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HIGHLIGHTS

- There is no single standard of research quality — and different dimensions add value.

- Beyond rigour, think tanks need quality assurance processes that match their own contextual definition of quality.

- While there is no fixed definition of quality, there are good practices to follow.

Research quality for policy engagement

TTI Insights distill ten years of learning from the Think Tank Initiative to inform donors, researchers, and practitioners working to strengthen policy research. Here, we explore how to measure and nurture the quality of think tanks' research.

What's at stake?

While there is no dispute that research quality is vitally important to policy research, there are many different views on what it means, and how to nurture or measure it.

Recent debates have highlighted the strengths and limitations of traditional quality measures such as peer review and publication metrics.[1] A growing body of evidence[2,3,4] suggests that research cannot be judged on its published outputs alone. We need to look more closely at the complex interactions among researchers, research users, beneficiaries, and other stakeholders.

As policy-focused organizations, think tanks differ from academic institutions, which have been the driving force behind conventional understandings and measures of research quality. Think tanks need quality assurance measures that address not just their outputs, but their research process, organizational strengths and strategies, engagement with stakeholders, and the accessibility and relevance of their findings to end users.

What have we learned?

Research quality has been vigorously debated throughout TTI's 10 years of programming, spurring ongoing learning and improvement. The **external evaluation** in 2017 found grantees increasingly proud of the quality of their research, particularly of the growing recognition of the value of their evidence in policy-making. Here, we offer three key observations on what "quality" means — and how to define, measure, and nurture it — in the context of policy-relevant research for development.

1 **There is no single standard of research quality — and different dimensions add value.**

In 2015, TTI convened nearly 200 researchers, donors, policymakers, journalists, and other stakeholders to share **perspectives** on the question of research quality. Participants understood it in various ways, encompassing not just the outputs and process of research, but its relevance to local and national priorities, and its impact on policies.

OUR APPROACH

Improving research capacity and quality was one of the pillars of TTI.

Rather than imposing a rigid definition of research quality, the flexible core funding that we provided enabled each think tank to set objectives for enhancing quality according to its own priorities and definitions. Core funding also allowed organizations to recruit high calibre research talent and invest in quality data sets.

We gave further support to specific areas of need identified by think tanks, which several used to take cross-organizational measures to address research quality. In Ghana, for example, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) sought external training for research staff. IEA initiated coaching of junior researchers, formalized an internal peer review process and staff performance evaluations, offered staff incentives, and upgraded information technology systems.

TTI staff and external experts provided training and mentoring in research methods and skills, policy engagement and communication, and general organizational effectiveness. We also promoted peer review, learning, and exchange among partner organizations, and exposed them to a range of tools used to assess quality.

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These differing views reflect the values and forms of knowledge and evidence privileged in different disciplines and contexts. They also reflect the vantage points of different stakeholders. A 2014 roundtable on strengthening research quality for policy engagement in Africa revealed similarities and differences in what policymakers and NGOs consider quality research: both valued research relevance, accessibility, and the use of quality data, but they differed on the importance of objectivity. Policy-making processes must reflect different kinds of knowledge — expert, indigenous, and others — that sometimes conflict. While evidence generated through research is important, it does not constitute the only "truth": diverse perspectives are crucial to policy formulation and to healthy civic debate.

Another benefit of diversity is the increased accessibility and credibility of research conducted and shared in local languages. For southern-based think tanks, the Leiden Manifesto's emphasis on seeing excellence in relation to one's mission, and its recognition that the English-language bias of high-impact journals works against locally relevant research, are especially pertinent.[5]

The International Development Research Centre's RQ+ approach[6] to research assessment advocates looking beyond published outputs to consider the intent and context of research, and its underlying values and objectives. Along with methodological rigour, other dimensions of quality include relevance, timeliness, inclusiveness, gender-responsiveness, and how well the research is positioned for use, among others.

2 **Beyond rigour, think tanks need quality assurance processes that match their own contextual definition of quality.**

Organizations need robust measures to ensure they are striving for excellence, according to their own definition. In designing their assessment and strengthening processes, think tanks must respond to specific factors in their field and local context. Think tanks operate in vastly different terrain in terms of how research is funded, valued, and used in national or local policy processes.

Confronted with a shrinking donor base, and an overreliance on contracts that threatened the independence of its research agenda, Sri Lanka's

Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) took a series of measures. It created a common understanding of the research cycle across the organization. It then updated and formalized its standards and procedures to cover all stages of the research cycle — and ensured all new recruits were aware of them. It also maintained peer review processes for quality assurance, while encouraging staff to explore new research methods.

