Action Research and
ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING

Journeys of change in southern think tanks

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Blind Men and the Elephant

The "Blind Men and the Elephant" tale originated in India, and illustrates how perception is based on what a person is able to see or touch. It is widely thought the original story originated in Hindu lore. It was translated to the English language in the 19th century as a poem by the English writer John Godfrey Saxe. A version of the story has been used in the Buddhist culture as well as the Jain and Sufi Muslim culture.

In the story, six blind men touch an elephant. Each man identifies the part he touches as something he is familiar with. For example, the man who touches the tail believes he is holding a rope. The man who touches the tusk believes he is holding a rock. The man who touches a leg believes he is holding a tree. Each was convinced he was right in his interpretation - and so indeed he was. For depending on how the elephant is seen, each blind man was partly right, though all were in the wrong. Although each man touches the same animal, his determination of the elephant is based only what he is able to perceive.

In modern times, the story has become widely used in philosophy and religion classes. It is used to illustrate the need for religious tolerance. The story illustrates how people form their reality and belief system on their limited experiences. In other words, perhaps each religious faith only holds truths that make up one part of God. The story is also used to teach tolerance for other cultures. We only "see" the culture in which we are immersed. It also warns the reader that preconceived notions and perceptions can lead to misinterpretation and that our perception of reality is always partial. By learning together and sharing our knowledge we find ourselves on a path towards a fuller understanding of the world.

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Contents

Acknowledgement

Acronyms

A & FM	Administration and Finance Manager
ACBF	African Capacity Building Foundation
BOG	Board of Governors
BBRM	Brown Bag Research Meeting
CAP	Communications and Policy
CCB	Center for Capacity Building
CEPA	Centre for Poverty Analysis
CFA	Council of Fellow Advisor
CIPPEC	Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth
COMPAS	Centre on Migration, Policy and Society
DFID	Department for International Development
DGIS	Department of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
DPs	Development Partners
DoR	Director of Research
ED	Executive Director
EEB	English Editorial Board
FAA	Finance and Administration

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GF	Grupo FARO
GoP	Government of Pakistan
GPPP	Ghana Political Parties' Program
HR	Human Resources
ICMJE	International Committee of Medical Journal Editors
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
INGO	International Nongovernmental Organization
IEA	Institute of Economic Affairs
IPAR	Institute of Policy Analysis and Research
IPC	Integrated Phase Classification
IT	Information Technology
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MRG	Minority Rights Group
MIS	Management Information Systems
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
OCB	Organizational Capacity Building

ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAM	Poverty Assessment and Measurement
PEC	Pakistan Electric Corporation
PIM	Poverty Impact Monitoring
P-TRAC	Petroleum Transparency and Accountability
PRAM	Policy Research Advocacy Meeting
RAs	Research Assistants
RFs	Research Fellows
RFC	Retreat Follow-up Committee
SDPI	Sustainable Development Policy Institute
SDPR	Staff Development and Performance Review
SDTV	Sustainable Development Television
SRF	Senior Research Fellow
ToRs	Terms of Reference
TTI	Think Tank Initiative

Foreword to the book

Policy research organizations, or think tanks, have a particular focus: to undertake quality research that feeds into local, national and international policy debates. Through advocacy and analysis, as well as by providing advice on domestic and international issues they enable both policymakers and the public at large to make informed decisions about public policy issues. Policy research organizations are found in many countries of the world. Indeed, their numbers appear to be growing. McGann (2012) has identified over 6,500 think tanks in 182 countries, and this is probably an underestimate of their true number worldwide. They vary in nature considerably, for example in "specialization, research output and ideological orientation", Abelson (2002).

Recent research[1] undertaken by the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) (2014) suggests the demand for the services of policy research organizations is growing. "Both national and international think tanks are seen as high quality sources of information, with quality staff and a good knowledge of the policy-making process. Across all regions (surveyed), think tanks are among the top-rated organizations for providing quality research, along with international agencies and international university-based research institutes" (p.5). Demand for research by think tanks is likely to be affected by a range of factors including growing use of, and access to, electronic data by different

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[1] A Policy Community Study was conducted in Africa, Latin America and South Asia

policy actors, and an increased appreciation of the value of research-based evidence and analysis for policy purposes.

In this context of increased interest in the work of independent policy research organizations in the developing world, the TTI is dedicated to strengthening their capacity to provide objective, high-quality research that both informs and influences policy. Launched in 2008 and managed by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), TTI is a partnership between six donors: the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; the UK Department for International Development (DFID); the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (DGIS); the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad); and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). TTI has a vision that governments in participating countries consistently develop and implement policies based on sound and objective research leading to more equitable and prosperous societies. It seeks to achieve this by strengthening think tanks and the many roles that they can play in the policy making process. It provides a combination of core funding and technical support to think tanks in selected countries in East and West Africa, South Asia and Latin America.

The non-earmarked, multi-year grants provided by TTI to policy research organizations help fund their research program, their engagement in public policy processes, and their operating costs. Provision of such stable financial support is critical in giving organizations both the flexibility to adjust and be proactive to changing circumstances, and the stability to engage in sustained

research on particular issues. TTI complements its core funding with a comprehensive capacity development program designed to strengthen policy research organizations. A central premise of the TTI is the need for policy research organizations to build and strengthen their capacity – to engage in quality research; to link with policy making processes; and to perform strategically, effectively and efficiently at the organizational level.

TTI places particular emphasis therefore on organizational capacity building (OCB), which is also linked closely with IDRC's strategy to help build capacity in research in many regions, countries and organizations around the world. Its approach is ambitious, understanding that policy research institutions need to be supported in ways that are integrative and holistic, and not just through a series of technical inputs that focus more heavily on individual capacity building. This approach is in keeping with the growing belief that OCB support is most effective when it takes into account the internal dimensions of the organization and its own needs and demands, as well as the external context in which it is located – in other words, when change comes from within.

TTI also aspires to be a learning program. By engaging with around 50 think tanks in different regions over several years, an opportunity has been created for the program and the organizations it supports to learn together about which OCB strategies, approaches and methods succeed, and also which are less successful. To understand how OCB takes place in the day to day realities of organizational life, TTI decided to pursue a relatively in-depth form of inquiry. This gave rise

to an "OCB action research" project, with the aim of exploring and tracking the actual processes of OCB experienced first-hand by five organizations over several years. For each participating organization, this presented an opportunity to combine reflection and action within a process of organizational change that would benefit both the organization and its stakeholders – and generate valuable learning for TTI in the process.

In practice, the OCB action research involved each participating organization in framing the issues and questions it wanted to address according to its own needs. Five organizations - the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) in Sri Lanka; Grupo FARO in Ecuador; the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) in Ghana; the Institute of Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR) in Rwanda; and the Social Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Pakistan - were invited to participate in the studies, and all accepted. A focus for all five organizations was to strengthen the quality of their research, as well as enhancing other, inter-related aspects of their organizational performance. Their stories form the core of this book.

Research quality has of course been at the center of much debate in academic, professional, and public policy circles, not least because the quality of scientific research is often perceived as uneven and lacking in credibility. This in turn may affect its uptake and use for policy making and practice (Levin & O'Donnell, 1999; Mosteller & Boruch, 2002; Shavelson & Towne, 2002). The debate is also due, in part, to the lack of consensus on the specific standards for assessing quality research and standards of quality for assessing evidence

(Gersten et al., 2000; Mosteller & Boruch, 2002). For the purposes of this project, the authors took a broad view of research quality considering issues such as objectivity, validity, reliability, rigor, open-mindedness, and honest and thorough reporting (Johnston et al, 2009). Broad as their understanding was, the authors also recognised that an understanding of research quality needed to encompass the processes by which researchers engage with different audiences. As pointed out by Amaltas (2013), "not only should research provide credible results which would be viewed as valid and fair, but it should also provide results which have application to practice and/or policy in the complexity of the real world". (p. 18)

In this book, the five participating organizations describe in their own words how they went about building their organizational capacity. In addition to taking action, they reflected, documented and collected evidence on how OCB was actually experienced. Having learned so much from the OCB action research process themselves, the authors very much hope that this publication will be of interest and a valuable resource for a diverse readership – policy research organizations and their wide range of stakeholders and supporters. The book aims to provide readers with a direct insight into how policy research organizations have actually gone about improving the quality of their research, including successes and pitfalls, in a "live" organizational change process. Hopefully readers will learn a great deal from the experiences encountered through these transformative efforts and, perhaps, may even feel inspired to embark upon a process of organizational capacity building themselves.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Facilitating organizational change – an action research approach

Capacity building is about change, and in the case studies presented in this book, about change in organizations for the purpose of strengthening research quality. This introductory chapter explains how the organizational capacity building (OCB) process was designed through a form of action research. It explains the approach, the methodology, and introduces the detailed case studies that follow. First, however, the chapter considers some key concepts of organizational capacity building that underpinned the overall process and were crucial to what subsequently unfolded.

Organizational Capacity Building (OCB)

According to the OECD (2006), capacity is understood as "the ability of people, organizations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully" (p. 12) whilst capacity development[2] is defined as "the process whereby people, organizations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time" (ibid). Other definitions of capacity provide more nuance (Otoo et all, 2009). Morgan (2006) understands capacity as "that emergent combination of attributes that enables a human system to create

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[2] There are many debates over the use of the terms "capacity building" and "capacity development". As the case studies that generated this book used the term "organizational capacity building", or "OCB", this will continue to be used throughout.

development value (p.8), whilst Ubels et al (2010) define capacity as the "power to perform".

Taylor and Ortiz (2008) describe capacity building as an intentional process of change: "the process by which individuals, groups, organizations, institutions and societies increase their ability to identify and analyse development challenges, and to conceive, conduct, manage and communicate research that addresses these challenges over time and in a sustainable manner".

Although both theory and practice of capacity building have continued to evolve over recent years, many capacity building efforts are still based on a linear approach in the belief that "capacity" of one individual, group or organization can be "built" by another, often involving external agencies and inputs. Capacity building is equated frequently with training, which fails to recognize that capacities emerge in diverse ways. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that large quantities of resources (money, people, time) are often spent on a goal that is ill-defined and rarely evaluated.

Furthermore, the process by which capacity building actually takes place is hard to explain, as the connections between actions or interventions and outcomes are not always clear, nor easy to demonstrate with evidence. Much of the emphasis on capacity building has traditionally been focused on the individual – whether a researcher, manager, administrator, or skilled worker. Even at the individual level it is difficult to show direct links between interventions and outcomes. At an organizational level,

demonstrating links between interventions and outcomes become even more challenging. Rather like the relationship between research and policy making, the link between capacity building "support" and capacity building "outcomes" or results is both complex and messy. This has highlighted the need for processes that are more integrative and holistic and grounded in identified organizational needs, rather than a series of technical inputs focusing only on the individual (Taylor and Clarke, 2008; Taylor and Ortiz, 2008).

