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Think Piece

Think Tanks at the crossroads of evidence. What next?

The Think Tank Initiative is nearly ten years old. How the landscape has changed over that time depends on where you are, and who is answering the question. As we enter the final TTI Exchange, it is worth asking 'Where are we now, and where are we going?'

The Last 10 Years: A Journey Well Travelled?

The political space for producing evidence and engaging decision makers around it has opened in some countries, and it has closed down in others. **Context matters. It matters in very specific ways and across several different dimensions, and the links between these dimensions are various and changing.**ⁱ Progress has been made in understanding how it matters, and providing tools that help us to analyse our own context to better identify the most promising potential areas of change for different types of interventions: research, design and implementation of projects, capacity building and monitoring and evaluation.

Evidence is increasingly influencing both policy and practice (although proving this is tricky). Evidence informed policy making has made its way into the lexicon of development – at least on paper – in most countries. **But the progress made varies enormously from country to country, and support is often more rhetorical than actual,** with resources and patterns of decision-making not necessarily following through on the spoken commitment to this way of working.

Getting evidence into policy and practice isn't just the job of researchers. Ten years ago, the onus was on researchers to effectively identify and communicate with a chosen target audience. But a new reality has emerged over the last 10 years that shares out more broadly the responsibility for evidence between those who generate evidence ('supply side') and those who use it ('demand side') – recognising often that people and organisations do both. A healthy evidence ecosystem requires optimal behaviours of both parties.

We've learned more about both what researchers need to know, what they need to do and how they should act for their work to be noticed and used. **We know more too, about how to improve decision makers' access to, understanding of, and use of evidence in their work.** DFID's Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme showed that, while evidence is crucial to successful policy making, in many low and middle-income countries **policymakers lack the capacity to effectively access, appraise and apply research when making decisions**ⁱⁱ. Helping them to do this by building technical skills around understanding statistics and determining which evidence sources are reliable, is useful. But fixing these problems won't help improve policy if there is no political space to bring evidence into decision making, and no incentives for senior decision makers to care about evidence. **Even when policymakers are motivated to use evidence in their decisions, they often don't have access to it.** ⁱⁱⁱ

Leadership and organisational culture are critical – possibly essential – elements in maintaining a healthy 'evidence ecosystem'. They will be fundamental to a smooth transition of the sector from its current 'binary' make-up of evidence supply (made up of the universities, think tanks, and NGOs who generate policy research) and demand (those drawing on evidence to help with their decisions) to a more 'systems-based' approach of evidence generation and use.

The small set of visionary funders that kick-started and supported a whole range of evidence initiatives, including the Think Tank Initiative (TTI), have remained loyal and others have joined them. **But the funding party has not been crowded.** There is a feeling that, over time, funders have become impatient with how long it takes to bring about change, and they have responded with more directive funding packages that align with their own policy interests.

Demonstrating the impact of much of the work of the think tanks involved in TTI – and indeed other organisations working in this space - is difficult. **Impact is not yet visible at scale, and in many cases may never be definitively 'proven'.** Many argue that our search for impact is either impossible or misled, or both, and that we're looking for the wrong things in the wrong place to demonstrate 'worth'.

The Present

The number of initiatives focusing on increasing evidence use in decision-making is definitely **on the rise**. A report published last year^{iv} identified more than 100 mechanisms, including dedicated evidence units, databases, and initiatives that share this objective. Research and evidence 'supply' continues to be prolific: UNESCO^v estimates that global spending on R&D has reached a record high of almost US\$ 1.7 trillion. But it is uneven: about 10 countries account for 80% of spending, and investment as part of GDP is very low in most of the developing world.

But there's **a long way to go** before this becomes the norm. The same report concluded that despite the increased availability of data and evidence in many countries, the use of information and analysis to inform policy remains limited. A shortage of funding; lack of commitment from political leadership; gaps in technical skills; and an absence of clearly defined strategies and mechanisms to support sharing and use of data and evidence are given as reasons why.

