

Preliminary lessons and conclusions from the external TTI evaluation



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This note presents emerging lessons and preliminary conclusions from the external TTI evaluation. Its purpose is to stimulate forward looking debate about how to best support think tanks within the broader policy landscape. We first briefly describe the methods of the evaluation and then continue with a presentation of our key findings concerning trajectories of change among the grantees. Finally, we conclude by considering issues concerning sustainability, policy-making processes and how think tanks manoeuvre in political landscapes.

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The evaluation has undertaken its analysis primarily through working with a sample of 13 TTI grantees, triangulated with interviews and review of reporting in relation to the full cohort of 43 grantees. From the data the evaluation identified key factors related to: (a) research quality; (b) organizational change; (c) institutional sustainability; (d) how policy landscapes condition think tank development; and (e) influence on policies. By working iteratively with the sample cohort data and the concepts, we have identified core issues for future support to think tanks.

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The most striking overall finding has been the extent to which the grantees have had to struggle to respond to abrupt and often negative changes in their respective policy environments. TTI financed growth in staffing and reputation has helped them to rethink their roles accordingly, sometimes radically and repeatedly, over the past decade.

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Three different trajectories of change in grantees can be discerned. **A first category** is composed of grantees that have gone through *transformational and non-linear* change. This is reflected in the sizeable growth of their non-TTI funding, staffing, research outputs and policy engage-

ments. For these grantees, access to TTI support was often leveraged to substantially recreate and reposition their organizations. **A second category** consists of grantees that have had a period of *accelerated or incremental* change with a significant growth or establishment of their weight as a think tank, building on what at the outset was a firm but limited base. These grantees have all remained recognisably the same organizations, but with important changes in various dimensions, often related to enhanced focus on policy influence and stronger staffing for research quality. TTI has had an important role in financing these changes. **A third category** is represented by think tanks which were able to *persevere or survive* in spite of a political landscape characterized by high levels of polarization and volatility, sometimes reinforced by an adverse or even hostile attitude from the national government. For these grantees, TTI support provided not only the financial means of survival and some degree of 'political protection' but also access to instruments which facilitated the exploration of new methods, approaches and ways to reposition themselves in a less than conducive environment.

Behind these diverse trajectories of change are a number of potential causes or determinant factors. TTI did not start with a 'blank slate' and its contribution needs to be considered within the framework of institutional history and inertia, path dependency, ambition and efforts by think tanks to constantly adapt and position themselves. Internal and contextual factors that frame how TTI support became transformational, incremental or a survival mechanism include: (a) formal and informal relationships between grantees and their governments; (b) the ability to engage in alternative facets of the policy sphere when dialogues with governments have been disrupted; (c) access to other core grants and internally generated resources (generally endowments) to enable stability beyond the period of TTI support; (d) the degree of competition grantees face for influence and to attract senior researchers; (e) the degree of institutional collaboration (e.g., with universities) that may enable a small think tank to 'punch above its weight', and; (f) diverse leadership styles and engagement of governance among the different grantees.

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Our conclusions on **sustainability** are that the lynchpin is the ability of grantees to build (and retain) a core complement of high-quality staff who can deliver high quality research outputs and maintain internal mechanisms within their organizations for research quality. The majority of grantees appear to be more sustainable now than they were before TTI, but a significant proportion will need to downsize in the near future, largely due to a reduction in flexible and long-term, predictable funding. Most are optimistic that research quality will be maintained, but the evaluation team sees reason for concern. The competition for funding and for attracting and retaining high quality staff is intensifying, just as the TTI grantees' comparative advantage shrinks with reduced access to the flexible funding that during the past decade enabled them to ensure quality and become more strategic and nimble. A critical mass of respected senior staff has been achieved in the large majority of grantees. But the characteristics of the funding environment suggest that maintaining that critical mass will continue to be something of a 'moving target'. Evidence indicates that this can be achieved where the grantees are able to attract core funding, secure overheads that cover the true costs, and build their own endowments or reserves. During its second phase, TTI has contributed to critical reflection on how to reinforce sustainability but in many cases this seems to have been 'too little, too late' to generate significant outcomes before the end of the program.