There is no shortage of literature and guidance available to organizations which want to bring about change, and it ranges from high theory to basic practical techniques. Indeed, the wealth of information and possible strategies to choose from can be overwhelming. Inevitably, organizational change is a vast field, with many different approaches and proponents (Clark and Ramalingan, cite; Lusthaus et al, 2002). To present the field in its entirety would require a very different and much longer book. Therefore this publication confines itself to two main groups of theories and practices that have proved useful and directly informed the organizations which present their cases in the following chapters: *strategic change*; and *planned change*.

Strategic Change
Caluwe and Vermaak (2003) distinguish between four main *change strategies* that may be used:

- power-coercive (top-down enforcement)
- empirical-rational (expert analysis, rational planning and factual communication)

- normative-reductive (bottom-up, stimulating people to change themselves), and
- bartering strategies (individuals weigh up pros and cons, and are then incentivised to act accordingly) (p.40).

Those who have experienced processes of organizational change may well recognise these different strategies from first-hand experience. They may also have discovered that some key dimensions such as expertise, procedures, culture and the exercise of power can influence outcomes in different ways. In the cases that follow later in this book, examples of all these strategies (often in combination) will be seen.

Planned Change

Cummings and Worley (2008) describe three alternative planning models that change agents may employ:

- *Planned Change* - highlights three key elements of organizational change: unfreezing, movement, and refreezing. Each stage has a range of interventions associated with it, to support the change process (Lewin, 1951).
- *Action Research* - a more iterative process, based around a cycle of reflection and action, in which the initial problem identified is revisited, and subsequent actions redefined, based on the experience of how change is actually taking place.
- *Positive Model* – does not require identification of a specific problem. Instead, the goal is that the organization should work towards a preferred future, and does this by identifying good

practices, or bright spots (Armstrong, 2013) that already exist. Through a process of reflection and analysis, a set of themes is identified where change efforts will be focused, and having envisioned a preferred future, a plan is made to design and deliver ways to create that future.

Action research was selected as the form of planned change which would guide the change processes described in this book, as it is grounded in an explicit process of reflection on action, leading to further action. Although the participants in the change process were careful to map out what they felt was the most appropriate direction to pursue at any given point in time, there was no guarantee that the outcomes would turn out as expected. Therefore, by building in regular opportunities for reflection, the chance was increased that successes could be built upon. When difficulties arose as they often did, the action research model ensured that these problems became a source of learning (Argyris and Schon, 1996; Senge, 1990) which could inform adaptation as needed. Given that the participants were themselves researchers, an action research approach proved of intrinsic interest to them as a methodology, and this also created more buy-in within the organization, helping to sustain momentum.

The following diagram[3] illustrates the key steps that characterise action research as a basis for planned change
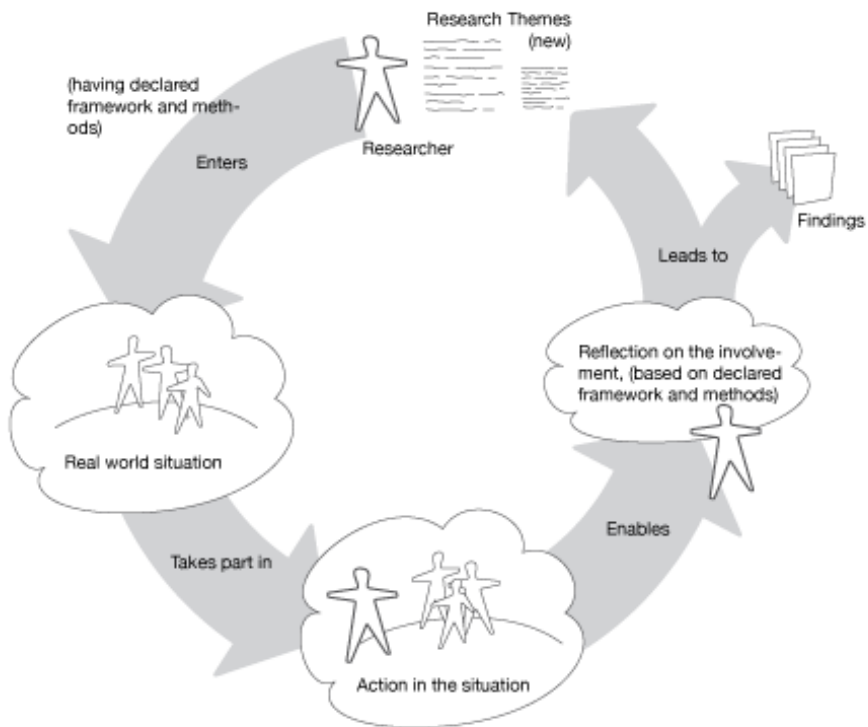
Although action research was selected as the most appropriate way to plan for OCB, there was clearly merit in other approaches to planned change. The positive model, for example, is excellent when the pathway forward is clear, or when there are good practices or bright spots already identified which can become a basis for similar practices elsewhere. Kotter's (1996) "eight-step process of successful change" was also extremely helpful to the five institutions for

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[3] Illustration provided by Ingrid Richter, personal correspondence

reflecting on the nature of change that transpired. This involves setting the stage for change, deciding what to do, making it happen, and making it stick. In Kotter's view, organizations often become embroiled in difficulty when creating change because they fail to identify some basic principles that are derived from multiple experiences of change processes collected over many years. These principles include creating a sense of urgency, pulling together a guiding team, developing a change vision and strategy, communication for understanding and buy-in, empowering others to act, producing short-term wins, not letting up, and creating a new culture.

Kotter also emphasises two dimensions that proved very valuable for the OCB work; thinking (collecting data and analysing, presenting information logically, and changing thinking), and feeling (creating surprising, compelling visual experiences that change how people feel about a situation). This perception is reinforced by Chip and Dan Heath in their popular books on change management (Heath and Heath, 2007, 2009. For organizations to make the "switch" from one form of behaviour to another, they advocate engagement of the mind and the heart, as well as "clearing the way" for change. They visualise these three elements as a rider (representing the mind) on top of an elephant (representing the heart), together following a path (representing the way forward).

As reflected in the individual case studies, the authors of this book came to realise quite strongly that rational approaches can only go so far in bringing about sustained change – ultimately, the emotional

dimension and the nature of relationships between key actors cannot be ignored. As researchers who spend a significant amount of their time on intellectual pursuits appealing to the "mind", the authors regularly reminded themselves to acknowledge emotional and attitudinal dimensions, so appealing also to the "heart". Individuals often respond to each other at an emotional level in order for a rational approach to work. One of the most significant areas that emerged as a way to move forward and ensure quality research was sharing of ideas at an internal and external level in ways that connected directly with personal experience. Such activities would not be possible without the individuals in the organization using a more emotive approach – sometimes referred to in the OCB reflections as the "elephant in the room" a metaphor which inspired the illustration on this book's cover.

Action Research for Organizational Capacity Building

The five action research studies set out to understand how change takes place when policy research institutions set out on a pathway towards transformation. They also provided an opportunity to test out theoretical concepts around change strategies and capacity building and to observe how these played out in reality. Action research had the advantage of generating theory through practice, via a process of action and reflection (Fals Borda 2001, Tandon, 2001, Reason, 2008). It was anticipated that the OCB stories developed subsequently from the five processes would be a valuable resource and a public good; not only for the participating organizations and the wider TTI partnership, but also for the wider development community. Action research was also well suited as a means of

promoting and learning about OCB because it built on existing needs and aspirations; it connected to the experience of staff of each organization; was timely (TTI funding for the above mentioned five policy research organizations over a five year period meant that action research could be located within the larger program of support); and would be of practical use to those involved, either directly or indirectly.

As the action research proceeded, the realisation grew that OCB is in fact a multi-dimensional process. Research quality was one particular dimension that each organization saw as a crucial element of its overall performance to be addressed through OCB, but it is just one attribute amongst many others, including reputation, culture, governance, impact, networks, and strategy. All of these can overlap and influence each other. Also policy research organizations, are themselves engaged in change processes particularly at the societal level. They need to adapt and transform themselves as they contribute to changes taking place more widely in society through their research and advocacy. Each organization had its own specific aspirations and needs which it intended to address through an OCB process both internally and in a wider context. Given the interplay between all these different organizational factors, both internal and external, a more systemic approach to OCB was required.

The basic methodology for the OCB action research involved a series of longitudinal case studies. During the process, relevant literature was drawn upon to help inform the OCB action research, as well as experiences from other think tanks in the TTI and beyond. Each

participating organization was invited to participate; invitations were made on the basis of geographical distribution (Africa, South Asia, Latin America), independence from other institutions such as universities (which might have made the OCB journey more complex), evidence that the organizations were already giving strategic consideration to their overall direction and specifically their research; and their likely willingness to engage in a potentially complex process with uncertain outcomes. They were also in the process of transforming their organizations in ways that encouraged a high degree of involvement of stakeholders, which was right at the heart of the OCB process.

After discussions and sharing of ideas with the five organizations, several principles were established that formed a key part of the methodology. There was consensus from the start that this was an appropriate way to proceed. However, the specific approaches undertaken by each organization were shaped by its particular context, and there was no attempt to force or predetermine the methods used to promote the changes on the ground. Had this been the case, and a top-down approach used for the OCB activities, it is very likely that the organizations would not have had the same level of engagement and buy-in, since each worked hard to ensure that their staff brought their own perspectives, needs and aspirations to the table - informing what then unfolded.

The broader conceptual framework within which these principles were formed are summed up in the table below. First, the specific nature or focus of the action research was identified. Secondly,

processes were established to ensure that key stakeholders were closely involved, depending on their interest and relative influence in the change context. Finally, each organization needed to strategise on how best to continually demonstrate the credibility and value of the learning that was being generated in order to maintain and even grow the momentum for OCB.

Action research to institutionalize change	Use the power and influence of key stakeholders (donors and other actors) in the context to address systemic resistance	Build credibility, and acceptance of ideas through your actions
Work on specific areas of a complex process	Use collaboration as a means to create and support key actors as influencers and supporters of accountability mechanisms and structures	'Ride' the credibility you build through your actions—use it to develop awareness of your actions
Develop capabilities through collaboration and facilitation	Link what you are doing to the country's strategic priorities	Use your results to build the case for broader change and stakeholder involvement
Gradually expand effort to work on the larger system of procedures and standards	Work with key internal partners, and bring them on board: a) e.g. other departments or levels of the organization or system b) other donors; c) other NGOs	Use your results to create support and reduce resistance
Reflect on how change has occurred through the cycle of action research and build a conducive environment for colleagues who also can act as change agents	Design and create accountability frameworks that will support compliance with new approaches	Show the consequences of not changing based on experiences. Make change inevitable while preserving the need to maintain some sort of continuity and indicate how change is necessary

This framework combining a focus for change, inclusion of key stakeholders, and strategies for building momentum helped identify some specific practices that were essential elements of the OCB action research:

- Initial awareness raising, and creating a sense of urgency and buy-in amongst those affected by change, are crucial
- Change often derives from positive signs (bright spots), which can be understood and built upon, as well as perhaps the more typical focus on problems and crises
- Reflection is a key dimension of change, coupled with analysis; together this ensures that the heart and mind become integral to the process; when linked to action, the impetus for change becomes very powerful
- Communication is vital at all stages of the change process, particularly to share successes along the way which can prove a key source of motivation to continue
- Collective effort breeds further success, whether it is at the stage of idea identification, visioning, strategizing, sense-making, planning or taking stock of progress.

