector in the country should be considered (is it large, centralised, elitist, what is the 'ruling' discipline?). If the think tank is advocacy leaning or is human-rights based, then the context that will matter more is the space of national civil society organisations.

Even in the same country different think tanks are embedded in different contexts. Some may be more partisan, others more academic, and others more corporate.

Read more about context here. There are two parts to this series: one based on a study by the Results for Development Institute for IDRC and one based on OTT's own reflections on micro-context issues.

Resources shared during the session:

- Baertl, A. (2020). The first think tank state of the sector report. On Think Tanks.
- Garcé, A., D'Avenia, L., López, C. and Villegas, B. (2018). Political knowledge regimes and policy change in Chile and Uruguay. On Think Tanks Working Paper 3. On Think Tanks.
- Campbell, J. and Pedersen, K. (2015).Knowledge regimes and comparative political economy, Socio-Economic Review, 13(4).
- Levine, R. (2018). The moral case for evidence in policymaking, post on OTT website.
- Medvetz, T. (2012). 'Murky power: "think tanks" as boundary organizations', in Courpasson, D., Golsorkhi, D. and Sallaz, J. J. (eds) *Rethinking Power in Organizations, Institutions and Markets.* (Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Vol. 34). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing, pp. 113–133.
- Stone, D. and Denham, A. (2005). Think tank traditions: Policy research and the politics of ideas. Manchester University Press.

SESSION 2.
THE ROLE OF THINK TANKS IN EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICY

Trainer: Peter Taylor

Peter, director of research at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), joined the school for a session on the role of think tanks in evidence-informed policy.

The presentation was divided into three sections aligned around three main questions:

1. What global challenges need knowledge, data and evidence?
2. What functions can think tanks have in response to these needs?
3. How can think tanks help level the global research-knowledge playing field?

Regarding the **first** question, the presentation started with an overview of the current global challenges and the role of data and evidence. We are living in unprecedented times of disruptions and shocks, and the current COVID-19 crisis is highlighting how vulnerable the world is to epidemics and how limited our capacities are to respond to these global challenges. But we are also seeing on the positive side that this crisis is catalysing local and global solidarities and different approaches to science and evidence, which is important if we are to respond to global challenges.

So, we are looking for responses to many global challenges, which include: climate change; growing inequality; a closing of civil society in certain parts of the world; discrimination and exclusion that undermine livelihoods; migration and displacement; and economic shocks. But while we are experiencing these challenges, we also see organisations and people coming together to try to find solutions.

In this context, an organisation like the IDS is moving away from discourses of development towards ideas of inclusion, diversity and equality. These challenges are discussed as universal because they affect so many people.

The **second** part of the session, focused on an overview of the functions that think tanks can have in response to these global needs:

- Research what works and what doesn't – this can help catalyse progress towards global goals.
- Identify, synthesise and make sense of data to track progress and boost accountability.
- Provide evidence at the intersections of challenges – such as inequalities, environmental sustainability, inclusion.
- Co-create knowledge via differentiated research agendas.
- Help navigate uncertain times by combining work on urgent needs with longer-term trajectories.
- Make the case that the outcomes from research on complex issues take time and happen through non-linear processes.
- Demonstrate that quality matters and is multi-dimensional.
- Connect research to societal needs and challenges.
- Make research findings and data accessible to those who need it.
- Acknowledge the importance of power and politics.

This discussion, therefore, highlighted think tanks' ability to not only undertake research but also to reach out and engage with policymakers to support change.

Other highlights from this section of the session include:

- A discussion of the importance of advocacy as another way to help bring about change. Advocacy efforts are contextual and the ways in which you can advocate vary. The position chosen will lead how you are able to work and what you can do.
- An interesting debate in response the question: Are all think tanks created equal and do all have the same opportunities regardless of their context? The group answer to this was a resounding NO. Context is paramount and shapes think tanks' abilities, functions and possibilities.
- Public engagement is a key function for think tanks and it allows them to be heard when policymakers don't want to (or are unable to) listen.
    - We all have a partial look at problems and deal with them accordingly. The role of think tanks is to integrate the different views and try to find unified solutions.

Finally, the **third** part of the session was a discussion of how the sector can better work together to combat the key challenges. Efforts and resources can be pooled together to tackle different aspects of problems with separate but synergetic actions. To do this, the role of politics cannot be disregarded, and think tanks should be able to navigate the pathways of politics as they can turn out to be opportunities. Peter made some suggestions about how think tanks can address power relations:

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- Collaborate on universal challenges.
- Be thoughtful and intentional about relationships.
- Address gender diversity and inclusion.
- Adopt environmental responsibility – walk the talk.
- Connect local and global.
- Keep a focus on learning – it's a shared endeavour for mutual benefit.

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MODULE 2. GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

SESSION 1. GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF VOLUNTEER-BASED ORGANISATIONS

Trainers: Maria Isabelle Wieser and Lukas Hupfer

In this session, Maria Isabelle (Romande Director, foraus) and Lukas (Director, foraus) explained the governance and management structure of foraus, a Swiss think tank that relies heavily (and successfully) on volunteers.

Foraus was founded in Zurich in 2009 with a small office of three people. Slowly it expanded, opened a new office in Geneva and connected with other organisations. In 2020, it had over 120 volunteers, and over 1000 members. In total, foraus currently has 15 paid employees in the offices in Zurich and Geneva who are in charge of every-day business, fundraising, communications and bigger projects. There are also paid interns and then there are several groups and teams composed of volunteers. The volunteers create content, bring new ideas, and help with communications and funding.

Then, they discussed some of the **opportunities and advantages** of working with volunteers for governance and management.

In terms of *governance*, the foraus model offers a flat hierarchy and a democratic decision-shaping and making process. Also, when setting the agenda and content, this model offers more diversity and creativity, and the ability to recognise emerging topics, given the broad volunteer network. Another advantage is that ideas are spread through the big network, and thus have more opportunity for impact. Many of the volunteers start as young professionals, and when they leave and rise higher in their career they usually stay faithful to foraus.

In terms of *management*, the main advantages of a volunteer-based network are that it provides a young and agile team open to new ways of work. The volunteers themselves organise many activities and bring a broad network of expertise and skills.

But there are also **challenges**.

In terms of *governance*, there are three main challenges. The first has to do with defining the vision and the strategy of the organisation: there are questions about how to include the volunteers in discussions about content, values, identity, or the future of the organisation. The second challenge is deciding how much flexibility to give to the volunteers versus the degree of control to have over them. And the third has to do with 'professionalism' how much should be done by volunteers and how much by staff? also do you need an office? How much funding do you need if most of the work is done by volunteers? Answering these require defining the structure that the organisation will have.