Programs such as the TTI have **created the space for organisations that could be competitors for the same research funds, commissions and intellectual territory, to find ‘common cause’ with each other** and to identify their place in the broader pursuit of better, more informed decision-making globally. Exposure to new ideas, different research and engagement approaches, diverse organisational arrangements and leadership styles over a significant number of years, has enabled a kind of ‘self-directed learning’ on a global scale. This approach of strengthening a community of think tanks, vs. supporting individual organisations, has allowed us to make ‘bigger picture’ reflections such as those concluded at the [Africa Evidence Informed Policy Forum](#) in Kenya early in 2018. These included: 1) the need to focus on building partnerships across the continent and an evidence ecosystem that is fit for purpose rather than ‘donor-prescribed’; 2) the real dangers of losing intellectual independence in the pursuit of audience (particularly government) buy-in; and 3) the need to recognise that think tanks require deliberate collaboration with a diversity of groups (especially youth) if they want their work to inform policies that are meaningful in the longer term.

Evidence that weaves together different types of knowledge has most utility, but is rarely done well. There are currently limited incentives for think tanks to both generate and communicate knowledge and evidence with and for the people who are being studied, and not much actual experience of how to do this well. But if we succeed in influencing decisions with evidence that isn’t informed by ordinary people’s experiences and knowledge, we run the dual risk of first, overlooking smart, grassroots solutions to the problems being studied and second, triggering unintended consequences for the populations affected. There must be a balance in the knowledge sources that are drawn on to inform policy, or else the solutions may perpetuate the issues.

Despite the progress that has been made in making the case for evidence use, the fact remains that **evidence is just one input to any decision-making process.** A recent study showed that information from lobbyists and pressure groups exerted as much influence on senior managers, as evidence.^{vi}

What evidence gets promoted is a political choice, not an absolute truth”, says Dr Fred Carden, Principal at Using Evidence Inc., and Senior Research Advisor to the Knowledge Sector Initiative in Indonesia. “Good policy relies on the effective use of all forms of knowledge: scientific knowledge, professional knowledge and local knowledge.”^{vii} Everyone, including researchers, approaches evidence with a certain position that informs what information sources and data they choose to include, how they analyse it, and what conclusions they draw. Similarly, decision makers select evidence as one input alongside other inputs, and they choose some evidence over others. Recognising and acknowledging this fact, we can tell a more honest story about Evidence Informed Policy Making (EIPM) and its potential to bring about positive social change.

Funding continues to be a challenge. Funders have a crucial role to play in supporting ‘the evidence ecosystem’ in the global south, by protecting the integrity of important local actors like think tanks. A report commissioned last year by TTI on the funding landscape for think tanks in low and middle income countries^{viii} showed that although the funding landscape is diverse, many funders are not stepping up to fund in the ways that are needed.

Where are we going?

As you would expect from a community as diverse and informed as the think tank community, there is a wide range of views about what to expect over the next ten years. For every pessimist, there is an optimist. For nearly every challenge, there is someone ready to identify and describe a set of opportunities.

The pessimists focus on our current **existential crisis**. Climate change and the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather conditions it causes; emerging and sustained incidences of conflict and fragility; increasing societal and economic polarities, particularly in the aftermath of the global financial crisis; and in many countries, both developed and developing, and closing spaces for inclusive discourse. These crises, among others, provide a uniquely challenging context in which to work. The raft of challenges that have been loyal companions for the last decade around funding, impact, sustainability and the nature of evidence – unpacked below – are likely to stay the journey for the next decade.

Others are gloomy about the lack of innovation in the sector, but confident that, in the future we will see less ‘ownership’ of knowledge by experts, and more co-creation of knowledge by those who are affected by the issues. A new generation of ‘Leaders Who Dare’, who are more interested in collective knowledge, interdependence and working horizontally across different interest groups to find solutions, will overturn the current, more hierarchical means of knowledge production. “Traditional authorship and individual ownership of knowledge will become a thing of the past”, says Vanesa Weyrauch, co-founder of [Politics & Ideas](#). “Young people, who have been brought up in a digitally connected world, and who have collaboration and co-creation enshrined in the DNA of how they work, will lead this way of working. Think tanks could play a central role, as facilitators of co-creation and co-production – but only if they are open and daring and willing to lead in a different way.”