Methodology

The specific methodology used for the action research process was based on some key points of guidance:

- The action research process should connect very closely with each organization's strategy and implementation of that strategy (and planned activities) for it to work well.

- It should not create heavy or burdensome tasks that extended far beyond the organization's workload, although it would bring some additional requirements for reflection and planning as part of the process – however, these should be of practical use and of added value to each organization.
- The process would commence in each case with some form of reflection in which the organization reviewed its own purpose for OCB.
- Based on the outcomes of this reflection, a small group of staff within each participating organization would develop a strategy for OCB over time, focusing on a specific OCB-related issue which they would like to explore through a process of action and reflection.
- A member of the TTI's team would act as a supporter, and if needed, as a facilitator, working closely with the think tank OCB groups to identify questions to be addressed and the key milestones for an action research process.
- A system would be established by each organization for tracking results and analyzing data. Questions arising in relation to findings at each milestone would form the basis for the next step of the research. Details of the process and outcomes would be recorded using data-collection methods that the organizations developed.
- Communication mechanisms would be set up enabling the five think tanks and the TTI team member to check in at regular intervals; in practice this was achieved through a web platform, and through monthly group calls via web

conferencing. Face to face meetings were planned when feasible.

It was agreed that each case study would be undertaken in its own right, since the context in which each think tank is located would inevitably create particularities. However, to generate learning that extended beyond each think tank, an over-arching comparative analysis would be undertaken, in order to identify common features or differences arising in the different cases, and to draw wider lessons which may be generalizable to the wider cohort.

Another anticipated feature of the study was the possibility of linking up the five participating organizations and the TTI facilitator, as a small "community of practice" engaged in critical reflection and action on OCB. Difficult as this might be across four continents, the benefits of sharing of experiences, collective learning, and direct collaboration in the action research were clear. This interaction, facilitated via webinars and occasional face to face meetings, proved a very valuable dimension of the OCB process. The cases were each reviewed by participants from other organizations, and through a process of critical debate, they were transformed into the chapters that follow. These exchanges proved extraordinarily useful as a means for mutual reflection, analysis and learning.

Once the process began, the action research approach was "customized" by each participating organization. Avoiding the notion of a "blueprint", each organization drew on ways of working that connected best with its own internal and external circumstances. As

the five organizations were quite diverse in terms of location, history, focus, and approach, it was inevitable that each would also have its own set of core objectives that it was seeking to address. One organization, for example, took a very holistic view of its organizational capacity as a means to strengthening its research quality, whilst another targeted more specific areas of its work. Even with these different areas of focus, there was still a significant amount of common ground within the overall OCB process. This provided an important shared learning experience, and was demonstrated frequently by the interest and excitement that arose during monthly conference calls between the organizations. This supported a collective approach initiated by the participants of the organizations to engage in reflection and learning that informed the overall process, as well as having immediate, practical use for each organization.

As the following cases reveal, there were interesting differences in the drivers for change for OCB. In some cases, the drivers emerged through the identification of "bright spots" in the organization's performance, with a desire to see good practices spread more widely. In others, the emphasis was more on problem areas and gaps that needed to be addressed. Ultimately, however, for all five organizations the demand for change was internally-driven and involved an insider approach, in contrast to many organizational change processes that are either promoted or facilitated by external actors.

About the book

The book now presents the five case studies. These are followed by a cross-cutting analysis of the five cases, which highlights some of the key learning that arose from the action research process, focusing particularly on links between individual and organizational capacity; organizational culture; resilience and sustainability; and the way that think tanks can shape their external environment, while supporting the strengthening of their internal capacity. The final chapter also draws together conclusions based on insights from the OCB action research, with some suggestions on how think tanks can make positive change more sustainable, for their long-term benefit.

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Chapter 2

Enhancing Research Quality through Organizational Capacity Building: The case of the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), Ghana

Michael Ofori-Mensah, Jean Mensa, Lucas Rutherford, Ransford Gyampo and John Kwakye[4].

Acknowledgements

Introduction

The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) is Ghana's first independent public policy think tank. It was founded in 1989 in Accra, Ghana's capital, when the country was still under military rule and multiparty democracy seemed a mere illusion. The IEA's mission is to carry out research and advocacy to inform public policy. Two decades on, research remains the foundation of the IEA's work and underpins the innovative processes that the Institute has introduced over the years into Ghana's economic and democratic development.

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[4] The authors are with the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) in the following capacities: Michael Ofori-Mensah is a Senior Research Fellow; Jean Mensa is the Executive Director; Lucas Rutherford was previously a Researcher at the IEA; Ransford Gyampo is a Research Fellow and John Kwakye is a Senior Research Fellow.

In fact, the Institute's research and discussion forums have influenced important economic and governance policies and further shaped public thinking on a range of policy issues. Through numerous publications, for example, the IEA makes important information available to policy makers and the public, thereby helping to raise the level of policy debate. The IEA's publications are also a credible reference point for the government, civil society, the media and academia. Indeed, the analysis and viewpoint of the IEA's research fellows are sought after by civil society and the media on pressing issues of economic and political significance. The Institute also provides training programmes aimed at strengthening the capacity of key governance institutions such as parliament, the judiciary, the media, and civil-society organizations. Thus, the Institute is simultaneously a centre for policy analysis, a forum for the exchange of ideas, and a resource centre for public education.

Internal Structure

The Institute's research work is organised under three program areas: the Economic Centre, the Governance Centre and the Survey Unit. The IEA undertakes economic policy research in its Economics Centre. The Centre also promotes robust debate on key economic policy issues confronting Ghana and Africa as a whole. The Governance Centre conducts governance policy research and engages directly with key stakeholders in Ghana to promote good governance, democracy and a transparent policy environment. Both Centres are staffed by senior and junior research fellows as well as research assistants. The Survey Unit complements the work of both the Governance and Economics Centres. The purpose of the Unit is to

develop expertise in the conduct and analysis of surveys with a view to ensuring that policy debate on governance and economic issues takes account of the views of a broad range of Ghanaians. The results and analysis of surveys are published in the IEA's Public Opinion series. The Institute has a total staff strength of 33; this includes 13 full-time researchers.

The IEA carries out its policy-influencing role through forums, roundtables, seminars, workshops and multi-stakeholder interactions on issues of economic and governance policy and practice. These forums typically bring together ministers of state, parliamentarians, business leaders, academics, development partners and civil society to deliberate on policy issues of national importance. These forums have been the platforms where policy recommendations on questions of economic and political importance, have been debated and discussed.

Dissemination: Dissemination and outreach are critical elements of the IEA's policy-influencing process. These functions are carried out through regular publications that discuss and advocate policy alternatives for public debate and policy-makers' consideration. The publications take the form of Monographs, Legislative Alerts, Occasional Papers, Governance Newsletters, Policy Analysis, Policy Journals, Constitutional Review Series, newspaper articles and press releases. Summaries of these publications are sent out electronically, on a monthly basis, to a list of 2000 most influential people in Ghana spanning government, civil society traditional authorities, faith-based

organizations, and private sector, academia and development partners.

Consensus-building: The IEA hosts the Ghana Political Parties' Programme (GPPP), which is a platform for consensus-building across political parties. The GPPP brings together the leadership of Ghana's political parties with representation in Parliament to discuss policy issues and find common solutions to them. Through this programme, critical governance processes have been undertaken by the participating political parties, such as the development of the Political Parties Code of Conduct, committing political parties to decorous conduct during presidential and parliamentary elections; the development of a Women's Manual, committing political parties to specific actions to increase women's representation and participation in parliament, and the development of the Democracy Consolidation Paper, which led to the comprehensive consultative review of Ghana's 1992 Constitution.

Impact on Governance and Development: The IEA's policy and legislative input have shaped several national policies and legislations, including Ghana's Whistle Blowers Act, the Right to Information Bill, the Presidential (Transition) Act, and the Political Parties' Funding Bill. The Annual Review of the Economy published by The Institute, which analyses the state of the economy and together with the Annual Review of the Budget, which is prepared after each year's reading of the Budget Statement, are highly rated publications on Ghana's economy. Ghana's recently-passed Petroleum Revenue Management Law also contains several recommendations of the IEA.

The relevance of the IEA's research to Ghana's on-going democratic process is also attested to by the public buy-in, ownership and institutionalization of democracy-enhancing processes and structures that the IEA has introduced into Ghana's practice of multi-party democracy. These successes notwithstanding, research quality remains an area where the Institute is most self-critical, and where the Board and management continuously seek to strengthen capacity.

The OCB project, which presented selected International Development Research Centre/ Think Tank Initiative (IDRC/TTI) partners with action research as a methodology for strengthening specific aspects of their organizational capacity, offered a welcome and timely opportunity for the IEA to enhance its competencies with respect to quality research. As a result, the process has presented the Institute with an opportunity to address a long-standing concern of how to improve research quality and performance, and give focused attention to the critical questions listed below:

i.   How to remain relevant, as a policy think tank, to Ghana's development;

ii.   How to groom and strengthen the research skills of second generation research staff, specifically junior research assistants;

iii. How to develop a system to retain institutional memory and institutional knowledge in the core areas of the Institute's work;

iv.   How to develop and retain in-house capacity and knowledge in the conduct of surveys and polls, in order to reduce the Institute's dependence on external resource persons and external sources of data;

v.   How to maintain a focus on long-term national policy challenges, while still responding to emerging policy questions and issues.

Method and Approach of OCB and Action Research

Strengthening Research Quality through OCB

The IEA's selection of research performance as the focus of its organization capacity building process is grounded in the Institute's vision and mission. The IEA's vision is to see an economically viable and democratic Ghana, West Africa and ultimately Africa in which the rule of law prevails, the institutions of democracy are protected and respected, and the citizens enjoy their rights and freedoms. The Institute believes that the creation of an environment in which economic, social, political and legal institutions function openly and freely is the key to sustainable economic growth and human development. To achieve this goal, the Institute engages in evidence based research on critical public policy challenges and employs extensive advocacy to disseminate its research findings with a particular focus on achieving the buy-in of policy makers.

Overall Goal and Strategy for OCB

The overall goal of the IEA's OCB process was to strengthen research quality. The IEA's strategy for strengthening research quality was by

addressing gaps in staff and institutional capacity in conducting research.

This strategy involved an inter-related capacity-building package comprising:

a. External training for research staff;
b. Coaching of junior researchers by senior research fellows;
c. Peer review processes involving senior and junior researchers;
d. Institutionalization of performance evaluation mechanisms;
e. Introduction of staff incentives in the form of monetary rewards and public recognition of professional excellence ;
f. Strengthening of ICT and knowledge management systems; and
g. Procurement of equipment.