In terms of *management*, 'professionalism' again comes into play, due to the dual existence of professionals 'versus' volunteers, who work at different speeds, under different expectations, and with different skills. Another challenge is quality control. Since all the papers and policy briefs are written by volunteers, it is key to have mechanisms for quality control and knowledge management.

Finally, Lukas and Maria shared some tools for managing the organisation. It is important to have a staff member who is the 'go to person' for the volunteers, who carries out regular check ins and coaching. Secondly, in terms of quality control, the review board ensures the quality of all publications and measures the impact of the volunteers and the staff. Third, physical meetings (such as retreats and workshops) are important not only to recruit but also to foster exchange between all those working for the organisation at different levels.

Lukas also presented the Policy Kitchen, a platform develop by foraus to crowdsource content from a variety of people, whether they are foraus members or not. They can check in on the platform and participate in two types of activities: 'Challenges' (connects people around a challenge to channel ideas) and 'Groups' (similar to a WhatsApp chat around a specific topic). The website also has a function for a collaborative text.

One interesting question that created discussion during the session related to the idea that volunteering can be a way 'into' think tanks and a career in the think tank world: Is it possible that this system discriminates in favour of middle-upper-class graduates who can afford to spend a few months in unpaid work? The group agreed that it does in a way, but could not find a solution to this.

Resources shared during the session:

- Engaging with volunteers in times of crisis. Interview with Wailea Zülch, engagement manager at foraus.
- Open think tank network, an initiative for the creation, development, and cooperation of open-source think tanks around the world.
- Policy Kitchen, a policy crowdsourcing methodology developed by foraus.
- Think Tank Hub in Geneva, an initiative undertaken by foraus to facilitate the involvement and evidence-based contributions of think tanks to policy discussions.

SESSION 2.
LEADING A THINK TANK: CHALLENGES AND KEY FUNCTIONS

Trainer: Lizza Bomassi

Lizza, deputy director of Carnegie Europe, delivered this session, which started with a potent statement: 'Think tanks are not a feature of democracy. We are not essential, and because of that we need to show and create our value'. A comparison that resonated well was equating think tanks to a sort of court jester, in the sense that, as court jesters used to do, think tanks are able to speak truth to power, but need to be careful with how they do it.

The conversation then diverted to measurement of policy impact. One of the most challenging groups to report to, in Lizza's experience, was government as they have constituencies to which they need to report how public funds have been used. Lizza introduced think tank pillars labelled VCR, representing:

- Vision (priorities, mission and strategy).
- Competence and key operational functions (project admin, communications, finance).
- Research (the value proposition to the outside world).

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A noteworthy aspect of the presentation was Lizza's suggestion that the precondition for a leader's success was their having a clear vision (and strategy) and a network (something we all need to work hard in establishing). On leadership, Lizza highlighted that a team needs (from its leader) trust, respect, accountability, humility, and integrity, and that a leader needs relevance, uniqueness, centrality, autonomy, and visibility.

Finally, the group discussed a management tool called the 'expectations exchange' to clarify and act on roles and expectations. This is important because 'if people are frustrated, they don't focus on work, but on their frustrations'.

Resources shared during the session:

- Laloux, F. Reinventing organizations
- Mendizabal, E. (2014). A few initiatives, not many projects, may be the secret to success. On Think Tanks.

MODULE 3. POLICY-RELEVANT RESEARCH

SESSION 1. UNDERTAKING RESEARCH MANAGEMENT: INDEPENDENCE AND RELEVANCE

Trainer: Chuwuka Onyekwena

Chukwuka, executive director of CSEA, delivered a session on undertaking research management, and shared CSEA's experience.

Chukwa highlighted that think tank research needs to be relevant, rigorous, and robust.

One way to develop a **research agenda** is to use an *issue-based approach*. For this, a think tank needs to address the following questions:

- What are the most relevant policy issues in our region that require evidence and analyses to inform decisions?
- Which of these policy issues align with our research areas and mission?
- Do we have the human and physical resources to work on these policy issues?

Think tanks need to understand that the policy environment is usually dynamic, so they need to keep track of the policy issues: monitor trends, interact with policymakers, analyse policy documents, and so on. To illustrate this, Chukwuka a described how CSEA developed an internal report to monitor activities in the policy space, which is circulated among senior research staff for them to align their agenda to important issues.
Another way of developing a research agenda is to base it on the *demand side*. This means monitoring activities in the donor space. CSEA developed an internal report documenting recent donor activities, requests for proposals and upcoming events in the region. The management team uses this report to align their engagement strategies with donors.

The discussion then moved to **independence**. According to Chukwuka, think tanks are independent when their views and/or positions are not influenced by the government, political parties, donors, private sector corporations and individuals. Having a variety of funding sources or more flexible funds can also facilitate independence.

In terms of **relevance**, Chukwuka discussed how think tanks are relevant when their outputs and views are widely recognised as credible. Relevance is linked to credibility, visibility and policy impact.

Resources shared during the session:

- Onyekwena, C. and Drusilla, D. (2018). Towards innovative fundraising strategies for think tanks. Post on OTT website.

SESSION 2.
POLICY RELEVANT RESEARCH AND INFLUENCE

Trainer: Simon Maxwell

Simon delivered a session on linking research and policy. His presentation started with a reflection on how often thinktankers are faced with situations in which suddenly everything changes. We are living through it now with the pandemic, but we've seen it before with other shocks. This means that think tanks, and other organisations, have to adapt our models and understand what each crisis means. For instance, COVID-19 is not just a health crisis but it is also an economic, social, youth, mental health, and foreign policy crisis (among others). As a consequence, think tanks have to stop and think about how they can use their resources to respond to the many aspects of this crisis.

Often researchers end every paper with a description of how difficult the issue is and how much more research is needed. This is not helpful for policymakers; they already know the issue is difficult. What they need is recommendations.

Simon recommended the use of the ODI ROMA toolkit. This approach consists of three main activities, which are then broken down into a series of steps:

- Diagnose the problem:
    - Identify stakeholders
    - Diagnose complexity and uncertainty
    - Understand why the problem persists
    - Pinpoint root causes
- Develop a strategy
    - Identify realistic outcomes
    - Identify your influencing objectives
    - Develop a theory of change
    - Develop a communication strategy
    - Assess your capacity and resources
    - Finalise your strategy
- Develop a monitoring and learning plan
    - Define information requirements
    - Collect and manage data
    - Make sense of data to improve decision-making

Simon then explained that thinktankers need to have some core skills and abilities. He distilled these into four personalities:

- **The storyteller:** a thinktanker needs to know how to tell a simple, convincing and exciting story that policymakers will understand.
- **The networker:** a thinktanker should have a solid network, they should be visible and known to decision-makers and become the go-to person on a topic.
- **The engineer:** a thinktanker needs to be innovative but also practical. Someone who can come up with plans and deliver to the people who can change things.
- **The fixer:** a thinktanker needs to think politically, understand how the political process works to make things happen.