An initiative that has shown how, in practice, such co-creation might happen is demonstrated by T20, a community of Latin American think tanks which has been convened to inform the G20. Through a series of task forces and collaboration around known policy interest areas, they presented their public policy recommendations to President Mauricio Macri at the T20 Summit earlier this year.

The optimists insist on seeing **opportunity in these challenging times**. They argue that evidence informed policy making is largely considered ‘a no brainer’ i.e. something that is difficult to argue against publicly. Even though in practice this varies enormously from country to country, it is not likely to go away as a concept, and this is considered a real achievement of the collective efforts of many over the last decade.

They advocate looking for ‘silver linings’ such as creating and engaging in new and more informal spaces of policymaking - **in the face of the broken/breaking multilateral system**; coming together as groups of scholars to help policymakers make sense of the available evidence – **in response to the prolificacy of (often conflicting) evidence** around a policy topic; pioneering different ways of working outside of conventional ‘silo’ research areas (health, environment, economics etc.) – **to face head-on the more complex, cross-sectoral problems** of the modern

world; and aligning around existing policy opportunities – **to meet the challenge of closing spaces** for influence.

The SDGs in particular are a cause for hope. “We have enormous potential to align around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”, says Andrea Ordonez, Director of Southern Voices. “This globally-agreed set of targets gives us something concrete to aim for. Although we currently do not have the appropriate capacities to monitor progress at a global scale, if we were able to do so - thanks to coordinated work among the evidence/data community - that would be a big win. We should make good use of this opportunity.” She says that, while governments may take issue with the progress being reported, they cannot put the lid back on the data and evidence being produced as part of the process: evidence that will allow a global conversation to be had across the normal confines of what we know about specific national contexts.

Peter Taylor, at IDRC, agrees. “The SDGs are becoming the catalyst for a new global set of relationships around a shared vision” he says. “In many countries they are being embedded in national policymaking processes and creating new demand for evidence and data.” He sees this as part of a general **trajectory of increased awareness and willingness to use evidence** and says that more funders are now seeing the communication and engagement around evidence as a ‘non-negotiable’.

These patterns are welcome, but not necessarily enough, he argues. The unfolding political landscape in many nations, both north and south, is not a friend to systemic evidence use. “It would be very easy for this toxic landscape to **undermine the progress** we’ve made”, he warns.

There appears to be a consensus that **many of the challenges facing the think tank community over the next decade are not new.** But they need persistent and collective vision and action to overcome them. We present some of them below, and invite discussion through the e-discussion over the weeks leading up to the TTX, which will spill over into face-to-face debates during the event.

The Funding Dilemma

Funders have a crucial role to play in supporting ‘the evidence ecosystem’ in the global south. First, they are uniquely positioned to protect the integrity and independence of local actors like think tanks to conduct rigorous and impartial research. Second, they play an important role in catalysing and convening engagement across a broad set of actors to get the evidence seen, discussed and understood. And third, they provide the resource needed to do the work.

But funders are not stepping up to fund in the way that is needed. They face increasing pressure to show impact from their investments in the short term and this **isn’t always compatible** with long-term core funding. Think tanks will need to continue to be strategic and smart about how they adapt their research agendas, to pursue both the funded and their own priorities.

The Impact Dilemma

Demonstrating impact is hard. But it is becoming increasingly important to get funding. It is tempting to try to show that policies have been nudged, attitudes challenged or discourse

influenced by one organisation's efforts, when the reality is that research is a collaborative endeavour and collaboration is essential for a healthy evidence ecosystem.^{ix} The tools for evaluating impact are improving, but it is never going to be possible to 'prove' anything beyond the contribution of one organisation to any desired outcome such as more informed media debate; improved evidence use in advocacy; specific policy statements, among others.

Some argue that we're 'missing the point' by looking for **whether** evidence has influenced policy instead of focusing on **how change happened** – which would give us better insights on how to use evidence in the future to make better decisions.

The Sustainability Dilemma

Think tanks are under pressure. They play an important role in one possible imagining of the future, where Evidence Informed Policy Making (EIPM) continues to be regarded as desirable and funding becomes easier. **But it is unlikely that they will look the same as they do now.**

This, the most immediate of the dilemmas for think tanks, has three related elements: capacity, competition, and change.