The Institute initially focused its human resource capacity building at the level of junior research staff. The IEA's intention was to build in junior researchers the confidence and competence to undertake independent research and to publish short research pieces. This was intended to provide an incentive and a means of building their research skills-set. The Institute however expanded its human resource capacity building to include all research staff. The Institute also introduced peer reviews across senior research fellows and a staff incentive scheme. It is worth emphasizing that the Institute's incentive package (beyond monetary rewards) included providing public recognition for junior researchers through the publication of their research work in prominent national newspapers and in IEA

policy briefs. For junior researchers, this served as a strong source of motivation and an incentive for improved quality of work.

In terms of institutional capacity building, the IEA's initial focus was on strengthening the Survey Unit. The Survey Unit is relatively new and is still undergoing a formation process. It was therefore identified as a unit that could benefit from the OCB action research process. Strengthening of this unit was intended to ensure that all information and lessons relating to the conduct of the surveys (survey methodologies, processes and learning) were documented to build institutional knowledge and experience. Institutional capacity building has however been extended to include the reinforcing of performance evaluation systems, the development of ICT systems and data base, and the expansion and upgrading of relevant equipment.

Underlying Concepts and Theories

The IEA defines quality research as "robust, evidenced-based and timely research activity that responds to and addresses a particular policy gap".

The IEA conceived of institutional strength as the robustness of the internal structures and processes, through which an organization delivers its outputs and holds itself accountable to its internal and external stakeholders. In fact, the IEA views institutional strength as a prerequisite for sustainable institutional performance. Institutional strength was also conceptualized as the resonance between the organizational culture and the products and services it delivers. The OCB process was therefore grounded in the recognition that the

strength of the Institute's organizational culture, as well as its internal systems and structures were all critical to performance. The concept of the journey being as important as the destination, the process being as critical as the product, and lessons learnt being as important as goals achieved, have become fundamental concepts underpinning the IEA's action research and OCB process.

With specific regard to research performance, the IEA has discovered that by creating an on-going dialogue process amongst senior research fellows as well as across senior and junior researchers, through regular research-in-progress meetings, the quality of research questions has significantly improved. The concept of organizational culture is still being explored and reflected upon by the Institute in its effort at organization capacity building. There is, at present, the recognition that while clear goals and effective systems are important, the ability to implement changes is dependent upon the organization's openness to change and ability to empower staff to make and propose changes with the confidence that they will be acted upon or at least considered constructively.

OCB Action Research Process
The IEA adopted a rigorous process which entailed the management and staff jointly identifying the key issues which the OCB process would focus on. A small team of researchers was formed to lead the OCB process and a lead person was identified. The broad goal for the OCB process, and the key questions to be addressed through action research, were formulated. Capacity-building activities were defined and a framework for documenting, monitoring and evaluating the process was established. Each member of the team was assigned

specific capacity-building roles and functions, which included offering in-house training to junior researchers, developing the staff reward and incentive scheme, and institutionalizing the performance evaluation system. In conducting the OCB process, the specific questions that the Institute sought to answer were as follows:

1. How do we ensure high quality research?
2. What have been the weaknesses in the IEA's research process that needed to be addressed?
3. What methods or activities are we going to adopt?
4. How will we evaluate success?

Action Research Process

The IEA's action research process began with the identification of a core group of researchers to participate in, and lead the action research process. Fortnightly meetings were held and guiding documents to enable focused reflection by staff were developed. A strict procedure for detailed documentation and filing of staff members' reflections on the OCB and action research process was also developed. Specific areas of the Institute's research processes that required strengthening were identified and related tasks were assigned to the group of researchers. A performance evaluation and staff incentive system was developed as part of the process.

A peer review system was also introduced into the IEA's research process. The system involves researchers presenting the outline of their research, having earlier developed an abstract. The outline is discussed at a research-in-progress meeting after which the

researcher produces a first draft. The first draft is discussed at a second meeting, with input from external resource persons. The draft is fine-tuned and presented at a roundtable discussion where relevant experts and policy makers are selectively invited. Feedback from the roundtable is incorporated into the paper, which is then published.

Strategies that seem to have yielded results in the action research process include the IEA's early engagement of a broad range of research staff in the process. Involving staff at different levels in identifying, revising and clarifying the goals for the project ensured buy-in and ownership from the outset. Regular meetings have also been important for maintaining momentum and interest in the action research process, as this has allowed the research group to keep track of responsibilities and progress. Having one staff member taking the lead in developing the action research plan and putting in place initial systems and processes has been yet another value-adding strategy.

Data Collection and Analysis
The regular research-in-progress meetings have been the main source of data. These meetings provided an invaluable forum for keeping all members of the core team up-to-date on progress and also for discussing emerging issues. File notes prepared at the end of each meeting also provided a record of progress over time. These meetings have further been the forum for data analysis and performance monitoring. The primary documentation with the action research process has been the record of the research-in-progress meetings. The purpose of these records has been to document

progress in the implementation of the OCB plan and to clarify and identify the responsibilities of respective staff members. The IEA also created a 'reflection' document - a one pager with a few questions that track each research member's progress since the last research-in-progress meeting.

Findings

Significant Experiences during OCB process

The most important experience during the OCB process was the departure of the lead member of the core team of researchers involved in the action research process. Although the team member left unexpectedly, his departure made almost no difference to the OCB and action research process. This was due to the strong documentation component within the process. In fact, as all meetings, reflections, decisions and developments during the OCB process had been judiciously documented and recorded, there was no institutional memory lost with the departure of the lead team member. The OCB action research process continued smoothly, as members of the team were able to find all relevant information on the process well documented and easily accessible. This was a far cry from previous experiences of staff turnover, where the Institute had been handicapped by an immediate loss of institutional memory and knowledge. The importance of effective documentation and record keeping was thus a significant experience during the OCB process.

Successes and Results Achieved

Development of in-house capacity in conducting surveys: Research assistants and senior research fellows have been taken through training on how to conduct surveys. The IEA prepared a Survey Manual (see appendix 1) that served as a guideline to assist both senior researchers and research assistants in the development, delivery, analysis and reporting of surveys. With this training, the entire process of data collection, coding, analysis and presentation of findings for two critical surveys undertaken over the OCB process were carried out by staff of the IEA. This was an improvement from previous years when data analysis had to be out-sourced at significant cost, as indicated in the quote below (see box).

> "One of the limitations I had was my inability to analyze data from surveys and field studies. The IEA, often had to pay considerable fees to external research experts to analyze and survey our data. I am excited that my capacity is now built in the area of data analysis, which implies savings for the IEA to direct towards additional research". Joy Say, Research Assistant

It is worth noting that building in-house capacity to conduct surveys, as opposed to contracting external consultants for this work, has helped save about 15,000 USD annually.

Increased number of newspaper articles and research papers written or co-authored by junior research assistants: The capacity of junior research assistants in research and writing has improved significantly, resulting in an increase in research publications. Prior to the OCB process, the Institute produced about eighteen publications

a year. Through the OCB process, the Institute is now producing an average of twenty-five publications a year. These papers are being written by both senior and junior researchers. Some notable papers produced by senior fellows and research assistants through joint research include:

i. *The IEA Petroleum Transparency and Accountability (P-TRAC) Index 2011 Report.* This report served as the first publication of the P-TRAC index, and was released in February 2012. The P-TRAC Index is an annual index that monitors the three aspects of the oil and gas chain, namely revenue transparency, expenditure transparency and contract transparency. It serves as a score card to rank government's performance in managing the above aspects of the oil and gas chain.

ii. *Fiscal policy, macroeconomic instability and debt: The case of Ghana (June 2012)*
The paper examines the effect of fiscal policy on key measures of macroeconomic instability as well as on output growth. The paper finds that, historically, fiscal policy has had a destabilizing influence on the Ghanaian economy, while exerting insignificant effect on growth. Thus, recommendations for the reorientation of fiscal policy to foster both macroeconomic stability and growth are outlined in the paper.

Retention of junior researchers: Junior researchers have exhibited a high sense of motivation, commitment and passion for the Institute's

work with the capacity and recognition they have gained through the OCB process. The introduction of the practice of joint research by senior fellows and junior research assistants has yielded results in terms of stronger retention of junior research assistants and high levels of motivation. Previously, research assistants only took part in data collection and field work. They were not acknowledged in the papers produced with their contribution, nor did they produce their own research papers. With the new practice of joint research and co-authoring of articles, however, research assistants are acknowledged as co-authors of papers produced. Their work has been published in national newspapers and in the IEA's policy briefs. As a result, they have increasingly been invited to speak on public policy debates and discussions on the radio.

The IEA has also instituted "The Worker of the Month" trophy to further boost the morale of researchers, particularly junior research assistants, as one of the strategies to enhance the quality of research output. Under this incentive system, the best worker of the month is selected by his/her peers for outstanding research performance and activities for a particular month and a trophy is presented to the individual with the most nominations.

Generally, these non-monetary incentive packages have served as motivation for researchers to improve their skill and, overall, encouraged staff to work hard. The recognition has also resulted in higher staff retention. The Institute intends to sustain this momentum by maintaining this practice. This should enable the IEA to develop a strong core of research assistants.

Efficient distribution of research roles: With the strengthening of capacities of junior research assistants, they are now carrying out research and producing papers on emerging national policy issues, while senior fellows maintain their focus on long-term research. Dr. John Kwakye, a Senior Researcher at the Institute, expressed this view: "I feel relieved and my work pressure is reduced with the training and mentorship of my research assistants. They can now conduct research with little or no supervision, while I focus on more pressing national strategic policy research issues." This is a more efficient distribution of research roles, and division of labor, than what was maintained in the past. In seeking to explain the zeal and enthusiasm to mentor junior research assistants of the Institute, it must be noted that senior researchers who provided training and mentorship for their juniors were mindful of the fact that they could not carry out their research work load alone. Hence training junior researchers was integral to lessening their work load and affording them opportunities to focus on more important and substantive research issues.

Increased media citation and public interest in IEA policy recommendations: There has been an increase in media requests for follow up interviews as well as responses by policy makers to the IEA's policy recommendations. The Institute's website traffic has also increased. Before the OCB process, media practitioners and policy makers sought the opinion of The IEA (and cited its work) on average about once a month. However, after the OCB process, more research papers have been produced. On average, the opinion of the Institute

is now sought by the media on significant national issues around which research has been conducted at least three times a week. On key policy issues, policy makers most often cite IEA research outputs publicly during radio and television discussions.

Recognition of the importance of internal reflection processes: The OCB process has introduced the Institute to the practice and value of regular internal reflection processes. This has been an immensely useful practice, which the Institute intends to maintain.

Institutionalization of documentation culture: The OCB process helped the Institute to place greater emphasis on the documentation of its internal organizational development processes. This is to become a core feature of the IEA's organizational culture.

The above successes have already contributed to the quality of the Institute's research. Research questions are being better formulated and respond more directly to the matters they seek to explore. The Institute has been able to respond in a timely manner to emerging policy questions. This is because junior researchers now have better capacity to contribute to, and/or write policy briefs and newspaper articles. To a large extent these results reflect the expected outcomes of the OCB process and have ultimately contributed to influencing public policies in Ghana.