Think tank research needs to be timely, there is no need for a long in-depth report 10 months after the window of opportunity has passed. In this sense,

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Enrique Mendizabal shared the idea of 'good enough', which he learned at ODI: 'as a researcher I would immediately think about reading everything I could find, interviewing as many people as I could etc., but as a thinktanker I had to ask myself what is necessary and possible now? what is "good enough" for what is needed?'

Simon also highlighted that people won't know you've done the work unless you tell them, so producing the research is not enough. You need to engage with those that need to know about it for it to have an influence.

Finally, and in summary, these are the questions that a think tank needs to ask when responding to a crisis or a topic:

- WHO is making WHAT decision?
- WHEN are they making it?
- WHAT products do you need to influence that decision?
- And WHEN do you need them?

Resources shared during the session:

- An introduction to think tanks and evidence-informed policy, video by Simon Maxwell
- Maxwell, S. (2021). Think-tanks in times of crisis. Prepare. Prod. Promote. Pitch. Produce. Blog post.
- Mendizabal, E. (2006). Building effective research policy networks: Linking function and form, Working Paper 276. Overseas Development Institute.
- Taylor, K. (2017). Kaleidoscope model tracks drivers, impacts of changing food policies. IFPRI blog post.
- Young, J., Shaxson, L., Jones, H., Hearn, S., Datta, A. and Cassidy, C. (2014). ROMA: A guide to policy engagement and policy influence. Overseas Development Institute.

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MODULE 4. COMMUNICATIONS

SESSION 1. MAKING THE STRATEGIC WORK: POLICIES AND PROTOCOLS TO BUILD A SOLID COMMUNICATIONS OPERATION

Trainer: Carolina Kern

Carolina, an OTT associate and independent consultant who works for international organisations, discussed the importance of establishing a solid base on which to build an organisation's communications activities. The discussion covered the following:

- Effective and strategic communications is about more than just defining your strategy, audience and channels for a specific piece of research or your organisation. The actual list of ingredients is much longer and entails a wide variety of functions.
- A key piece of advice is to start with staffing, systems and protocols, and then move on to the fun stuff. Taking this approach will save time and money, avoid the 'bolt-on' approach, boost credibility, and ensure consistency and sustainability.
- There are many different types of research-focused organisations. Many have different goals. Some are big, well resourced, and have an entire communications team. Others are small, with no specific person dedicated to communications. There are also different staff approaches: centralised, devolved, or skilled up.
- Organisations should understand different communications functions and reflect on how they will fulfil them (in-house or outsource, centralised or devolved, etc.). Common functions include: events, marketing, digital, social, content production, editing, press relations, public affairs, internal communications, design, and more.

Carolina also presented the different systems and protocols that (ideally) an organisation should have in place and highlighted the importance of a social media policy and plan. Social media such as a Twitter account is powerful and easy to set up, but needs work. Carolina recommended the use of scheduling software and developing stock responses to social media comments.

Other policies and processes discussed were: style guides, publication policies, and content templates. Finally, Carolina highlighted that in monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) for communications, the 'L' cannot wait – and anything measured should be used to learn and improve.

Resources shared during the session:

- On staffing structures, this video gives a full picture and shows how different think tanks have chosen to arrange their teams and skill sets. This event was organised by wonkcomms – a communications network started in London – that frequently posts interesting stuff on 'thinktanking' from a comms perspective.
- Think Tank Communications Health Check. A tool designed to help think tanks refine and improve their communications by evaluating key areas.

SESSION 2.
COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Trainer: Keith Burnet

Keith, director of communications and publishing at Chatham House, delivered a session on communication strategies.

The session started with a description of Chatham House and their current communication strategies. Their objective currently is to reach a younger, more diverse audience and to achieve this they are developing new spaces to engage, such as CoLab, Academy, and their panel of young advisors.

The presentation then delved into two main ideas: the 'why' and the 'how' of developing a communication strategy. The **why** – a communications strategy will help:

- Deliver your objectives.
- Have clarity of purpose.
- Plan.
- Focus your resources.
- Define your audiences.
- Measure your success.

The **how** – develop the strategy by:

- Agreeing on your strategic objectives through teamwork, as an organisational effort.
- Having a written plan. There can be flexibility, but you need to be clear about what you want to do.
- Implementing and delivering.
- Evaluating the outcomes.
- Learning the lessons.

Any communications strategy should have the following five key components:

- Identify your outputs: website, reports, op-eds, articles, multimedia, social media posts, events ...
- Identify your audiences: inner circle, members and supporters, policymakers, media, other think tanks, students, interested public ...
- Select your channels: website, email, social media, media, events ...
- Plan the frequency: content needs space to breathe. Be careful and thoughtful about it. Plan the frequency and timing of your outputs, and have a flexible approach.
- Measure your impact: metrics, key performance indicators, surveys, evaluations, anecdotal responses ...

Communications need to have three elements: an objective (overall goal), a strategy (overall plan) and tactics (specific activities).

Keith reflected on four main communication goals that Chatham House has worked towards during his time there (2001 to 2021):

- **Profile and visibility:** they initially worked to get their experts out in every news outlet possible to increase their profile; they responded to every single request

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no matter the outlet, even if it was a small local radio.

- **Outreach for influence**: then they shifted to selecting their influencing objectives more carefully.
- **Audience-focused**. A third goal shift was made to identify their audience's needs and styles
- **Diversify and immerse**: this is the current phase, in which they are working on expanding their partnerships, expanding their network of experts and working towards diversifying their audiences.

There were several questions on how to measure and how to report impact: outreach (numbers), engagement (one to one), influence (acknowledgement in the policy sector and/or policy), implementation (when something changes). The sources of information and how each source of information is registered varies, and together they paint the full picture.

Enrique Mendizabal asked about who makes the decision about how to communicate when there is a discussion between the researchers and the communications team. Keith responded that researchers almost 90% have the final say in deciding the products that will come out of a piece of work (although they have moved away from only producing written documents), but the communications team comes in early to support the process.

Keith's advice for a new think tank: Be sincere and clear about objectives. Know yourself and what you want and can do. It is not about size necessarily, but being true to yourself, and being realistic.

