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PRACTICE PAPER
Innovation and learning in impact evaluation

Evaluating Capacity-Strengthening Impact: A Funder Perspective

Abstract The Think Tank Initiative (TTI) was a large-scale, ten-year, multi-donor-funded programme of institutional research capacity strengthening for thinktanks in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It offered flexible, long-term funding combined with technical support to help over 40 organisations move along a pathway to sustainability, generating a consistent flow of high-quality evidence, data, and analysis to inform and influence national and regional policy debates. This CDI Practice paper by Peter Taylor describes the evolution of the TTI evaluation approach as it engaged progressively with the complexity of the programme. It reflects critically on key lessons learned through process and outcomes. It also offers some takeaways for those commissioning evaluation of large, complex capacity-development interventions.

1 Introduction

What is the best way to understand the impact of a ten-year programme of institutional research capacity-strengthening support? This Practice Paper explores this question via the case of the evaluation of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI),[1] a ten-year, multi-donor-funded programme of institutional strengthening of policy research organisations – thinktanks – in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Hurst 2021). The author of this paper was a member of the funder programme team that commissioned several TTI evaluations and was involved closely in reflections and decision-making on these issues. The paper reflects on key lessons learned from the evaluation's process and offers some takeaways as tools for thought and practice for other large, complex programmes that are commissioning an evaluation.

2 TTI: A large, long-running, complex programme

With an investment of over £100m provided by a consortium of funders (the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), the Hewlett Foundation, Gates Foundation, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), and the Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIS)), TTI offered flexible, long-term funding combined with technical support to thinktanks[2] in countries in the global South. Implemented by IDRC, its aim was to help an initial group of 52 thinktanks move along a pathway to sustainability, generating a consistent flow of high-quality social and economic evidence, data, and analysis to ensure that research results inform and influence national and regional policy debates.

The programme ran from 2009–19, with Phase 1 from 2009–14, and Phase 2 from 2014–19. This was a relatively lengthy funding period compared with many other programmes, thanks to the generous commitments of the donors. TTI's flexible approach to funding and support was much appreciated by the supported organisations in an era of short-term, output-driven project funding. The implicit theory of change was underpinned by the assumption that policies, well-implemented through evidence-informed virtuous feedback loops, should help build stronger, citizen-led accountability mechanisms that could ensure that new policies indeed improved people's lives. Given its ambitious aims and the relatively high level of overall investment, the funding partners viewed an evaluation of TTI's impacts as a priority. Although the two original funders (the Hewlett Foundation and IDRC) had committed to a ten-year programme of support, both viewed a review after the first five years as essential to allow the programme to be adapted

if necessary, or even the possibility of a major change in approach. This view was also agreed by the funders who joined the partnership after TTI had been set up.

A key challenge was how to help different TTI stakeholders achieve reasonable consensus about an evaluation approach. New funders joined the partnership over time, bringing different priorities and perspectives, as well as alternative views on what characterised success. The community of thinktanks supported by TTI was eclectic, ranging from large, well-established organisations covering a wide array of research and policy issues, to small 'start-ups' with a primary focus on a specific issue. Some organisations described themselves as 'think and do tanks'. This generated a rich tapestry of views and interests regarding evaluation.

Facilitating inclusive, participative conversations around these issues was crucial. These processes took time and effort, thoughtful design, ongoing reflection, and involved many meetings which, before the Covid-19 pandemic, were in person. The key evaluative question that dominated the early conversations was, 'what would success look like for TTI?'. In response, two further core questions emerged:

■ What impact do thinktanks make on policies and practice through their actions in the contexts where they operate?

■ What difference does the support offered by TTI make to the ability of those thinktanks to have an impact on policies and practice?

The extent to which TTI had contributed to an improvement in people's lives was not chosen as a central evaluation question on the grounds of feasibility and methodology. Ultimately, it was decided that the evaluation would focus on changes related to each thinktank's changes in policy engagement and practice, research quality, and organisational change.