Factors Enabling Progress and Attainment of OCB Goals

Undoubtedly, the IEA has made significant strides in its implementation of the OCB process. The Institute's success in

achieving its set goals was helped by the fact that a broad range of research staff took ownership of the process. In carrying out the OCB processes, broad input was essential in clearly identifying practical and relevant goals and on subsequent implementation. A lack of 'ownership', particularly from the start, would have potentially undermined implementation. Similarly, simply imposing change on a group of people, as opposed to allowing those people to determine, experience and learn from a change directly, would have undermined staff commitment to the process. Engaging a broad range of staff early in the OCB process, particularly in identifying its goals, ensured a level of 'buy-in'.

Crucially, TTI core funding has also enabled the IEA to continue building the capacity of its human resource base. In fact core funding has also helped the Institute to strengthen its ICT and knowledge management systems including the procurement of statistical software packages. Core funding has further made it possible for the IEA's staff to undergo external training integral to policy research work - where gaps that cannot be addressed internally have been identified. This critical contribution is typically not offered under short term project funding. Finally, core funding has allowed the IEA to retain its experienced high-calibre staff whose capacities have been built over the period of TTI support on a long-term basis. Overall, this strengthens the organization in terms of professionalism and maintaining its reputation for quality research.

In summary, the factors that enabled the IEA to work positively towards its OCB goals included the following:

  i.   A shared drive to improve the quality of research

  ii.   Having one staff member with sufficient capacity taking leadership in developing the plan and putting in place initial systems and processes

  iii.   Establishing broad consensus at the outset was integral to ensuring 'buy-in' by staff members and their ongoing engagement in the process

  iv.   Maintaining the management's commitment to the process

  v.   Putting in place an incentive package to reward staff proved instrumental in realising the OCB goals

  vi.   Establishing an organizational culture that is receptive to change

  vii. Availability of TTI core funding

Challenges to the OCB process

The Sudden Departure of a lead team member: The lead member of the team left the organization unexpectedly during the course of the project. This situation, which the IEA refers to as the "Lucas Rock", initially caused some limitations to the smooth work flow of the OCB process. Nonetheless, with the structures and systems in place, as well as documentation, the process continued (see box below)

Explaining the "Lucas Rock"
To ensure the smooth implementation of the OCB processes at the IEA, Mr. Lucas Rutherford, a Researcher at the Governance Unit of the Institute was appointed to co-ordinate activities of the process. He was tasked with convening research-in-progress meetings,

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documenting and initiating discussions on the progress made and challenges encountered in the implementation of the OCB process. Essentially, Lucas played a key coordinating role that included circulating research papers among researchers to ensure that they were peer-reviewed. He was also tasked with instituting a proper filing system that would contribute to knowledge sharing and institutional memory.

The impact of Lucas leaving the IEA was a temporary setback. The term the "Lucas Rock" was coined to reflect the effect of his departure, as it presented an initial challenge to the OCB process; the IEA OCB team had come to rely on him to coordinate activities of the process. In order to address this setback, another research assistant was appointed to coordinate the OCB process. Significantly, the meticulous documentation and filing of all relevant material implied that institutional memory was not lost and the OCB processes was taken up where Lucas left it and continued to run smoothly.

Rescheduling OCB meetings: The demands of the policy and civil society environment meant that unplanned activities required rescheduling of some research-in-progress meetings. In fact there were instances where researchers involved in the OCB process had to appear on radio or television programs to participate in policy discussions, defend research outputs of the Institute or to participate in government programs at short notice. This proved challenging in some instances as all the OCB team members had to realign their diaries for an alternative meeting time. In fact the role of a lead OCB team member was crucial, as effective coordination always helped in rearranging the meetings.

Managing Time

One key lesson learnt in the OCB process is that the Institute could probably have broadened the core team to include more staff so that the absence of one or two individuals would not have required the rescheduling of a meeting as was the case. The process also put some pressure on the Institute's on-going programs and activities. Carrying out the action research process, while maintaining the broad range of initiatives and programs, which the Institute carries out, placed significant time pressure on management and staff.

To a large extent, these challenges are to be expected within a small organization such as the IEA. Indeed such challenges cannot be fully removed and, at best, can be managed with flexibility and some level of accommodation.

Conclusion

The IEA's participation in the OCB process using action research has been significant in enhancing the quality of research output at the Institute. The considered reflection of internal processes together with the investment of resources to strengthen both human and institutional capacity has been an empowering experience. The high level of ownership and buy-in to the process by the Institute's staff, due to the fact that all processes were led and initiated by the IEA itself, and were not imposed by external persons, has been crucial. Through the OCB process the IEA has recognised that peer review and research in progress meetings bring a high level of value to research quality and staff competence.

Through the OCB process, the IEA has systematically confronted challenges of research quality and established well-grounded processes and structures for institutionalizing the gains made in research performance. During the process staff have been made aware of the importance of several factors, including the significance of documentation and the recognition of the central role of an organizational culture in sustaining organizational performance.

These insights have implications for the IEA's role and sustainability as a national policy think tank. More efforts will need to be put into deepening staff members' commitment to the organization's vision, mission and values and to the management's effort at empowering staff to function as a capable, confident and innovative human resource. Efforts will also need to be made to mobilise resources to fund the strengthening of internal documentation processes and structures. The IEA with its team of researchers both at the Governance and Economic Centres, remain indebted to the IDRC/TTI for the opportunity it offered the Institute to be part of the OCB process.

Annex

Organizational Capacity Building Project – Reflections

Name:

Date:

1. *What were my tasks since the last meeting?*

2. *What went particularly well, and/or what challenges did I face in completing these tasks?*

3. *Any important lessons learned since the last meeting (e.g. reasons for changes in direction, needs for different actions...)?*

4. *Other reflections?*

Chapter 3

Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Pakistan: A Visible Change
Mome Saleem, Asif Saeed Memon and Duaa Sayed

Introduction
The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) is one of the premier think tanks in Pakistan working in areas of economic growth, trade and trans boundary issues, climate change, water, forestry education, migration, livelihoods, urbanization, peace and conflict,

food security, governance and gender under the broad theme of Sustainable Development.

SDPI joined the International Development Research Centre (IDRC's) Think Tank initiative (TTI) in 2010 in a bid to ensure its financial sustainability and secure its future. When the opportunity arose to join in on the IDRC Organization Capacity Building (OCB) programme SDPI joined with enthusiasm as the institute had been considering the options available to implement and mainstream processes and practices to ensure improved quality of policy research and advocacy. The OCB programme therefore afforded SDPI the opportunity to embark on an actions research based capacity building programme.

SDPI aimed at improving several organizational and working areas in order to retain its position and enhance its quality of research work. The areas can be broadly categorized into the following:

1. Research quality
2. Organizational performance
3. Policy linkages, communication and outreach

This chapter analyses SDPI's progress through OCB planning and implementation. It begins with a description of the organization and the context within which SDPI operates followed by a description of the crisis which led SDPI into considering organizational development as envisaged by the OCB programme. The following section describes the process by which the institute determined its capacity shortfall and the tools it used to fill these gaps. Results are highlighted and

lessons learnt from the OCB Action Research programme implemented at SDPI during the last two years are also discussed.

National Context

SDPI expanded its research work in different themes including economic growth, the environment and climate change and the social sector. During the 1990s SDPI produced quality work in policy relevant research areas. Through its policy outreach activities such as seminars, conferences, round tables, consultative meetings and orientation sessions SDPI was able to influence policymaking. However, amidst the successful policy outreach environment the organization was operating in a volatile social, political and economic system. The organization's response to the instability surrounding it has remained constant, and it continued to exhibit the same vigilance to policy analysis, regardless of the context.

In the political realm the early period of SDPI's existence was marked by unstable democratic regimes. Between 1988 and 1999 four democratic governments came to power and were derailed (three through the constitutional powers of the office of the president and the last one through a military coup d'état). The result was that SDPI and other research organizations faced a constrained operating environment. Similarly, following the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 in the United States and subsequent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, religious extremism, terrorism and growing anti-Western sentiments among segments of the Pakistani public transformed the social scenario in which SDPI was operating. The scope of field research had become limited in several locations in the

country. A perception of think tanks and NGOs as organizations promoting a Western (neo-colonial) agenda further restricted research and advocacy space. However, the year 2008 signaled a major change for Pakistani politics, with a democratically elected government coming to power after nearly nine years of military backed rule. Over the next five years further challenges emerged. A severe power crisis, continued (in fact, heightened levels of) militancy and extremism and perceptions of widespread corruption against the government added to the existing challenges.

For SDPI perhaps the most relevant policy shift occurred in 2010 when the National Assembly passed the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, which led to the devolution of powers to the Provinces. SDPI's location in Islamabad, the country's capital, had helped the organization build linkages with key policy makers. The devolution of power meant a change in the power structure within which the organization conducted its advocacy activity. New linkages with provincial ministries were required to maintain SDPI's policy relevancy. In order to remain relevant in this new era of decentralized policymaking SDPI began forging partnerships in the provincial headquarters.

Why OCB?

Since its creation SDPI has worked towards policy research and advocacy for sustainable development in Pakistan. However, the organization may have been less mindful of its own sustainability. Following 2005 SDPI found itself under significant financial stress. The financial constraint had a direct impact on the institution's structures

and processes. While the organization survived, and to some extent thrived in the face of external instability, poor internal processes meant that the organization had started to struggle due to diminishing financial resources with only short-term projects to sustain the financial operations of the institution and no core funding.

The organization continued working with a skeleton staff of a few senior and mid-level researchers, on whom the burden of multiple on-going research activities increased. In order to counter the growing pressure created by this situation, SDPI recruited a number of entry and mid-career researchers. These younger researchers were tasked to carry out policy research without close supervision and mentoring. This was partly due to the fact that senior researchers were over-burdened and could not give adequate amount of time to the young researchers. The situation invariably led to a decline in the quality of research output being produced by the young researchers at SDPI.

At the same time some of the most important features of SDPI were shut down or drastically curtailed due to continuing financial constraints. This included the Urdu Publications unit (newsletter, translated version of research publications etc.), the Resource Centre (where a number of resource gathering activities were cancelled and only the library remained active). In addition the lack of capacity of young staff was reflected in the decreased number of policy relevant research publications, which consequently affected SDPI's advocacy and outreach functions adversely. The burden of producing quality research output grew on senior staff, which focused on their specific

areas of expertise. This resulted in a narrowing of the scope of SDPI's work into a small number of themes of sustainable development.

Support units (Finance, Human Resources, and Administration) faced similar issues as procedures of recruitment, record keeping, website maintenance and logistic support for institutional activities suffered a great deal. The staff was bound to work under tight budgets to complete projects. There continued a battle of everyday survival and the organization resorted to taking up small scale projects. Through this time SDPI's reputation survived, largely on its previous work. Research work continued on a small scale but had less policy relevance to cater to the emerging needs of the state confronting issues of political instability, poverty, social disintegration, lack of security and multiple social problems. The work of the policy outreach unit shrunk to simply holding seminars as the sole means of information dissemination. In addition quality, diversity of thematic areas and comprehensive research was missing in the content of the seminars.