MODULE 5.
FUNDRAISING AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

SESSION 1.
FINANCE FOR NON-FINANCIAL MANAGERS

Trainer: Sonja Stojanovic Gajic

Sonja was the director of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) from 2006 to 2019 and helped transform it from a national NGO into an internationally recognised think tank on security policy. The key takeaways from the session include:

- Most people who become think tank directors do not have a financial background and need to learn as they settle in the position. Learning by practising, making mistakes (and learning from them), reading, and identifying good practice are the key tactics to learn.
- Growth is not necessarily always positive if the organisation cannot manage it.
- Financial sustainability is a component of organisational sustainability. It has to go hand in hand with other issues that shape the organisation (mission, leadership, and so on).
- Adaption to the external context is needed for a successful operation. And what is considered an adequate funding source in one context could be a highly contested one in another (e.g. funding from government is OK in Germany, but could signal a lack of independence in the UK).
- Think tanks should work at building a good relationship with their donors; donors are interested in your work and discussing your budgets and true costs ‘educates’ them and helps you run a successful organisation. Also donors want to discuss failures as much as challenges (to support you).
- Context matters for funding opportunities, both policy and funding environment. The environment can have different priorities, so it might be that you need to link what you do to the current context and find your way in. Not completely changing, but adapting.
- One of the key lessons for think tank leaders is how to structure a good budget. You need to have a good budget structure, and as you grow your budget structure needs to change.
- Don’t forget about liquidity! Good financial management is not just what an organisation’s funds look like, but when they come and go.
- A budget is your organisation’s strategy expressed in currency.

A successful funding model has the following characteristics:

- Reliability: more steady flow of secured income, longevity of funding.
- Diversification: diverse funding sources, decreased dependence.
- Reserves: more unrestricted income, which also provide flexibility and continuity in workstreams, and the ability to think and plan more long-term.

Sonja proposed the following five actions needed to thrive:

1. Understand how close you might be to the worst case scenario – liquidity.
2. Revise revenue streams and use relationships with donors to adjust approved budgets or open new streams – have an entrepreneurial mindset.
3. If you need to make cuts, think in terms of impact and profitability.
4. Involve everyone, including the board and leadership – but always keep up internal transparency.

5. Communicate consistently to staff, donors, and constituency (radical transparency and engagement).

Resources shared during the session:

- Baertl, A. (2019). Think tanks and the private sector: Opportunities and challenges. Working Paper, On Think Tanks.
- Jones, A. (2017). Webinar 'Smart project budgeting for think tanks'. Overseas Development Institute.
- MANGO Guide for financial management for non-profits.
- Mendizabal, E. (2018). Rethinking the business model: The case of Espacio Público. Post on OTT website.
- McCambridge, R. (2019). Pizza and a laugh—a reminder about your nonprofit financial stress level. Nonprofit Quarterly Blog.
- Miller, C. (2010). The four horsemen of the nonprofit financial apocalypse. Nonprofit Quarterly Blog.
- Polanco, H. and Summers, J. (2020). Cash flow in the nonprofit business model: A question of whats and whens. Nonprofit Quarterly Blog.
- On Think Tanks' section devoted to funding for think tanks.
- On Think Tanks: Nine webinars on sustainability for think tanks.
- Politics & Ideas: A collection of articles that are based on a series of online courses on funding models, which were delivered to dozens of think tanks in 2015, 2016 and 2017.
- Vargas, Y. (2020). 4 ways funders are supporting NGOs and responding to coronavirus. Blog post on Bond.
- Wallace Knowledge Center. Financial management for nonprofits resources.
- Zimmerman, S. (2020). Sustainability to survivability: 5 nonprofit finance must-do's in the time of COVID. Nonprofit Quarterly Blog.

SESSION 2.
SUSTAINABILITY AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Trainer: Anthony Boateng

Anthony delivered an interesting session on how to navigate changes in the ecosystem in which we operate while we maintain our mission and impact. As other trainers mentioned. we live in a time in which we are in constant change and we need to adapt.

During his work with the Think Tank Initiative, Anthony interviewed some donors and asked what the challenges were in terms of their work with think tanks. The conclusions included:

- Quality of proposals could be improved by aligning ideas to objectives.
- A lot of think tanks are doing exactly the same and donors are interested in identifying experts and institutions in the landscape: so work on your identity rather than trying to chase projects.
- Many think tanks do not assess the capacity of the allocated funds to execute a project and they end up diverting funds from other projects or poorly executing.
- Think tanks do not push back enough when funding amounts are determined by donors for a particular project.

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Anthony also discussed ‘the whispers’, or reading between the lines of what funders say:

- Think tanks need to have more clarity of the true cost of projects.
- Some think tanks sometimes do not have the adequate capacity to execute project in terms of the right professionals. Funders want to see the ability to formulate partnerships and form a good network.
- Funders are aware of the idea of ‘starvation’ when it comes to funding, so you shouldn’t be shy when you know that the funding you are receiving will not allow you to execute the project.
- Funders want to see clear links between the objectives, the narrative and the budget.

There has been an evolution of the funding mix: while several years ago many institutions received 100% or 80% of core funding, many institutions do not receive any core funding now. This means that they are constantly writing proposals and this requires a shift in the business model.

How to become sustainable in this ecosystem: Anthony proposes that you always need to have some sort of funding that goes beyond executing projects and that helps support institutional strengthening and creates some form of financial resilience.

Resources shared during the session:

- Webinar with Ruth Levine (Hewlett Foundation) about the funder and think tank relationship.

SESSION 3.
EXPLORING FUNDING AND ENGAGEMENT MODELS: STRATEGY AND MANAGEMENT

Trainers: Scarlett Varga and Milena Gaitan

In this session, Scarlett from Bruegel (Belgium) and Milena from Fundación Ideas para la Paz (Colombia) discussed different funding models by explaining how their organisations fund themselves.

Scarlett started by sharing five common sources of funding for think tanks:

- Donations and endowments: an endowment is a great source of funding to have but a difficult one to come by.
- Grants: from governments or foundations.
- Membership: this is more common in Europe, where exclusive programmes offer benefits to its members.
- Consulting: this ‘selling of knowledge’ is growing among think tanks.
- Crowdfunding: a novel idea, donations based on a project proposal or story.

Scarlett then discussed Bruegel’s funding model. Bruegel is a European think tank that specialises in economics. Scarlett explained that is important to highlight what the think tank is good at when approaching funders.