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Implicit in the **policy influencing model** of TTI is something of a linear model that moves from good researchers working in an enabling environment, to good research products, to policy influence and impact. Moreover, there are also inherent assumptions about the demand for evidence, about the rationalities of bureaucracies in responding to 'good evidence', and about what it means to engage in different but interlinked state, private sector and civic spaces. There are good grounds for questioning these assumptions. The efforts of the TTI grantees reflect how policy influencing processes are based on relationships and networks;

the boundaries between the state and non-state spheres are highly permeable; and long-term relationships and partnerships are key to influence. That is why '*Who you are*' and '*Where you stand*' in the policy debate can override '*What you say*' – regardless of the quality of the research products. Furthermore, the relevance of these relationships and positioning for influence waxes and wanes as governments change.

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We also find that strategic practices of policy engagement range from direct dialogue with senior politicians 'under the radar' of the public debate, to public data activism and partnerships with advocacy organizations, to 'proper' evidence informed debate. All these modes substantively address the 'political', recognize the benefits of a short-term tactical and long-term strategic game, and recognize the antagonisms of politics in policy debates. In sum, we need to be open minded as to how policy influencing works in order to understand what a program like TTI could and should do. Grantees are very clear that TTI has helped them become more intentional in influencing policy. TTI is seen by the grantees to have played an important role in helping them to focus greater attention on how to achieve policy influence within these complex and dynamic arenas, frequently characterised by high levels of polarization and adverse conditions. This has included both concrete investments in communications, and also more low-key reflection on how they position themselves in the policy arena. Whether they are then ultimately effective varies significantly, as does the contribution of TTI relative to their own contextual struggles.

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As such, our findings also require us to question the assumptions being made about how to best manoeuvre to respond to the **(in)stability of institutional and political landscapes**. What does it mean if the disruptive or volatile is the norm, rather than stability? What does policy influence entail when political polarization completely overrides discussions based on evidence, or when a think tank's credibility is exceedingly tainted by 'guilt by association' with an opposing political camp?

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In other words, contrary to the assumptions of stability, it seems that it is the unpredictability about what is recognized as ‘truth’ and ‘evidence’ that frames positioning, relationship construction and tactics of engagement in policy. Core support from TTI has made a significant contribution to grantees’ much needed manoeuvrability during the program, but this is an endemic feature of the policy landscape and does not lend itself to sustainable solutions.

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What lessons does this carry forward for **support to the sustainability and influence of think tanks in the future beyond TTI**? *Firstly*, our findings support the notion that framed the original TTI concept, that core funding devoted to institutional strengthening and giving think tanks the flexibility to be both tactical in the short term and strategic in the long term is the best investment as the think tanks themselves know best how to manage their own tactics and strategies. They need a modicum of financial sustainability to apply their contextual knowledge and these skills in savvy policy engagement. *Secondly*, TTI’s other forms of support have been most effective when built around dialogue for precisely this reason. Whereas our analysis clearly shows the importance of bilateral dialogues between the grantees and the Regional Program Officers for bringing the TTI instruments together, there is evidence which questions the overall utility of much of the specific capacity development initiatives (including training) for such a diverse cohort. Within that same logic, networking has shown to be highly valued by many grantees, but this has been most successful when the grantees have found their own partners, rather than necessarily via participation in TTI-led efforts.

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We have also noted significant regional variations in what constitutes effective support to think tanks. In Africa, it appears that ability to attract, retain and even to directly train senior and

promising junior researchers has come out as the strongest aspect of effective TTI support. In Latin America and South Asia, flexible support that enables grantees to become sufficiently nimble and better at communications so as to adapt to the rapid ups and downs of government engagement and hostility has been most important. Especially in Latin America, being nimble has shown to generate positive effects on access to financial resources. Given the growing risk of more governments putting restrictions on financial flows in order to shrink the civic space, this may become a more serious factor in the future on a global level, which donors may have limited power to address.

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Finally, as TTI ends, for a significant proportion of the grantees there is uncertainty about if and how they are going to be able to retain the advancements achieved with TTI support. It must be recognized that no form of assistance, with the possible exception of investments in sizeable endowments, can vaccinate against threats to financial sustainability and related challenges to staff retention in competitive environments. If senior researchers can be retained and key research coordination, financial management and support to junior researchers are maintained, prospects are good. If not, research quality, credibility and ultimate sustainability may be increasingly threatened. ‘Betting’ on think tanks is, by definition, a risky business but it is a cause well justified.