As the organization continued its dip, a leadership change in 2007 provided a catalyst for reform that was much needed, but the downfall that had been set in motion exhibited its inertia, and the institutional crisis reached its apex in 2009. At this time a considerable turn over in staff was witnessed, with senior researchers leaving the organization as their salaries were no longer affordable for SDPI, and those who remained took major salary cuts. The vicious cycle continued as with depleted human resources, income-

generating projects had to be turned down due to the lack of the institutional capacity to fulfill the project requirements.

In 2009, the management at SDPI felt that the risk of the institute's closure was high. Around this time, SDPI began a lengthy process of planning its revival and aimed to return to its previous standard and scope of work. The organization began a concerted effort to return to the status reflected in its vision of being a 'center of excellence'. It was in this institutional set up that IDRC's Think Tank Initiative grant emerged. It provided the core funding that allowed the organization the breathing space required to pay staff salaries, and take on bigger projects that would sustain the organization coupled with SDPI's relevance in the policy environment that allowed this comeback. The IDRC TTI enabled the leadership and management to invest more time in strategizing organizational growth and refining goals. To cater to the needs of the staff and revival process it was important to first diagnose the nature of the problems and issues confronted by the organization. A lengthy staff retreat was planned in 2011 with technical input from TTI.

During this process IDRC's Organizational Capacity Building (OCB) initiative was offered as an opportunity to conduct a rational (action research-based) analysis of the organization's problems, develop a plan to tackle these problems and then to implement them. IDRC was leading the OCB process to technically help and support TTI partners who were striving and struggling to improve capacity of specific areas within their organizations including research quality, policy outreach and organizational capacity. The underlying themes of OCB

dovetailed with SDPI's stated goals which emerged from frequent internal discussions of the problems they faced. These included a shortage of competent and senior level staff which left young researchers devoid of mentoring. As a result a decrease in the quality and quantity of the publications was observed. Additionally it was highlighted that support units lacked systems and senior level staff guiding the processes. Data management was also highlighted as an issue.

Following SDPI's adoption of the OCB program in 2011, the institute proposed a comprehensive action research plan for organizational capacity building. The main objective of the action research was *"to build SDPI's capacity to support quality research."* The overall action research aimed at enabling SDPI to have quality multi-disciplinary research on various aspects of sustainable development in Pakistan and be effective in conveying policy recommendations to the government and other relevant stakeholders. The planning and implementation of OCB at SDPI was based on the hypothesis that action research will help address the problem of capacity in a structured way and individual capacity building will help build organizational capacity. OCB was also expected to provide an opportunity to share and learn from other organizations who are confronted with similar issues and serve as a source of discussion and consultation with other TTs to craft a more practical and innovative solution for addressing the capacity needs of the organization. SDPI focused on all the three areas offered by the OCB to build capacity including research quality, policy outreach and organizational capacity. The rationale for this was rooted in the crises where the

organization had lost its capacity. It was believed that organizational capacity i.e. support staff including Finance, Human Resources (HR), Management Information Systems (MIS) and Administration units would facilitate and remove constraints in research related activities and that in turn would improve policy advocacy and outreach.

Method and Approach of OCB and Action Research

There was recognition within the institution that capacity to conduct quality policy research and advocate for policy change was limited. There were three aspects of OCB at SDPI: (a) an assessment of the institutions research capacity and research needs; (b) implementation of various tools which emerged from the assessment exercises; and (c) monitoring of the implementation of OCB. These are discussed below.

Institutional Research Capacity Assessment

The first step was to conduct some form of institutional capacity assessment in order to determine, strengths and weaknesses. For the purpose of such stocktaking the first exercise planned was the renewal of SDPI's annual retreat: an endeavor which had been discontinued for a number of years due to financial constraints. The goal of the retreat was to bring together all SDPI staff and engage everyone on the issues facing the organization. This helped highlight the weaknesses of the organization with reference to stated organizational goals (vision and mission statements) as well as strengths. Strengths of the organization would also be highlighted along with possible solutions for problems.

In order to execute action research and lay down a plan it was important to first identify the existing capacity of the institute and the researchers working at the institute. The following questions were kept in mind while gauging the capacity of the institute by deploying different methods discussed below.

- What is the scope of research at SDPI?
- Who are the users/stakeholders of SDPI's research outcomes?
- What are SDPI's research strengths?
- What are its weaknesses?
- What inputs are needed to enhance the research capacity individual research staff?

Inherent in these research questions was the assumption that research capacity can be analyzed at both the institutional and individual level and that the two are complementary and positively reinforce each other. The first part of the action plan was to incorporate the proceedings of the retreat 2011 and its findings into the OCB exercise.

Retreat, 2011

The retreat of 2011 was held during the month of March, with technical support from IDRC. The retreat was helpful in not only setting the direction for the institute but also in identifying hurdles and areas for improvement by the staff members. The major problem identified before the retreat was the declining number of *quality* research publications (peer reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, policy reports, etc.) being produced by SDPI, which was consequently

impacting the institute's policy influence (advocacy and outreach) in a negative way.

The four day event was structured so as to identify and diagnose the major problems of the organization as well as the individual units. Following intensive discussions and debate during two days of deliberations – first, involving all staff and then, broken up into relevant units – a list of causes was identified (Table 1). After the identification of the causes of SDPI's research quality shortfalls the participants of the retreat were encouraged to consider the following questions to arrive at the best set of solutions:

What is SDPI's current capacity with regards conducting quality policy research, advocacy and outreach?

- What is SDPI's capacity shortfall?
- How can SDPI make optimal use of its existing capacity?
- How can SDPI incorporate mentoring of young researchers?
- What lessons have we learnt to enhance research organizational capacity?
- How can SDPI facilitate staff retention?

Table 1: List of causes leading to poor research quality

No.	Causes
	Core Research
1	Low research capacity of staff
2	Poor or no mentoring of mid-career and young research staff
3	Lack of trans-disciplinary research
	Policy linkages, communication and outreach

4	Limited advocacy efforts due to limited policy research output
Organizational Performance	
5	Low access to quality journal articles
6	Poor knowledge management (Lack of systematic documentation of SDPI's work)
7	Staff retention

The ways and means to address the problem identified and the questions highlighted above were reflected upon during the remainder of the retreat. Strategic work plans (Annex B) were drafted by each unit which was fundamental to OCB action research at SDPI.

Two tangible outcomes of the retreat were:

- All major units –research units, center for capacity building as well as the policy advocacy and outreach unit prepared 4 year strategic work plans
- An 'Actions Marked' matrix[5] was formulated to carry out functions to enhance research programme and develop organizational capacity.

Survey of young researchers

Following the incorporation of OCB's action research plan into SDPI's strategic work plans, it was considered necessary to determine the capacity needs of research staff as well as their perceptions of the organization's capacity. A twelve question survey was designed to be administered to research staff at SDPI (*n*=12). The survey served as a

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[5] Displayed in Annex B

starting point to establish the goals for building capacity of the research staff. The survey was administered online to young researchers, while making adequate accommodations for respondents' time and anonymity. A total of 12 questions (Annex A) were used to gather responses entailing work tenure history of the respondent, future plans, reasons for working at SDPI and for leaving it, recommendations to improve the situation and areas requiring attention at the organization. Once the survey had been filled out by 12 researchers the data was collated and analyzed.

The results from the survey can be divided into two: strengths and weaknesses. The research staff highlighted the following as SDPI's strengths – therefore, reasons for their joining and staying at SDPI:

- A congenial working environment,
- Institutional history and reputation of SDPI; consequently credibility in the job market for those having worked at SDPI.

Further positive feedback came in the form of responses to questions (Questions 4, 5 and 7 in Annex A) concerning future individual goals. The respondents shared their dedication to the organization and desire to work for its growth.

The survey results also highlighted the number of challenges and weaknesses at SDPI. These are listed below:

- Training of staff
- Mentorship by senior colleagues and external mentors

- Lack of financial resources for conducting relevant policy research
- Lack of incentives for researchers
- Lack of competitive salaries

The survey findings were helpful in identifying training needs, organizational reforms and enhancing the research at the organization. In most cases these findings reinforced the findings from the 2011 Retreat , while providing some more depth to understanding the individual capacity building needs of the research staff. Both the survey and the retreat helped in highlighting core issues, strengths, weaknesses and identifying high importance and high influence stakeholders which can play a vital role in achieving SDPI goals as a think tank.

Implementation: The Action Plan

The retreat and staff survey, not also helped the organization understand the nature of the capacity deficiencies at SDPI, but also aided the members of the organization to work towards solutions for each individual set of problems.

The solutions aimed at tackling the specific causes of SDPI's organizational capacity weaknesses are presented in table 2 below. While further details of the actions marked are presented in Annex B, the tasks highlighted here were specifically tailored towards tackling the problems and their causes highlighted during the action research involved in OCB. One of the challenges often faced by organizations embarking on significant changes is a lack of 'buy-in' from employees. In the case of SDPI this was not a major challenge, possibly due to

two main reasons. First, the organization was already in crisis and there was a sense within that extreme action was needed. Second, the plan undertaken was a participative one involving feedback from all SDPI staff on the capacity building of the organization.

Some of the tools proposed had already existed at SDPI but were formally incorporated within the OCB process (e.g. the Policy Review and Advocacy Meetings), while other tools (e.g. the weekly Brown Bag Meetings as explained in Table 2) were newly introduced. The mechanisms adopted by SDPI to effect organizational change at the institute fell within four broad categories. These are human resources practices, capacity building, knowledge management and monitoring of the OCB process. A brief description of each of these is given below.

Table 2: List of causes and solutions identified at SDPI's Retreat 2011

No.	Identified Causes	Recommended Solutions
Core Research		
1	Low research capacity of staff	▪ Staff trainings ▪ Brown Bag Research Meetings (BBRMs)[6]
2	Poor or no mentoring of mid-career and young research staff	▪ Senior level researcher recruitment ▪ Mentoring explicitly included in senior and mid-career researchers' ToRs

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[6] Also referred to as Brown Bag Lunches where discussions on ongoing research, writing circles and reading circles is conducted every Friday afternoon

3	Lack of trans-disciplinary research	▪ Recruitment of researchers with cross-cutting experience ▪ An overall organizational realignment of research themes with a focus on cross-cutting issues
Policy linkages, communication and outreach		
4	Limited advocacy efforts due to limited policy research output	▪ New advocacy and outreach program introduced, incorporating multiple events and media ▪ Use of advanced technology and innovation; Social media and erection of SDPI's own web based Television called Sustainable Development Television (SDTV)
Organizational Performance		
5	Access to quality journal articles through improved resource centre facilities	▪ The Resource Center tasked with devising mechanisms to enhance research staff's access to online journals
6	Knowledge management (Systematic documentation of SDPI's work)	▪ Intranet archiving of all internal documents & website archiving of SDPI research output
7	Staff retention	▪ New HR processes for recruitment, remuneration, performance assessment and incentives to motivate researchers
8	Financial welfare	▪

Capacity Building of Research Staff

The central task of OCB at SDPI was considered that of capacity building of research staff. This task was undertaken in three main

ways. First, the center for capacity building (CCB) was incorporated into the research capacity development process by tailoring training workshops towards the specific needs of young researchers at SDPI. Secondly, weekly research review meetings were launched in the form of Brown Bag Research Meetings (BBRM). An amalgamation of two separate interventions was introduced immediately after the 2011 retreat: Case Study Circles and Reading Circles. The goal of the two separate forums was to enhance analytical skills, and generate interest in relevant policy debate among young researchers. While the ideas behind these meetings were sound and addressed the organizational needs, the implementation proved problematic due to time constraints. The solution adopted to counter this issue was a consolidated version of the two separate forums, which became the Brown Bag Research Meeting (BBRM). BBRM was an informal, Friday lunchtime session designed to allow young researchers a space for presenting their work and receive feedback and constructive criticism. Finally, senior and mid-career researchers were encouraged to actively participate in the capacity building of younger researchers through mentoring them on their work.