Regarding Bruegel’s sources of income:

- Eighty-four per cent is core funding based on membership, of which: 41% comes from states (European member states through ministries of economics

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who pay their fee based on population size and GDP); 34% from corporate members and 9%from institutional members). Having this core funding gives them a stable ground upon which to develop their projects. The value proposition of the membership benefits is that members can contribute to setting Bruegel's research agenda; access insights into European and global economy through bilateral meetings and calls; and engage with scholars, decision-makers from the policy sector and policymakers at global, EU and national levels.

- Sixteen per cent is non-core funding, of which: 7% comes from public grants, 7% from foundation grants, and 2% from other types of funding.

Then, Milena proceeded to describe a very different funding model, that of Fundación Ideas para la Paz in Colombia. It is a think tank specialising in peace and security that has experienced a transformation in its funding model since the year 2000. It started with donations from corporate donors. Throughout its transformation, income from corporate contributions has been reduced while income from projects has increased.

Currently, their main source of income is from project grants (82%). A project-based funding model has advantages and disadvantages. In terms of advantages, Milena highlighted:

- Broad spectrum of possibilities for project financing.
- Flexibility in the design and implementation of activities.
- Opportunities to propose ideas.
- Thematic directors/researchers/experts responsible for the engagement of different funders.
- Flexibility to expand and reduce teams.
- Having a wider network of partners.

On the other hand, the disadvantages are:

- Not having an endowment that allows financial self-sufficiency.
- Project-based work results in short-term interventions.
- Donors may come in with their own agendas, cycles, and focuses.
- Social organisations (who are the final beneficiaries) have limited capacity to propose activities that are more in line with their expectations.

Finally, Scarlett and Milena discussed the fundraising cycle. This includes several activities that they summarised as:

- Prospecting: monitoring of opportunities and scoping and building a relationship.
- Evaluating and selecting.
- Development of proposal.
- Negotiation.
- Reporting.
- Nurturing.

They explained that **prospecting** is the most important: it's what opens the door, but it also needs a very rigorous selection process. Think tanks always have a higher chance of receiving funds from those who share their values. This means going beyond reading their website and engaging more with donors. When evaluating and selecting it is important to remember 'don't bite off more than you can chew'. It is better to have fewer projects/donors but do a good job than try to chase more and more funding and then risk underdelivering.

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Prospecting often overlaps with engagement. For this, think tanks have to:

- Have clarity about the funding model, which should be connected with the strategic plan of your think tank.
- Develop the capabilities that donors require.
- Connect your donor's motivations with those of your organisation. You must be flexible to find a way in which your programme can be funded by a donor.
- Build strong relationships with donors, take care of their interests, and ensure that you are on the radar of different funders.

A final advice was: Evaluate and select what funding you need and can work with. You have to know how much you can deliver on, so it's best to focus on what you can do rather than chasing more and more funding.

Resources shared during the session:

- Abelson, D. (2002). Do think tanks matter? Assessing the impact of public policy institutes. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Balfour, R. 2017. What are think tanks for? Policy research in the age of anti-expertise. LSE Ideas.
- Callahan, D. (2018). The givers: Money, power, and philanthropy in a new gilded age. Vintage.
- Selee, A. (2013). What should think tanks do? A strategic guide to policy impact. Stanford University Press. A video by the Wilson Center includes a discussion of this book.
- Struyk, R. (2015). Improving think tank management: Practical guidance for think Tanks, research advocacy NGOs, and their funders. Results for Development Institute.
- Video by Robin Niblett from Chatham House, 'Do think-tanks have a future?'
- Video by the BBC (2019). What are think tanks and how are they funded? (The importance of transparent funding).

MODULE 6. MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING (MEL)

SESSIONS 1 AND 2. MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING OF POLICY INFLUENCE

Trainers: Dena Lomofsky and Stephen Yeo

The monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) module was divided into two sessions, both delivered by Stephen and Dena.

During their first session they discussed the basic concepts of MEL, and held group discussions to explore participants' experiences with MEL.

Stephen started by explaining that this function used to be called M&E (monitoring and evaluation), but over the past 10–20 years, it has evolved to include the 'L' (**learning**). This is because the emphasis has shifted from a focus on measuring success, or lack of success, to assessing whether the institution or the project being assessed is capable of learning from its experiences, adapting its tactics to what it's learning, and becoming more effective as a result. So, the addition of the 'L' means that this process has an important role beyond just an evaluation. MEL can, if used properly, be a way to learn more about your organisation.

Monitoring is the term used for the collection of information and data. In some sense, it is a rather passive activity: just measuring things without trying to interpret them.

Evaluation can be summative and formative. Summative evaluation is about asking whether the project or the institution was successful. Formative evaluation is more designed to help the organisation better achieve its goals without passing judgment about the success. Funders tend to want summative evaluations, while organisations that carry out their own evaluations prefer formative types.

Other important concepts to consider when doing MEL are:

- Outputs: what activities the organisation carries out.
- Outcomes: changes that are brought about as a result of the outputs.
- Impacts: the longer-term changes that the organisation/project sees or expects.
- Context: the social, political and intellectual environment in which the think tank operates. This makes a big difference to the way think tanks can operate and achieve their activities.
- Results chains: these combine outputs, outcomes and impacts -- > if we do X and our assumption Y is true, then result Z will occur. Results chains are often criticised as being too linear.

MEL for think tanks can have three focuses:

- Policy influence (MEL-I): this will be discussed in the second session.
- Communications (MEL-C): focussing on evaluating and learning from comms strategies.
- Management and operations (MEL-M): this is about human resources, finance and internal operations.

MEL for think tanks is different from MEL in companies. The mission of a think tank has non-financial aspects to it, whereas MEL for companies is dominated by financial considerations.

However, MEL for think tanks is closer in structure to that of companies than to MEL for NGOs. There are two main differences between think tanks and NGOs:

- The quality and credibility of research is much more important for think tanks than for NGOs. The kind of research that NGOs provide is very different.
- Providing policy advice is not the same as doing advocacy.

He then discussed what can be monitored by think tanks:

- Time: time sheets can be used to identify what staff are working on.
- Outputs: can be measured both quantitively and qualitatively.
    - Quantity: can be problematic if you have many different outputs (different publications, events, etc.) and must be kept up to date.
    - Quality: it is difficult to define 'quality'. In terms of 'scientific quality', this is measured through bibliometrics, peer review and 'altmetrics'.
- Funding and financial management: general financial performance can be monitored through periodic reporting cycles and external audits.

The second MEL session started by asking the participants what their policy influence goals/ objectives are. These ranged from more short-term goals (e.g. male and female politicians working to enhance women's participation) to other more long-term goals, which would be harder to measure.