3 TTI Phase 1: What to evaluate, why, and how?

A significant investment was made early on in designing and developing a TTI monitoring system, which could be used to support programme learning, provide an ongoing feedback loop to the thinktanks, and potentially become a source of data on thinktanks for external audiences. For evaluation matters, an Executive Committee of donor representatives played a key role in setting out the framing of the evaluation, the selection of the external evaluation team, and ongoing interaction with the evaluators over time. It was also, of course, a key audience for the evaluation findings. The TTI programme team managed practical coordination of the evaluation.

Thinktanks supported by TTI had varying views about the value of the programme's evaluation. Many understood that this was necessary but did not have a strong interest in engaging in the process. Some thinktank leaders were more explicitly concerned that an evaluation process might lead to assessments and judgements of their performance, which if shared publicly might affect their credibility and reputation, and ultimately their funding and survival. Others saw evaluation as central to their own work and as a learning opportunity, and engaged proactively in exploring evaluative questions.

■ A monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) approach was put in place when TTI began implementation. Key monitoring tools included: a 'monitoring questionnaire' which collected, via an annual survey of the supported organisations, responses to questions covering different aspects of organisational performance, research quality, and policy engagement and communications.

■ Regular monitoring visits were carried out by Regional Programme Officers.

■ A Policy Community Survey gathered perspectives of high-level policy actors on their evidence and data needs, and expectations.

■ Reflexive learning events and peer exchange around the importance of MEL supported the movement of thinktanks on a pathway to sustainability.

Thinktanks participated in learning events which, among other topics, included conversations about the relevance of evaluative thinking and approaches for the work of thinktanks, and how these approaches might be embedded at the organisational level.

Building on the monitoring mechanisms, TTI also made efforts to encourage evaluative thinking across the programme. For example, it commissioned a series of case studies from among the supported organisations to provide examples of how thinktanks had influenced policy and decisions as part of a wider learning process (Ordóñez et al. 2012). Although not directly part of the external evaluation, this work helped generate a useful framework for exploring different expectations for policy influence, as shaped by the particular issues and context. A study (Alcázar et al. 2012) highlighted the challenges with objective measurement of policy influence, particularly indicators or ultimate impact. Another evaluative project explored the ways in which thinktanks could assess the impact of their work using 'impact graphics' (Redstone Strategy Group 2013). These early efforts helped to promote a culture within TTI of evaluative thinking, which was often critical but also constructive. They were instrumental in shaping TTI's later approach to developing a significant collection of 'stories of change', and

'stories of influence'. They also encouraged engagement around the data generated through programme monitoring, and learning and knowledge exchange on evaluation approaches, methods, and purposes.

With the above MEL 'building blocks' in place, attention turned early in Phase 1 to evaluating performance and effectiveness of the TTI programme:

- to generate lessons for the programme and other actors interested in supporting thinktanks;

- to provide information to help funders, and other interested stakeholders;

- to understand the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme;

- to generate evidence which would help funders decide whether the programme should continue for a second phase; and

- to help raise the profile of the programme more widely in the hope that other funders would appreciate the importance and value of supporting thinktanks in developing countries.

For some funders, an 'end of phase' evaluation was the preferred option, providing an 'objective' view of whether the programme had been successful. Others were more interested in a learning-oriented evaluation that could generate insights in real time. An extensive discussion took place on whether to use a 'counterfactual' to frame the evaluation, but this approach would have required an answer to the question 'what progress would thinktanks have made if they had not received support from TTI?'. Although the thinktanks supported by the programme were selected through an open competition, it was deemed unrealistic to conduct a study of thinktanks that had applied for support but were not then selected.

Although some funding partners were interested in how individual thinktanks had progressed as a result of TTI's support, most were interested in more generalisable lessons learned, acknowledging that a thinktank's *modus operandi* would vary according to its location (for example, in Bolivia or Burkina Faso) and that other contextual factors (such as size, history, and thematic areas of interest) would also play an important role in determining a thinktank's performance. Many thinktanks also emphasised that making an assessment of their performance was a different objective than providing mutual learning about how flexible financial support helped thinktanks achieve their aspirations. TTI's implementer, IDRC, was particularly interested in an evaluation that could allow real-time adaptation to take place throughout the duration of the programme – along the lines of a 'developmental evaluation' approach (Patton 2010).