Human Resource Processes

Since one of the gaps identified was the relatively low number of senior and mid-level researchers, SDPI began actively recruiting senior and mid-career researchers in order to ensure a good mix of research experience. Researchers were recruited in multiple areas in order to develop an atmosphere of multi-disciplinary research work at SDPI. At the same time the Terms of References (ToRs) of all senior and mid-career researchers were amended to incorporate relevant

targets in order to improve the research capacity of the institute. This included formally incorporating targets for research output, training workshops and mentoring of young staff. Explicit monetary incentives were introduced for young researchers (Research Assistants) to produce quality research reports and peer-reviewed journal articles over and above their set goals. This was seen as a useful incentive for encouraging younger researchers to pursue their own research work and publish this research work. Categories of paper for which monetary incentives were allocated include the following, Peer Reviewed Journal Article (W, Z and Y category Journals), Monograph, Research Report, Chapter in a peer reviewed volume, anthology, Working Paper, Policy Brief, Newspapers Article. An annual Research Quality Award was also allocated for the best papers in the year. Finally, an innovative approach was taken to seating arrangements within SDPI's building that has proved highly beneficial (see box below).

Efficiency through deliberate inefficiency?

In the process of enhancing research quality in an organization one would never consider where people sit to be a major variable in the process, but at SDPI, the simple act of strategically organizing seating arrangements has proven to be highly beneficial. Common sense dictates that those working within the same department should sit in close proximity to one another for more efficient communication. This convention, which is aptly applied for support units, i.e. HR, IT and Finance, is done away with for research staff. Rooms within the organization are dedicated to research units, with no label attached to any office space. Research staff are randomly allocated space within the allotted rooms so, for example, within any one room there will be researchers from the climate change unit, sitting next to someone from the economic growth unit. The benefits of this arrangement are not as obvious as those advocating for efficiency but the interdisciplinary research that has resulted from this policy has proven to override any qualms about loss of productivity. A prime example of the cross pollination of ideas that emerged from this innovation was the Sustainable Development

> *report, that was jointly headed by a researcher from the social development unit and the Economic Growth unit, a collaboration that resulted from the camaraderie and professional understanding that had developed between the researchers through months of interaction within their office space. Informal discussions of research ideas and processes had resulted in a formalized research partnership. Similarly through this arrangement the highly crucial element of gender has been mainstreamed into various research project. For example a research study analyzing the impact on women of climate driven migration was carried out by researchers from the Climate Change unit and the Social Development unit.*

Knowledge Management

A major impediment to improved research quality at SDPI was identified as a lack of documentation and archiving. This included the development of an in-house, online information archival system accessible to all permanent staff. Also, a virtual resource center is being developed to enhance the institute's ability to access outside literature as well as a mechanism for documenting and archiving the institute's own research output.

Monitoring of OCB

Three main tools were used for monitoring purposes. First, a Retreat Follow-up Committee (RFC) was constituted to ensure implementation of the strategic plans. The committee soon became a coalition for larger ownership of the process hence the unit heads were made part of a consultative process in order to discuss the hurdles in implementation and suggest solutions. RFC comprised of the Executive Director, head of all units and was chaired by the Senior Advisor of capacity building unit (CCB).

Second, the Policy Research Advocacy Meeting (PRAM) which had been a regular feature of SDPI to monitor and assess research and

advocacy at SDPI was incorporated into the OCB process. The PRAM was quarterly meeting between unit heads and senior researchers to get together and discuss achievements and progress in the previous quarter and plans for the next quarter.

Finally, FAC had been a regular feature of SDPI. To gauge the progress every month, each unit is asked to submit their reports to the forum. Moreover, strategic issues raised during the RFC are submitted to the FAC for endorsement or to get further clarity or make decisions on issues such as training needs, and kinds of incentives etc.

Documentation of the OCB process was deemed important and PRAM and RFC minutes became an important source of information in order to help the RFC track progress over time.

Impacts and Findings

SDPI's action research process has brought about visible changes in the quality of the organization's research output. The impacts were not limited to the increased quantity of research publications but were reflected through increased policy outreach and influence.

Core Research

While the process covered different facets of the organization, a key organizational component of the OCB process was SDPI's Centre for Capacity Building (CCB), which initially served as the institutional home for the process, and took the lead in promoting action research activities throughout the organization. Within its own operations the process of building organizational capacity required the CCB unit to augment its operations from conducting external trainings to include

in-house trainings specifically geared towards enhancing the capacity of research staff. Some of the areas covered by CCB's in-house training agenda included writing skills, monitoring and evaluation, proposal writing, data analysis, presentation skills and interpersonal communication skills. The trainings were helpful in not only imparting research skills, but also helped in improving an organizational environment by addressing how individuals interact with one another.

In 2011-2012 CCB held a number of trainings for internal staff besides holding trainings for the external clients. Staff members were also given opportunities to avail of international training opportunities. For this purpose the institution developed its network with international agencies and universities. Some of these include the annually awarded scholarship administered jointly by the Ministry of Economic and Development corporation Germany, and DIE, GIZ on Managing Global Governance and to date three SDPI staff members have been selected for the prestigious award; the integrated food security IPC training workshop in Bangkok Thailand held by FAO, and a training on minority rights held in Geneva, hosted by MRG. These international trainings helped enhance the researchers' exposure to international research standards and work ethics, moreover they were also important in increasing the knowledge base of the researchers working on specific thematic areas.

Along the way some of the tools applied to build the capacity of research staff had to be modified, changed or scrapped altogether to better address organizational needs for the OCB process. Notable

amongst these policies were the Study Circle and Reading Circle that had to be merged and became the Brown Bag Research Meeting (BBRM) as described above. This forum has proved successful in terms of engaging research staff as the meetings are held during the lunch break every Friday, ensuring participation and generating enthusiasm as the meetings to do not interfere with regular work schedules. The BBRM has proven to be successful in not only building synergies among young research staff coming from different thematic backgrounds, but also in generating ideas for new research and developing a holistic understanding of sustainable development. In addition to this the forum also serves as an internal quality assessment and enhancement tool, as senior as well as younger staff members are encouraged to provide insights and inputs into the research presented, along with pointing out any major red flags that may be raised by external audiences. This process allows the architect of the research study to revise their work before it is externally scrutinized. Through this exercise researchers also gain considerable experience in presenting and defending their work to more senior level researchers.

The mentoring processes embedded in the BBRM were enhanced by an influx of research fellows, who are required to have a doctorate level education and significant experience in the development research field. During SDPI's crisis period a principal concern was a shortfall in the number of experienced research fellows. The process of inducting more senior level researchers into the organization was not solely accomplished by hiring more experienced researchers; SDPI took the initiative to develop the skills of their existing pool of young

researchers to eventually take on more responsibility for the research agenda of the organization. Prior to this initiative Research Assistants were not required to execute independent research but in an attempt to groom them for more senior positions i.e. Research Associates and Research Fellows, they were offered financial incentives for publishing research output . The following graph below highlights the increase in number of in-house published papers by SDPI besides book chapters, project reports and international journal publications.

Increase in In-House Published Papers from the Crises Period

Year	Percentage
2005	10%
2006	7%
2007	5%
2008	5%
2009	7%
2010	12%
2011	8%
2012	23%
2013	23%
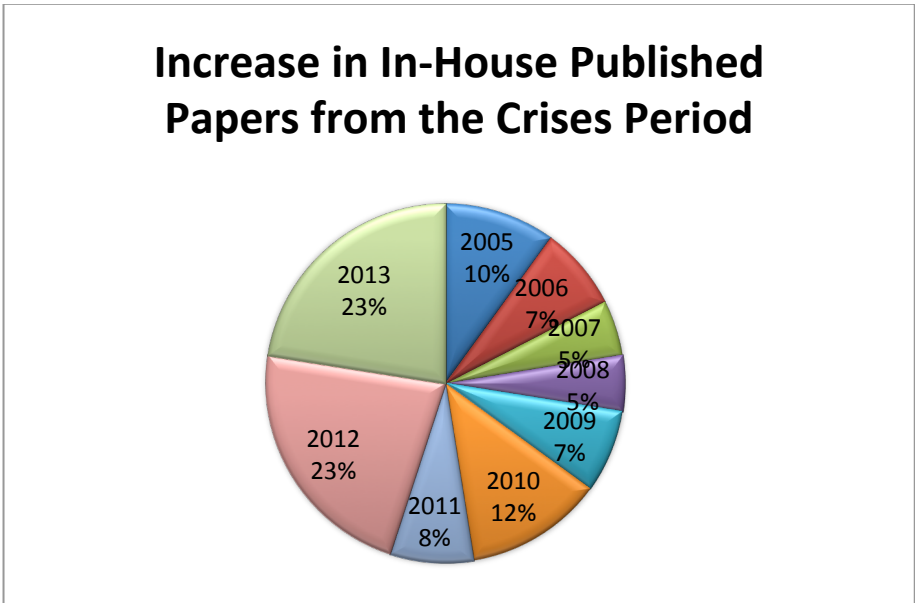
The incentives for producing quality research are not restricted to monetary transfers but also include opportunities to present papers internationally, and to engage with international institutions. The entire process of mentoring and enhancing research capacity of young researchers led to an increase in quality research output,

which was not limited to policy papers, and briefs but also included newspaper articles. This addressed the dearth of research based policy outreach during SDPI's crisis period. The production and recognition of SDPI's policy research is an evidence of the increased quality. SDPI was able to produce flagship work on thematic areas including national food security analysis, district education ranking, political barometer, taxation and inclusive growth. The work was recognized at the policy level and SDPI was Included in several strategic policy advisory groups such as the Vision 2025 group of the Planning Commission. Some of the organization's recent success stories are highlighted below.

- The 2012 Global Go To Think Tanks Index Report, ranked SDPI 26th among Top 40 think tanks in Asia[7]. SDPI was also ranked among the top 70 think tanks working on environment issues all over the world[8].
- A Special edition of Pakistan's Herald Magazine was published in February of 2013 covering SDPI's comprehensive survey of voter preferences in anticipation of the May 2013 general elections (Political Barometer Study). The study was carried out by SDPI in collaboration with DAWN Newspaper and Herald Magazine.
- SDPI has become a major part of the "Think Tank on Energy" formulated by Pakistan Electric Corporation (PEC) intended to

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[7]Excluding China, India, Japan and South Korea
[8]http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=think_tanks

guide Government of Pakistan (GoP) regarding the Energy Policy.