Research quality can also be addressed through internal monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes. The African Heritage Institution (AfriHeritage) strengthened its assessment of research quality — which it links to organizational research capacity — using M&E tools and approaches embedded in its strategic plan. Monitoring tools include: annual research staff appraisals for research capacity; methodology seminars for quality control; and internal peer reviews and external evaluation for research quality. Along with internal and external feedback, citations in scientific literature are monitored. AfriHeritage also considers policy relevance to be a crucial element of quality research, using a tailored list of questions on the policy purpose, stakeholders, and engagement pathways to assess each research initiative.

3 **While there is no fixed definition of quality, there are good practices to follow.**

Quality research, however it is defined, demands adherence to well-designed practices and procedures for research design and quality control. TTI experience points to the importance of:

- Monitoring the external context, and reflecting key factors and stakeholder priorities in the research agenda and organizational directions;

- Maintaining a high standard of research ethics;

- Conducting some form of peer review on research outputs; and

- Engaging in ongoing learning with other organizations and networks.

TTI's 2015 knowledge exchange underscored how important it is for think tanks to respond to the external context, including political and economic factors; donor landscape; intellectual climate; and openness to civil society. These all have a significant impact on policy debates, and how governments adopt and implement policies.

Photo: Visual News Associates/World Bank

In El Salvador's polarized political environment, the Dr. Guillermo Manuel Ungo Foundation (FUNDAUNGO) sees itself as a valuable bridge between the left and right. Its contributions to more transparent municipal governance illustrate how a careful read of the external environment can inform research that opens new pathways for civic participation. In 2013, FUNDAUNGO launched the Transparent Municipality initiative to help cities better apply the country's new laws on access to information, and help citizens to exercise their rights. A study of 61 municipalities and 218 administrative units laid the foundation for training and technical assistance that has better equipped municipalities to respond to their citizens.

For TTI partners, research ethics demand, among other considerations, retaining independence and avoiding bias. This has implications both for think tanks and their funders, given the potential for donor agendas to influence research directions. As definitions and standards of research ethics vary, an explicit code of conduct can make research and funding processes more transparent and accountable.

Traditional external peer review has been challenging for think tanks, in part because of the cost and time involved, and their need to respond quickly to policy openings. In 2013, we supported a pilot peer review mechanism in Latin America through which think tanks in the region reviewed each others' work. The experience revealed that the peer review process needs to be adapted for think tank use. Suggestions included clearly defining the objectives of the process; drawing on both generalists and experts as reviewers; and ensuring they are familiar with think tank methodologies and their unique policy research context.

Putting lessons into practice

A robust, yet flexible, framework is needed for defining think tank research quality, tailored to the specifics of each organization and its local context. Think tanks need to look beyond their outputs to the quality and frequency of their interaction with policymakers, civil society, and other institutions that shape local policy processes. They also need to ensure research is relevant to their context and shared in ways most likely to inform decision-making. Based on their own grounded definitions of research quality, think tanks should have sound processes in place across their organizations — not just in individual projects — to review and ensure progress toward these standards.

Donors and practitioners working with think tanks need to help create the conditions for these organizations to make high-calibre research contributions to public policy. These include:

- Stable, predictable funding that enables organizations to recruit research talent and gives them the independence needed for credibility;

- Training and mentoring in the use of tools and measures for ensuring research methods are appropriate and applied with rigour;

- Acceptance of a broader range of research quality tools and measures in think tanks' reporting to donors; and

- Strong networks that link think tanks and stakeholders, and can strengthen the relevance and quality of their research.

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2   Bowen, S. & Graham, I.D. 2015. "Backwards design or looking sideways? Knowledge translation in the real world: Comment on 'A call for a backward design to knowledge translation'" in *Journal of Health Policy and Management.* (2015). 4(8): 545-547. DOI:10.15171/ijhpm.2015.71.

3   Greenhalgh, T. & Wieringa, S. 2011. "Is it time to drop the 'knowledge translation' metaphor? A critical literature review" in *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*: 104:501-9. DOI: 10.1258/ jrsm.2011.110285.

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5   Hicks et al. Op. cit.

6   Ofir, Z., Schwandt, T., Duggan, C., & McLean, R. 2016. *Research Quality Plus (RQ+) – A Holistic Approach to Evaluating Research.* Ottawa: IDRC.