There is concern that the current challenges in securing and retaining high calibre research staff will get worse. This threatens the potential of think tanks to address both increasingly complex policy scenarios, and constantly evolving methodological challenges (e.g. Impact Evaluations and systematic reviews). In Africa, for example, it is estimated that 60% of think tanks are highly vulnerable with a serious risk of disappearing, given unstable funding, staff turnover, and brain drain".^x

Two factors make this likely to get worse. First, the **policy research community is becoming more competitive**, with more think tanks entering the space and growing competition from consultancy firms that both win the research and consultancy contracts, and often poach high calibre staff from TTs with better pay and conditions. Second, those **countries with strong research and higher education traditions can support strong think tanks** with a large pool of well-trained researchers and research evidence to use as part of their work. But countries with relatively weak high education systems, non-existent research funding systems, and a relative emphasis on teaching over research in university can do little to provide the enabling environment for talented researchers to thrive, or stay.

The world is changing fast, and it is no longer possible to use robust analysis of past events to help us to understand and navigate the future. As the financial sector declares: 'past performance is no indication of future results'. This has implications for think tanks. Those with excellent track records in researching and analysing past and current events, may struggle with the demands of a policy community wanting answers and explanation for tomorrow's world. Those with the skills to adapt and flex to meet the policy community's needs, without relinquishing their independence, will be the winners.

Communications can help. Rapidly evolving digital communication technologies present enormous opportunities for even the smallest think tank to join in global policy conversations and influence discourse with their research. Social media both provides an enormous 'shop window'

to a global community that is interested in a particular topic, and allows think tanks to quickly map their target audience's position on it. It affords anyone with an opinion the equivalent of a modern 'Talking Stick' to make their case to that global audience. The trick and the challenge, in equal measure, is how to contribute strategically in a way that will achieve increased visibility, reputation, and make meaningful contribution to relevant policy discussions without simply adding to the noise.

The Definition Dilemma

The question of 'Whose evidence counts?' will become ever more important – and provide both challenges and opportunities for think tanks.

Challenges come from **rising scepticism about experts/professionals** because of their privileged role in decision-making; their 'failure' to foresee events like the global financial crisis; and their perceived 'default positions' in reinforcing the status quo. Organisations that are seen to be part of the system that has failed to tackle big problems like inequality or climate change, become tarnished when the system itself is discredited. This trend, linked to the return of a certain kind of populism in both north and south, presents a unique impediment for those wanting to engage around evidence in public and policy spaces.

The **exclusion of ordinary citizens** from almost all evidence informed policy/decision making processes is only now becoming recognised, acknowledge and addressed. How to support their more active involvement; tackle the power imbalances that underlie their exclusion; and find and engage the supporters and intermediaries - including think tanks - who can help to facilitate their inclusion, is open for discussion. It opens the door to a broader conversation about the role that different kinds of evidence can play in strengthening decision-making, and paves the way for new evidence coalitions to emerge. This potential for new ways of working, outside of and across conventional think tank structures, creates an alternative to the more traditional ways of doing research through formal institutions and could provide an answer to the sustainability of funding institutions.

But marrying the different worlds, with their very different cultures, procedures and incentives, will not be easy.

Can we identify 10 practical steps to navigating these choppy waters?

What can be done to ensure a safe and productive journey over the next 10 years? Is there a consensus around the practical steps that will both capitalise on progress made during the first 10 years of TTI, and meet the challenges of the next ten years?

We propose a handful below and we invite you, through the next three weeks of e-discussions, to extend the list to "Ten Top Tips for the 2020s".

1. **Tell a good story based on robust evidence.** Scientists or policy experts need to capture attention and communicate both the importance and complexity of issues to their audiences^{xi}.
2. Recognise and acknowledge in both research and engagement activities, that **both the generation of evidence and its use is political.**

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3. **Be more inclusive.** Include the knowledge and experiences of ordinary people – what is increasingly being called ‘citizen’s evidence’ – in building evidence used to inform policy.
 4. **Embrace new ways of working.** Traditional funding models, collaborations, and advocacy partnerships are no longer either guaranteed to work or the most effective way of doing business.
 5.

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