It proved practically difficult to reconcile all these views in the evaluation of TTI's first phase. An agreement had been reached that all funders would adopt a shared results framework for TTI, but individual funding partners had differing internal evaluation requirements, ranging from a logframe that formed part of an annual review process to a broader narrative report that would generate highlights for a foundation's trustees. Eventually, after an extensive design process, and recruitment of an evaluation team, a methodology was agreed which combined desk-based research and a review of key project documentation, interviews with stakeholders, a literature review of comparable programmes, and an analysis of the TTI monitoring and evaluation (M&E) database (Young *et al.* 2013). Informed by rapid Outcome Mapping approaches, the evaluators also collected 65 'stories of change' from project stakeholders. These stories generated fascinating insights into a thinktank's world and ways of acting in its context. They also helped to provide an important source of data and a methodology for better understanding evidence-informed policy processes.

Several observations arose from the Phase 1 evaluation:

1 **The concept and design of TTI would have been enhanced by having an explicit theory of change** (Taylor and Ortiz 2008; Rogers 2014). **In addition to helping the design and implementation of the programme, this would have supported the evaluation design.** TTI's theory of change was described in a brief paragraph in the original project proposal document but had not been elaborated subsequently. Although TTI had a 'results framework' which formed the basis for the funding partner agreement, and which laid out the component parts of the programme and main expected deliverables, it did not have a clear vision on the outcomes that were meant to result from these deliverables. The evaluators interviewed funding partners individually about what they believed to be the theory of change for TTI as a way of ascertaining difference in their assumptions and expectations. They also interviewed TTI team members, and a sample of TTI-supported thinktanks, thus validating the draft theory of change that they developed subsequently with the TTI's International Advisory Group.

2 **The evaluation highlighted that the absence of a shared theory of change led to different views among key stakeholders about what the success of TTI should look like.** The evaluation revealed that success for some stakeholders would be demonstrated with evidence that thinktanks had generated a flow of evidence and analysis that would improve and strengthen policy and decision-making in specific countries, and which would persuade other funders to invest in supporting thinktanks in due course. For others, success would be demonstrated by some form of measurable transformation in the way that thinktanks performed and operated; the expression

'step change' was often used in this regard. Others emphasised that each thinktank would need to become more sustainable in its own context, starting from its own baseline, and making progress according to its own needs and aspirations. Inevitably, the lack of an explicit theory of change had implications for decisions on programme design, and ultimately for the balance of support made available to different areas of programme activity.

3   **The writing-up of 'stories of change' proved an extremely useful evaluation method, as well as a powerful communication tool.** This approach aligned well with a trend for policy-focused research programmes and initiatives to document their policy influence through 'pathways to impact'. Clappison (2014) notes that different interpretations of such stories tend to fall along a spectrum, at one end of which the focus of stories is purely evaluative and reflexive, while at the other end there is more focus on external marketing and profile raising. He notes that a working typology of stories would be useful to help bring together and compare stories from within and between organisations: 'Somewhere in the middle lies a more balanced approach combining both, which might also be inclusive of learning and peer-exchange objectives' (*ibid*.) Krueger (2010) observes that these stories of change as evaluation stories need to be distinct from communication stories, collected using sound research methods, and validated through evidence and data. The TTI stories of change helped to validate findings from some pilot cost-benefit

analyses of TTI support, helped to meet the demand from donors to better understand the impact of programming, and offered a means to support systematic learning and reflection on what worked in what context.

4 TTI Phase 2: Shift towards a realist evaluation focused on contribution

Following the publication of the TTI Phase 1 evaluation, the funding partnership continued to support TTI for another five years. Many of the recommendations made in the Phase 1 evaluation were incorporated in the proposal for the continuation of TTI.