What is policy influence? Most people think about it as bringing about a change in a specific policy or regulation, but it can be more than that. One scheme used by the International Growth Centre to measure policy impact has four levels:

Level 1: ideas created and mobilised

Level 2: outputs are disseminated to government

Level 3: engagement of policymakers

Level 4: demonstrable changes to policy

There are other ways to think of policy influence. One is that it has more than one dimension. For instance, there are three aspects of influence that may be more important in the long run:

- Expand policy capacities: research can strengthen policymaking by enhancing the policy community's ability to assess and communicate ideas and apply research advice.
- Broaden policy horizons: research can improve policymaking by introducing new ideas to the agenda and by fostering helpful dialogue.
- Affect decision regimes: research findings can improve policy processes by helping to open and rationalise the procedures of legislating, administering, and evaluating government policies and programmes.

MEL for policy influence (MEL-I) is the most difficult to establish and do well . Some reasons for this, suggested by the participants and trainers, include:

- Policy change takes a long time and it is not always a single event, but can be several parallel processes.
- It is hard to track where ideas are coming from so it is hard to attribute policy changes to particular outputs.

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- Most policy changes involve multiple actors.
- Lags between research and impact are long and unpredictable.
- It is hard to obtain evidence: policymakers not likely to admit who influenced them.

Stephen and Dena recommended starting with 'monitoring' – looking at the data that you are already collecting and think about what else you need to be collecting in order to be comprehensive. It is possible that you are not gathering enough qualitative information.

Dena and Stephen also shared an interesting quote by Enrique Mendizabal, who argues that policy influence should not be the only thing we should measure: 'Any MEL approach chosen must consider that think tanks are not just about influencing policies directly but also fulfil a great deal of other functions (education of elites, prepare new policymakers, create and maintain spaces, help set the agenda, disrupt consensus). It is in all these functions that their real value lies'.

After a group activity, the trainers asked participants what methods or data sources they use in their organisations to describe their activities and outputs. These were some of the responses:

- Press clippings.
- Metrics and analytics from social media.
- Number of downloads of papers.
- Number of citations.
- Mentions in parliament.
- Engagements with policymakers.
- Participation in public hearings.

To end the session, Dena asked participants to write a word or a sentence about what they learned. Some of the responses were:

- Learning to see CHANGE in small parts ... thank you both ...
- You cannot change what you don't see.
- Start from intermediate outcomes.
- Measuring different types of policy influence at different levels.
- Keep the framework simple.
- Setting boundary patterns.
- Learning is an important part of M&E that we often forget about.
- Track your impact.
- Balance.
- Don't bite off more than you can chew.

Resources shared during the session:

- Carden, F. (2009). Knowledge to policy: Making the Most of development research Sage, IDRC.
- Evans, A., Raimondo, E. and Hutton, S. (2021). The results agenda needs a steer—what could be its new course?. Blog post from the World Bank.
- Gold, J. and Rutter, J. (2015). Show your workings: Assessing how government uses evidence to make policy. [online] Institute for Government.
- Honig, D. (2020). Actually navigating by judgment: Towards a new paradigm of

donor accountability where the current system doesn't work. CGD Policy Paper 169. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development.

- Kirsty (2016) Holding decision makers to account for evidence use. Kirstyevidence blog.
- Stachowiak, S. (2013). Pathways for change: 10 theories to inform advocacy and policy change efforts. blog post.
- Struyk, R. (2015). *Improving Think Tank Management: Practical Guidance for Think Tanks, Research Advocacy NGOs, and Their Funders*
- Tilley, H., Ball., L. and Cassidy, C. (2018). Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact toolkit. Overseas Development Institute.

FOUNDING THINK TANKS

Trainers: Orazio Belletini and Nicolás Ducoté

Orazio (former Director and co-founder of Grupo Faro, Ecuador) and Nicolás (former Director and co-founder of CIPPEC, Argentina) participated in a Q&A on their experiences on founding a think tank. The session was described by one of the participants as 'watching an intense game of ping pong ... with great pleasure'. Here are some highlights:

Which were the initial challenges you faced?

- Ensuring that the organisation had: ideas, resources and people.
- Building credibility: for which several different options were shared, such as recruiting a board with established credibility, renting high profile office space, carving out a niche expertise, building alliances with others, or balancing engagement with political parties (neutrality).
- Deciding what to do internally and what to outsource (even research can be outsourced).

How did you carve out a place in the policy space?

- Establishing a clear objective, connecting with relevant stakeholders and seeking funding for that work.
- Working on specific products that are new and useful. CIPPEC developed the congressional directory and also reviewed and commented on the national budget. And with these products they were able to engage in current public debate and long-term work.

What advice and experience can you share on funding and fundraising?

- Grupo Faro opted to have international funders to maintain their independence (and became known for their independence).
- CIPPEC opted for an individual fundraising strategy and reached out to individual donors to establish a solid foundation.
- Each set out specific policies to secure their independence e.g. no donor could represent more than x% of their budget; transparency in funding sources and expenses; working with different sectors; deciding who you don't take money from; acknowledging that when you have to say no, you say no. In summary: radical transparency and discerning which donors to work with.
- Ample time and resources should be dedicated to fundraising: the return on investment is high. If you fail to dedicate time and resources to this, the think tank might never take off.
- Persevere, persevere, persevere. You will get several 'no's before you get a 'yes'.
- Build up an endowment: '10% of everything went into the anticyclical fund to build reserves; as soon as we had 6 months it went to the endowment'.

How do you address 'mission drift'?

- Set up processes to build your institution.
- Keep your own agenda, be demand driven, but be aware of what funders are willing to fund and what can you contribute to it.

What is the role of a think tank's director?

- The director is in a way a public good, as the role is needed to make the organisation function properly.
- Don't devote too much time for research – dedicate more time and energy to getting the organisation going. The world of think tanks lacks entrepreneurs and managers rather than researchers.

What other advice could you give to other think tank founders?

- Work on establishing alliances, they are key for your work.
- Have your value proposition ready.
- One to ones work well to convince people.
- Don't be afraid to fail – it happens. Continue working. Be clear of how you will inform all members of the organisations
- When you start growing put resources into non-core staff, such as programme managers and HR. Take an active management approach and make sure you can chew what you bite. Separate 10% of your energy to manage growth. Don´t run behind, but have the infrastructure to support the weight.