The appointment of the author as overall TTI Programme Manager allowed continued close engagement with the funders and thinktanks to ensure that Phase 1 evaluation findings shaped the next stage of programme design. The Phase 1 evaluation, based on interviews with funding partners and other stakeholders, proposed a detailed theory of change which helped to clarify expectations for the programme and contributed to a significant improvement in the quality of the partnership between the programme-implementing team and its funders.

As Phase 2 commenced in 2014, the TTI project team and funders collectively agreed that a renewed effort should be made to undertake a more learning-oriented, external evaluation that would take place throughout the remaining period of the programme to provide 'real-time' feedback at specified moments while also providing a final evaluation.

Figure 1 Contribution analysis framework
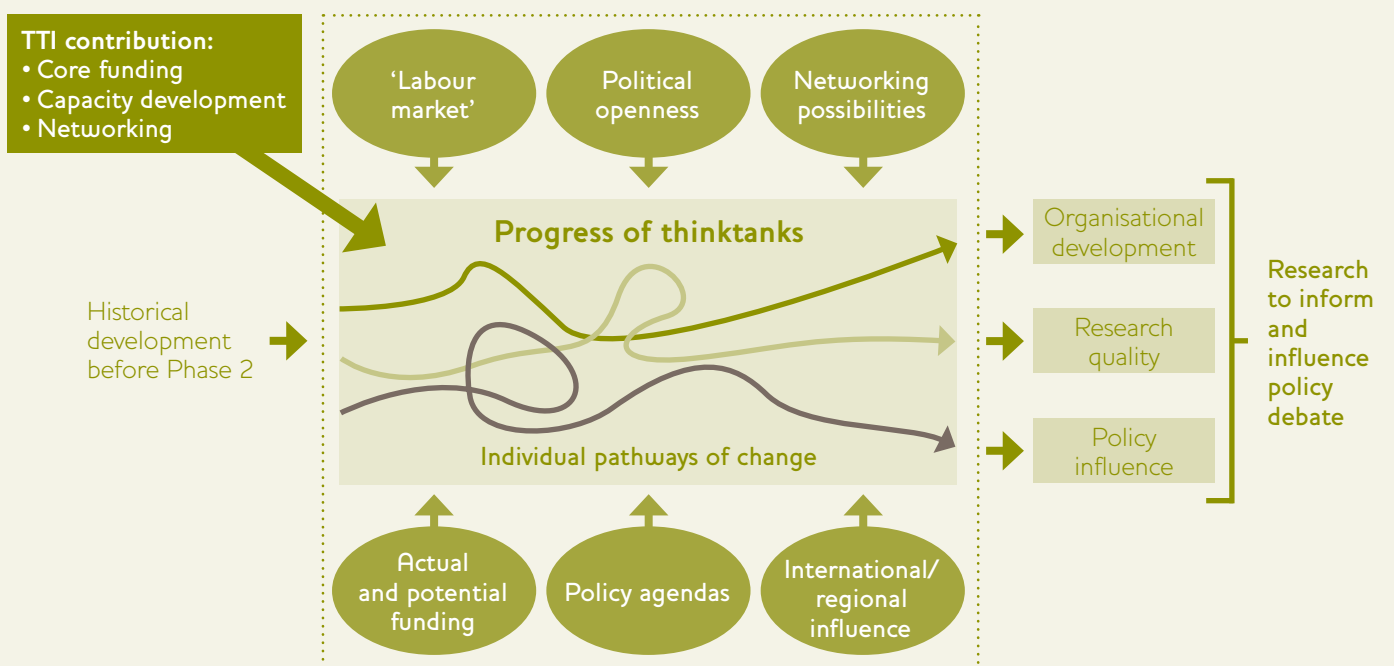
Source: Cristoplos, I.; Pain, A.; Kluyskens, J. and Fruhling, P. (2019: 5) © IDRC and NIRAS. Reproduced under **CC BY 2.0**.

Based on their proposal via a competitive call, NIRAS was selected by the TTI Executive Committee to carry out the external evaluation of TTI, and subsequently worked on the project over almost four years. Their evaluation methodology was influenced by concepts and practices of realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilley 1997), given the emphasis on learning what worked, with whom, and where and why, to help shape more effective activities and approaches during the lifetime of the programme. Realist evaluation theory stresses how it is the reasoning and decisions of actors in response to the resources or opportunities accompanying an intervention that will determine whether or not, and to what extent, it works as intended. Neither the TTI programme nor the evaluation attempted to judge the progress of the grantees against any single 'model' of what a thinktank should be, in recognition of the diverse trends and goals among them. The evaluation accepted this complexity and built frank and evidence-based assessments of contributions. Thus, different underlying influences in each grantee's context were central to understanding performance (Cristoplos *et al.* 2019: 81).

The evaluators generated a framework for their evaluative methodology and approach which situated Phase 2 in the context of its historical development, its ultimate aim of supporting the generation of research that informs and influences policy debates, and its three main objectives: organisational development; research quality; and policy influence. TTI provided thinktanks with core funding, capacity development and networking opportunities, within an environment with numerous, intersecting drivers: labour market; political openness; networking possibilities; actual and potential funding; policy agendas; and international/regional influence. The evaluators recognised that multiple causal influences were at work and so did not impose simple, linear attribution of results to the programme interventions.

The evaluation posed three main sets of questions:

■ Q.1: In what ways does the support offered by TTI lead, or fail to lead, to stronger and more sustainable thinktanks? How has this been achieved? Where evidence exists that TTI support has failed to contribute to the strengthening and improved sustainability of thinktanks, what are the reasons?

■ Q.2: To what extent do stronger and more sustainable thinktanks lead to changes in policy and practice? How has this been achieved? If evidence does not exist that strong, sustainable thinktanks lead to changes in policy and practice, what are the reasons?

■ Q.3: What lessons can be drawn from the TTI experience regarding effective support to thinktanks?

By embracing complexity as core to their evaluation approach and refraining from 'performance assessment', the evaluators generated a design pathway that situated individual organisations within their own policy and political contexts, and which sought to understand changes taking place within the organisation and also within the wider context that could have influenced, or been influenced by, the work of thinktanks. Based on these individual trajectories, focusing particularly on a 'sample' of 13 organisations, they sought to make more general inferences for the TTI community of thinktanks overall, ideally generating useful theory in the process. The evaluators focused primarily on qualitative baseline evidence from sample grantees, supplemented with brief interviews with the full group of grantees on emerging themes. Subsequent rounds of data collection were dedicated to monitoring against these initial baseline indicators, and also gave greater weight to growing concerns about grantee sustainability, given the approaching end of the programme. To achieve 'real-time' learning, the evaluators produced annual interim reports and facilitated engagement with all key TTI stakeholders, allowing engagement and validation with the whole TTI programme community around findings, lessons emerging, and opportunities for programme adaptation.

Reflecting on the evolution of the evaluation approach within the broader TTI programming context over ten years, the Phase 2 evaluation contributed several lessons:

1 **The theory-based evaluation approach generated actionable insights related to the value of flexible financial support which creates an enabling space for thinktanks to put strategies into action.** It provided many detailed stories of how thinktanks made a difference within their particular contexts, and showed how they had, overall, made extremely good use of the long-term funding provided. It demonstrated this by identifying four categories or typologies for trajectories of change:

> The kind of change experienced by the grantees ranged from transformational progress at one end of the spectrum [establishing a critical mass of human resources and expanding the quality, quantity and range of their research] to survival amid turbulent conditions at the other. However, most grantees are found in the intermediate categories of accelerated change and consolidation. (Cristoplos *et al.* 2019: 1)

In these 'intermediate' categories, thinktanks were able at times to invest in, and often grow, one or more aspects of their work, for example policy engagement and communications, or the introduction and development of improved organisation systems and processes. The evaluation also demonstrated that

successful use of the flexible funding was enhanced through the personal relationships between thinktank leaders and staff, and the TTI team's experienced cadre of Regional Programme Officers who engaged directly with advice and strategic guidance.