Resources shared during the session:

- Echt, L. (2012). Interview with Nicolás Ducoté, executive director at CIPPEC at the time, published on OTT website.
- Echt, L. (2012). Interview with Laura Zommer, CIPPEC's head of communications at the time, published on OTT website.
- Mendizabal, E. (2012). A Latin American policy entrepreneur: Orazio Bellettini, executive director of Grupo FARO, published on OTT website.

TRANSPARENCY, INTEGRITY AND CREDIBILITY

Trainer: Andrea Baertl

The group discussed the differences between integrity and credibility and agreed that integrity has to do with following a set of values and ethical guidelines, and in a way is internal, while credibility is external. They are related because to some audiences having integrity builds credibility. Andrea shared her paper on credibility, which identifies 10 key factors on which a think tank can build credibility towards its audiences. These are: networks, impact, intellectual independence, transparency, credentials and expertise, communications and visibility, research quality, ideology and values, and current context.

The group then did a reduced version of the Transparify Think Tank Integrity check (Transparify provides ratings of the financial transparency of major think tanks). The exercise highlights the difficulties of establishing and upholding your values in real life scenarios. It is suggested that you do the exercise in your own organisations to help you agree on what is OK and what is not.

Resources shared during the session

- Baertl, A. (2018). De-constructing credibility. Factors that affect a think tank's credibility, On Think Tanks Working Paper 4. On Think Tanks.
- Levine, R. (2017). The moral case for evidence in policymaking, Hewlett Foundation blogpost.

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- Nibett, R. (2018). The future of think tanks. Chatham House.
- Transparify integrity check: a downloadable tool.
- Transparify website, which provides a global rating of the financial transparency of major think tanks.

BRANDING WORKSHOP

Trainers: John Schwartz, Ellen Mather and Naomi Isaacs

John, Ellen and Naomi delivered a dynamic workshop using Miro, a digital whiteboard where participants can use post-it notes to add their ideas. Participants were divided into three groups to work on the branding of a fictional think tank. John, Ellen and Naomi discussed the following ideas about branding:

- Think tank communications is a distinct discipline: the audiences and channels are not the same as for governments, charities, or academia. The work of Soapbox is focused on think tanks.
- Branding is important because your work as thinktankers needs to be communicated to wide audiences across different channels and that means it needs to carry your identity.
- Branding is the process through which you can influence what your audiences think of you and your ideas. It starts by thinking about a strategic foundation for your organisation, where you work out collectively what you want your story to be. This strategic foundation should convey: 'This is who we are, this is what we stand for, this is our story and this is what we want people to think about us'.
- Good branding should unify your organisation and help it become the organisation you aspire to be. In order to do this, you have to internally know who you are, and this will also help your audiences understand your narrative.
- Branding is also important because it helps your organisation own that piece of intellectual and cultural territory. Working on your brand helps you dig deeper into who you are and why what you do is important.
- Branding helps you produce the right kinds of communications for the right kind of audiences because you will have the tools and frameworks to clearly communicate who you are and what you do.
- The branding exercise included filling out different layers of an 'onion' that focus on:
    1. Defining your what, how and why: your purpose, your process or approach, your offer.
    2. Defining your core values.
    3. Audience identification and mapping.
    4. Understanding your audience and your offer to them.
    5. Defining your role.
    6. Defining your personality.

DATABASED STORYTELLING AND THE POWER TO INFLUENCE

Trainer: Memuna Forna

Memuna's session was dedicated to identifying the key elements of data-based storytelling. "We are all familiar with stories: most of our lives are spent hearing and telling stories. We communicate our experiences through stories. They are a tool to bring order into a confusing world."

Data-based storytelling means:

- Narrative created around data. It is not fiction.
- For instance, good documentaries reflect the elements of good data-based storytelling: they include storytelling techniques (a beginning, a middle and an end), they use a narrator, they contain a variety of sources, and they arrive at a conclusion.
- Some organisations use it as part of a predetermined process of change – to convey actionable insights, and evoke emotions that will help stakeholders make decisions.
- It is the process of weaving stories or narratives around data to ensure that the insights from it are received, retained, and acted upon.
- Therefore, two elements are key: the use of data and the use of narrative.

Memuna had asked participants to record a one-minute video telling the story of their name. With this exercise she showed that after watching the videos, most of us felt that the stories humanised our fellow participants, that they were made more memorable by their stories, that we were left wanting to know more and that we gained additional insights into the narrator from their story.

Later, Memuna discussed narrative research. Collecting narrative data is intrinsic to data-based storytelling. Memuna relayed six guidelines that came out of a study about narrative research in the health sector:

- Narrative research may include one or more of the following activities: story gathering; story eliciting; story interpreting; story collating.
- These activities should be classified as research for the purposes of ethical approval if they are undertaken with the explicit intention of furthering a body of knowledge.
- Narrative research must meet the general criteria of high-quality research.
- Storytelling is an art, not a science. The storyteller uses rhetoric and other literary devices to give a version of events from his or her own perspective.
- Storytelling is a communicative act, involving inter-subjectivity (i.e. an overlap in two people's individual understandings of something held in common).
- When a story is sought as (or becomes) research material, the researcher takes on ethical duties towards the storyteller.

This led to an interesting discussion in the chat about the ethics of narrative research, whether some researchers or journalists end up making up stories or quotes, and whether think tanks produce stories or other type of texts.

Resources shared during the session:

- Aaker, J. (No date) How to Use Stories to Win Over Others
- Brodock, M. (2013) Selling Your Product Means Selling A Story. Women 2
- Crow, D. and Jones, M. (2018). Narratives as tools for influencing policy change. Blog post.
- Gubrium A. C., Graham L. F., Lowe S., Paterno M., Fiddian-Green A. (2017). The ethics and practice of digital storytelling as a methodology for community-based participatory research in public health. community engagement and research symposia.
- Jones, M.D & McBeth, M. K. (2010) A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong? The Policy Studies Journal, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2010.

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- Rush, B.C. (2014) Science of storytelling: why and how to use it in your marketing. The Guardian Media network blog.
- Zak, P.J. (2014) Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling. Harvard Business Review.

SETTING UP A THINK TANK WORKSHOP

Trainer: Enrique Mendizabal

During this workshop, Enrique discussed questions to ask ourselves when thinking about setting up (or restructuring) a think tank and working for a think tank. He explained that think tanks are a product of and a reaction to their context, so think tanks in different parts of the world are going to be different.

Before continuing with the presentation, Enrique used Menti to ask participants what they have learned that they were hoping to learn, and what they have learned that was unexpected during the School for Thinktankers. Some of the unexpected lessons were:

- How important context is for the way think tanks work.
- The importance of communications and branding.
- The importance of MEL.
- Even large, established think tanks face similar challenges to smaller ones.