2 **Perspectives on 'successful performance' are often highly subjective.** The TTI evaluation showed that thinktanks, policy and other societal actors, and funders, had differing views about what constituted evidence of high performance; for example, by producing a particularly important piece of high-quality research, or by influencing a key policy decision on an important national agenda, or by the emergence of a more sustainable organisation. The evaluation confirmed strongly that key indicators of a high-performing thinktank were the quality of its research; the presence of strong, effective leadership; the combination of a strategy and plan built on a sound business model; and the ability to attract and retain a high calibre of staff, coupled with the employment conditions (stability, income, inclusion, safety) that made a workplace enabling and amenable for its employees. This conceptual understanding of what makes organisational performance successful, coupled with practical methods and approaches for achieving it developed and tested through TTI, remain an important source of learning.

3 **Policy actor perceptions of the value of evidence and data strongly influence their engagement with it.** The evaluation validated the findings from a series of TTI policy community surveys. Over a ten-year period, this revealed a great deal about the kinds of evidence and data that national policy actors needed in order to carry out their responsibilities, where they went to access this evidence, and their perceptions of its quality and usefulness once they had engaged with it. It also gathered their views about how thinktanks were helping them to meet their evidence needs. The evaluation confirmed that thinktanks were making an important contribution to global policy dialogues, as well as influencing national policy processes. It also highlighted areas where the programme approach may not have delivered as fully expected, particularly around technical support provided to grantee institutions. It demonstrated the inherent complexity associated with supporting a highly heterogeneous group of institutions in 20 countries and across three continents and provided valuable lessons on how to approach an evaluation for this purpose. One unexpected positive outcome from TTI was the emergence of the Southern Voice network,[3] which self-formed from among the TTI community. Southern Voice continues today as a vibrant community of policy and practice-oriented research groups engaging in national, regional, and global debates, and maintains a strong interest in evaluative work.

5 Lessons and takeaways

Lessons learned from TTI evaluations proved vital in informing programming design and implementation decisions, and also shaped further evaluation within TTI:

1 **Programmatic strengthening of incremental, organisational change is an emergent process, and is likely to require evaluation approaches which are also incremental and iterative.** Although TTI was committed to an accompaniment model of evaluation from very early in its programming, this proved harder to implement than expected and a lot of time was spent in attempting to put a more learning-oriented, developmental evaluation in place. Although this was an important opportunity for lesson learning, a decision was eventually made for Phase 1 to have only an 'end of phase' evaluation. The evaluation team selected was then able to capitalise on the increased 'buy-in' established through the dialogues about evaluation with funders and thinktanks. Establishing an open, constructive, and transparent culture of discussion about evaluation – with programme staff, funders, grantees, and other stakeholders – takes time.

2 **A well-articulated theory of change helps to bring all key actors together to define the purpose of the evaluation, and to reach agreement on understandings and expectations of impact and success.** An appropriate evaluation methodology was developed for TTI by bringing key stakeholders onto the same page regarding what should be evaluated, and how. This helped with efforts to work through debates on what success would look like, not surprisingly given the wide array of stakeholders. Methodological questions resurfaced at times within the funding partnership, as new funders joined, and the priorities of funding partner organisations continued to evolve. Discussions continued on the desirability or otherwise of including some form of randomised control testing in order to offer a 'proof of concept' for TTI support modalities. Rather than simply accepting or dismissing certain methods as a given, however, sufficient trust had been established between key players for an engaged dialogue on TTI's theory of change. Apgar, Hernandez and Ton (2020) also highlight the importance of inclusive elaboration of theories of change for programmes operating in contexts of complexity, the need for embedding MEL within large programmes and the associated commitment to learning, backed up by supportive leadership to help build trust and mutual respect. The extensive discussion and interaction with the funders who had previously held differing perspectives on the desired outcomes, and multiple other stakeholders in TTI's success, thus laid important groundwork for successful implementation, and evaluation, of Phase 2.

3 **Programmatic learning can arise by combining monitoring and evaluation, but it requires intentional facilitation and design.** In TTI, there was an ongoing disconnect between the monitoring data collected by the programme and the external evaluation methodology, particularly for the purposes of establishing a baseline. TTI monitoring surveys provided very useful insights into how thinktanks were performing individually at any given time, and in fact was extremely helpful to the organisations themselves for real-time performance management and organisational learning. Thinktank leaders welcomed the opportunity to receive feedback from policy actors in their national contexts, or peer reviewers of their research outputs, which they often found difficult to access. However, aggregation of the monitoring data to create an overarching view of programmatic performance proved challenging. The stories of change proved very helpful in providing a rich picture of the programme's outcomes and impact generated. They contributed to a compelling, credible, and rigorous set of findings, and offered lessons internally and externally to TTI.

4 **The objectives of an evaluation change during the course of the programme.** The final evaluation of TTI shifted towards understanding the extent to which TTI support helped thinktanks to become more sustainable, and consistently informing policy and practice in their national contexts. The evaluation found that most of the supported thinktanks did move on a pathway towards sustainability, even though they did so at different paces and in different ways. They also faced a variety of challenges, many of which emerged from their external environment, over which they had very little control, particularly political dynamics and turbulence. For large, complex programmes, evaluation methods and approaches should aim to engage with different levels of outcome and impact and place these in their context, acknowledging that these may emerge in different ways, and may often be the result of a configuration of interconnected factors that are out of influence.

5 **Large, complex programmes benefit from complexity-aware evaluations; otherwise, unanticipated outcomes may be missed.** While individual organisations supported by TTI produced research, engaged in policy processes, and strengthened their organisational performance in multiple different ways, an unexpected outcome was the extent to which the thinktanks emerged as a community of practice. Some of the strongest shared interest was around learning how thinktanks engage effectively and innovatively with the political nature of policy processes while maintaining their independence and credibility (being 'political, not partisan'); and understanding how they could help create a more enabling landscape for evidence-informed policy and decision-making. The theory-based evaluation approach

helped illuminate these understandings. Also, the complexity-aware evaluation methods used helped to reveal what emerged from TTI, including outcomes that were quite unexpected. This shows the need to look beyond the logframe and the initial theory of change, with methods that can capture these unintended outcomes from the beginning, since otherwise there may be a tendency to simply not 'see' results, lessons, and outcomes that the programme designers had not originally considered.

6 Conclusion

The TTI evaluation involved engagement with multiple actors, particularly the organisations that had been supported over a ten-year period, since they had the clearest view of what really took place on the ground, and what the resources made available to them had helped them to achieve. The evaluation also provided an important opportunity for reflection on the societal role and types of contributions made by thinktanks in low- and middle-income country contexts. Although TTI came to an end in 2019, many of the relationships, and the 'spirit' that characterised the programme, continue today and seem destined to reappear in future collaborations and partnerships. The TTI evaluation helped to generate a culture of collective learning and, in doing so, generated valuable insights and takeaways for programmatic interventions that support research capacity strengthening.

Based on the lessons learned from the TTI experience, three core recommendations can be made for those intending to commission evaluations:

1 Tailor the evaluation approach to the nature of the programme, particularly when it is complex, adaptive, and flexible in the support that it provides. Experimental evaluation methods may prove attractive to satisfy demands of the commissioning organisation but may not be fit for purpose in programmes offering capacity-strengthening support with unique types of organisations such as thinktanks.

2 Design and implement an evaluation approach that distils and synthesises generalised insights without losing sight of the contextual specifics that arise from the environment where organisations are based; ultimately the harmony and balance between these dimensions offers the greatest value of the evaluation for learning purposes, as well as for understanding programme performance.

3 Establish a theory of change that is co-owned and shared by key programme stakeholders, especially where multiple donors are involved, and use impact or contribution stories, backed up with evidence, to illustrate the plausibility of that theory of change.

Endnotes

1   See the **Think Tank Initiative website** for more details.
2   There is no single definition of a thinktank, but the Think Tank Initiative uses the description 'independent policy research institution'. See the **Think Tank Initiative website**.
3   See the **Southern Voice website** for more details.

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(3) Better understanding the political dynamics and other factors in the evaluation process, including the use of evaluation evidence.

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