Enrique structured the rest of his presentation around key questions to ask yourself about think tanks: the why, what, who, how, and when.

Why questions

Why do you want to set up a think tank? Why do you work in a think tank?
These vary from the mundane to the ideal to the unethical. But having clear answers to these questions can help you better reflect on why to set up a think tank or work for a think tank:

- What problem do you want to address?
- What sort of changes and improvements are you aiming for?
- What needs to be done (or needs to happen) for this change to happen?
- What type of activities would you like to do?
- Who do you want to influence?
- Who do you want to work with?

What questions

What is the context?
Context affects an organisation at every level, so you need to think hard about the context in which you operate. Having a clear understanding of the context will help you:

- Assess your capacity to influence; is there demand for evidence – what kind and for what?
- Determine your role.
- Decide what type of organisation you will/can create.
- Understand current trends (evidence needs, policy gaps, donor priorities, etc.).
- Map out 'the competition' and potential partners. You are not alone, you are part of an ecosystem and you need to be aware of who else is in that space.

- Analyse international and domestic spaces of action.
- Identify whether your ideas are relevant.
- Plan your research agenda.

What does the think tank want to achieve?
This is a key question to ask yourself about your vision, mission and scope:

- The vision is your dream of the ideal world, the big picture of what you would like the think tank to contribute towards.
- The mission is the organisation's raison d'etre, it is what the think tank will do to contribute to the achievement of the vision.
- What issues will you tackle? How focused do you wish to be? Think tanks should focus on just a few things (or even one) and make sure that that is your intellectual territory.

You can look at the missions of existing think tanks to better grasp the kind of language they use or what they say they do, as this can help you define your own.

What is the business model of the organisation?
This is how you go about achieving your goal, it's how you deliver value to your stakeholders and how you can entice funders to pay for that value. Some important questions you need to ask yourself:

- What is your value proposition?
- What activities are you going to carry out to create that value?
- Who is going to lead and own the organisation?
- Where does your funding come from?
- How are you going to identify, attract and motivate staff?
- What strategies and channels are you going to use to communicate to your audiences?
- How will you ensure the financial sustainability of the organisation?

Who questions

These are some of the most important questions and we tend to forget them.

Who will govern? And how will they do so?
This relates to who will own the organisation and how they will express that ownership. The best way to think about this is who is going to be in the board and in top positions keeping an eye out for the future of the organisation. There are different types of boards and all have pros and cons. You can learn more about this in the background notes and in the video prepared by Enrique about think tank boards.

Who will lead?
Enrique asked participants what desired skills a think tank leader should have. The top three were: 'ability to mobilise people to join them and to empower a team to deliver the organisation's mission', 'knowledge of the context', and 'good management skills'.

Who will listen?
Don't forget about your audience. Don't start doing research until you know who will be reading it. You need to know what your audience wants and needs. This is as important as the mission and goals. Understanding your audience can build up trust and credibility and helps you avoid working with audiences who are not interested in your work.

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Who will fund it?
There are many ways to generate income now that core funding is less common. It can be based on projects or outputs, but also paid membership, paid courses, publication sales, research consultancy, and more. So don't narrow yourself by thinking that you need to go for core or long-term funding. Yes, you need to find that, but there are many other ways to find funds. It is also important to build your network and your name before you can start approaching funders.

How questions

How will the think tank do the research?
You need to figure out whether you will hire in-house researchers, if they will be senior researchers working on their own or teams of researcher, what type of research the organisation will conduct, and who the audience is for this research.

And you have to ensure that the research you are doing is not just research, but that it is policy relevant. For research to be 'policy relevant', it needs to follow these principles:

- It is embedded in the policy context.
- It is internally and externally validated.
- It responds to policy questions and objectives.
- It is fit for purpose and timely.
- It is crafted with an analytical and policy perspective.
- It is open to change and innovation as it interacts with policy spaces and policymakers.
- It is realistic about institutional capacity and funding opportunities.

And you need to remember that research questions are not the same as policy questions.

Having a **research agenda** will help you navigate the difficult balance between what you want to do and what the funds you have will allow you to do. It is an important framework that helps you focus your research efforts and articulate initiatives into common goals.

How will the think tank communicate?
At the start of any project, it is important to think about what you are trying to achieve. This will help you choose the best output to ensure maximum impact.

You have to think about who needs to read or listen to your work in order to get your desired impact.

A successful think tank does not compartmentalise research and communications. Instead, it brings them together as one and the same. It's one effort.

When questions

When to start a think tank?
Start now! Start before you look for funding. You can start by doing literature reviews, or starting a Twitter account that deals with a specific issue, or by hosting events. You can start building a reputation before you start asking for funding. Funders are usually risk averse, but this way you show that you already exist and that you have ideas. So think about what you can put out there.

To end the session, Enrique asked participants 'What are you going to do next?'

This served as a reflection about what new plans have emerged from attending the school. Some of the responses were:

- Take the time to digest the material and resources!
- I'm going to write a summary document of each session from the school in order to use it as an assessment tool on where my organisation needs to learn more most urgently.
- 1. Finalise the concept note of my think tank (including the integration of all the material), 2. Present the note to potential future board members (including researchers), 3. continue networking with potential funders and partners.
- Develop a concept note based on the resources. Reach out to contacts that I've identified who may be involved/interested in the think tank setup – whether in research, governance, fundraising or management.
- A brainstorming session with my think tank team to develop our ways of setting the research agenda and our communication tools.
- Attempt to apply what I've learnt in this school in my current position at a think tank as a practical learning opportunity, while starting to follow the recommendations just shared in the last slide (about starting a new think tank).
- Read more in-depth on the storytelling approach of presenting research results.
- Improve communication strategies. I believe it is vital for many objectives: attracting funding, building a good reputation, communicating the message clearly and accurately. And establishing a proper MEL practice.
- Based on the materials and discussion, reflect on what BCSP is currently doing and how it could be done better, since we are also going through a restructuring in terms of HR and establishing new lines of management.
- Digest the information we have received over the past two weeks, rethink the mission/vision of our organisation and further develop governance, funding and MEL models.
- I will move from research to story-based presentation ... improve communications.
- Let the brain do the 'deep connections' work (that's the passive, intuitive phase of connecting dots). Then debrief and connect everything with my business modelling framework. Then share and discuss with peers and funders.
- Beyond the other aspects, I am going to boost our funding model: 2 million is the target this year.

Resources shared during the session:

- Cast from Clay (2018). A new model for think tank communications. Blog post.
- Mendizabal, E. (2016). Setting up a think tank: Step by step, post on OTT website.

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