- SDPI hosted the South Asia Economic Summit in September 2012.
- SDPI has been requested by the Minister of Planning and Development to initiate a research group to give feedback on vision 2025 being prepared.
- SPDI has been requested by the Prime Minister to chair the economic advisory committee.

Organizational Performance

The process of improving research activities is not limited to the capacity building of research staff, and concerted efforts have been made to engage support units in the process. Most notably the human resources division was tasked with introducing performance goals that helped in not only monitoring research performance and quality but also to introduce annual performance based increments. This led to improved motivation among the staff which in turn decreased staff turnover. In the quarterly held PRAM meetings it was highlighted that a performance-measuring tool had to be introduced to ensure research quality according to the cadre of the researcher in question, and different goals were assigned based on which their individual performance was evaluated. Generally the goals included publication of a number of quality papers, holding a number of research seminars, and disseminating trainings on relevant thematic areas. The number of goals was decided upon in consultation with the supervisor and the associate every year after the annual evaluation.

Similarly financial mechanisms were revived and improved. Various financial incentive tools such as gratuity and the provident fund were put on hold during SDPI's crisis period. Following the revival of the institution, these mechanisms were reinstated. Additionally funds such as a benevolent fund for staff welfare, that is provided to staff members, in case of emergency were introduced. The medical insurance policy for the organization was also dramatically improved to lower the share paid by the employee for medical treatment.

It was also considered worthwhile to improve ICT services within the organization. A repository, which included primary data collected by SDPI staff, survey tools, minutes of various meetings, and the OCB process, were developed. Webinars were introduced to increase the interaction among the research community at the national, regional and international level. The advancement in the ICT processes in the organization have led to strengthening of the advocacy activities at all levels, by diversifying the communication mechanisms that were being adopted. During the course of the action research process it became evident that seminars were not sufficient for effective policy engagement both at the community level and the national level. The use of new media tools such as Twitter and Facebook, round table meetings with policy makers and civil society institutions, and a dedicated web based TV channel (SDTV) proved to be more effective.

Policy Advocacy, though a key component of research activity is managed by a dedicated unit within the organization. The manifestation of SDPI's improved research quality is its continuous thematic advocacy campaigns which require quality research to

inform and support it. A formal system of policy outreach was put in place for extensive engagement with the policy makers through the advocacy unit regularly sending policy briefs and policy recommendations from SDPI's research activities to relevant ministries and policy makers. The quality of work is the basis for SDPI's presence at the important government policy drafting and steering committees. Following the devolution of powers from the center to the provincial ministries in 2010, SDPI felt the need to ensure its presence at the provincial level. The quick response of the organization to this major change in the operating environment has ensured the relevance of SDPI in the current political scenario.

The resource center as mentioned previously had significantly downsized during the organizational crisis. In the revival period several steps have been taken to improve access to resource material. Linkages to other online libraries have been created while the center also facilitates access to international journals. Additionally IDRC has provided the resource with access to its online database of journals. Moreover, the Ahmed Salim Resource Center is in the process of developing its own online library.

Monitoring
While all the units were progressing and working on strategic work plans and implementing them effectively, the senior management felt the need for a monitoring mechanism, which would trace the progress and lessons learnt from each strategic plan. A pivotal monitoring process was the Retreat Follow up Committee, which was soon changed to a coalition of unit heads, the Research Coordinator, the Executive Director and was chaired by the head of the CCB unit.

The coalition met every three months on a needs basis to help track the progress of individual units based on strategic goals drafted by the units during the retreat and ensure conformity to individual outcomes associated with broader goals. The existing structure of the FAC provided an opportunity to inform the strategic goals of each unit. RFC and FAC worked in close collaboration to facilitate the newly introduced processes for improving organizational functions and structure. The minutes of these two integral forums were helpful in building institutional memory of the action research process.

Challenges

While the implementation of OCB at the institute is considered a success it has not been without its challenges.

- The biggest challenge faced in OCB implementation has been proper documentation of the process. The lack of comprehensive archiving and recording of information about the process may have been a hindrance in the early implementation of OCB.
- Further, it has become apparent that previous problems – regarding quality of researchers – tend to reemerge from time to time. This is partly because SDPI – being a Pakistani non-profit organization - pays below the market rate for the best researchers.
- Finally, SDPI still struggles to provide its researchers access to the multitude of online archives of peer-reviewed journals due to the prohibitive cost of subscription.

However, revival from the financial crises alone was not in itself sufficient without a clearly thought out institutional strategy. The damages that had been caused to the institution were to be dealt with at all levels. OCB action research served as the answer to this problem where it helped identify the issues and bring about innovation. All along, the mechanisms developed for implementation and knowledge management helped in reflecting on the strategy and to revise it in accordance with the emerging needs. This also helped in analyzing the trajectories of expansion within the sphere of OCB. Focus was given on retaining the initial goals to get maximum output.

Conclusion

The recent achievements of SDPI which were possible because of the institute's continued development as a top research organization after 2010 are also attributed to the change in research quality. Going forward the institute has internalized (mainstreamed) most of the components of the OCB, so that the process of assessment of capacity needs and fulfilling them does not become an occasional endeavor. The most important example of this is the SDPI retreat, which is now conducted annually as a tool for the organization's staff to determine the performance of the institute, the gaps which need addressing and the proposed methods of addressing them. The retreat also helps the institute strategize its financial sustainability which is reflected in the four year strategic planning. The action research methods have enabled the institute to assess, reflect and implement the plan in a more holistic, systematic and centralized manner.

Annexes

Annexure-A: Organizational Capacity Building (OCB) Survey at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI)

1. For how many years have you been working with SDPI? (less than 1, 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16 or more)
2. I expect to continue to work with SDPI for the next_____ years _ (less than 1, 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16 or more)
3. What are the three most important reasons why you choose to work with SDPI?
4. Where do you see yourself after five years?
5. If I choose to I would leave SDPI for the following reasons?
6. By working at SDPI, I feel that I am meeting my goals for professional growth. (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree)
7. What are your main career and personal goals for the next five years?
8. What forms of support (e.g. training or other forms of support) do you require to help you achieve your goals at SDPI?
9. What are the most valuable capacities that you think that SDPI already has in place to help it achieve its organizational vision/ goals?
10. What are the most critical organizational capacities you think that SDPI still needs to develop to help it achieve its organization vision/ goals?
11. What obstacles do you see at SDPI, which hinder it in implementing its organizational vision/ goals?
12. What three recommendations would you give to SDPI to help it enhance its organizational capacity?

Annexure B: Action Marked to Staff at the Retreat

Sr. No	Action	Responsibility
1.	Realignment of research themes Formal project closure system to be put in place Organizational and Impact Assessment Core Funding Committee to be formed Provincial presence must be established Maximum utilization of existing fellows and consultants One proactive policy advocacy campaign should be established Monitoring of Deliverables	FAC
2.	Formal Project Closure system to be put in place Quarterly Financial inflow-outflow report	**Finance** (in formal closure. MIS is also involved)
3.	Project Database and centralized knowledge management system to put in place More virtual space to be created on the intranet Unit-wise who is who database to be created	**MIS** (In Unit-Level who Database, All Units have to keep their database)
4.	Realignment of research Teams/themes against areas identified between SPI and IDRC- energy, fiscal policy, food, adaptation, government, peace. Forming new partnership at regional international level Succession plan for the support units particularly PRAM to be revived on a quarterly basis	**All researchers**
5.	Campaigns to be revived There should be at least 2 research based seminars a month Pre and post event follow-ups (invitations, policy makers, thematic sorting out, lists of seminars attended)	**Advocacy Unit**

	Webinars: through skype and conference call to taken place recommendations The use of new social networking sites There should be a formal system of policy feed-back to where it matters	
6.	There must be health insurance for all field staff Training and conference (Exposure for the young staff and making partnerships for senior staff) Staff orientation on policies/procedure, MPs	**HR and Staff Welfare Committee**
7.	Organizational Impact Assessment should be carried out in 2011 in terms of SDPI-s contribution to sustainable development	**M&E**
8.	Financial training for proposal writing for researchers to be arranged Interpersonal skills and communication - Training must be held for SDPI staff to ensure that it can work together effectively and in a congenial atmosphere An internship programme should be formalized to encourage interns	**CCB**
9.	Research capacity forecasting – Find out areas of new research and whether SDPI is tapping into the right areas, Also identify what SDPI's capacity is and how to best utilize what SDPI's capacity is and how to best utilize what is available	**Director Program Development**
10.	Web TV to be set up	**Head SDTV**
11.	Donor relationship management – building up rapport with donors	**Finance, Research CCB**
12.	New system/ technologies for HR, MIS and Finance to make their work run more smoothly e.g. latest templates etc.	**HR, MIS, Finance**
13.	Management procedure to be finalized	**BOG**
14.	Project database, centralized knowledge management system to be put in place so that all projects can tap into them for information etc.	**MIS, all units-Heads, Research staff**
15.	Quiet office space to be made available for staff members	**Admin**
16.	Project Management plan: Comprehensive plan	**Director Program**

	with the help of Project Management software	**Development, All Unit- heads**
17.	Strengthening Resource Centre	**Action Needs to be Marked**
18.	Study Circle	**Assistant Research Fellow**
19.	Writers Circle	**Assistant Research Fellow**
20.	More liaison with Corporate Sector	**All researchers**
21.	Insufficient number of staff	**HR**
22.	Work load is not evenly distributed. Too few people are doing too many tasks	**All researchers**
23.	Publications need to increase	**Publication Unit and EEB**
24.	We need to encourage more researchers to attend international conferences	**All researchers**
25.	A youth development program should be developed	**CCB**
26.	Incentives mechanisms are needed for staff, to promote fundraising and publishing	**HR**
27.	Would like an exchange program for young professionals amongst TTs internationally	**CCB**
28.	Need to distinguish between advocacy and activism; ideal is "research-based advocacy"	**All researchers**
29.	Need to generate new ideas for creating new knowledge, coupled with having people who are able to generate these	**As Above**
30.	Peer group environment is needed to help enhance support to all staff, horizontally within the organization	**HR**
31.	Research staff need access to journals and database	**All research staff**
32.	Young researchers need technical skills in writing	**All research staff**
33.	Physical space needed for informal interaction	**HR**
34.	Choose themes for advocacy efforts carefully; may come out of suggestions, interest or based on more political agenda for influence	**Advocacy**
35.	Young staff need to be part of relationship	**All researchers**

	building- need to get them engaged in activities that broaden their horizons, engaging with consultants, getting involved in consultancies; will help if staff profile is developed, to highlight strengths and weakness of the individuals; staff development is a personal responsibility, but there is also the responsibility to help facilitate the development of others	

Chapter 4

Using Action Research to Build Capacity at the Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR), Rwanda

Pamela Abbott and Antonia Mutoro

Introduction: the Organizational Capacity Building Project and Action Research

This chapter looks at an action research organizational capacity-building project undertaken at the Institute of Policy Analysis Research-Rwanda (IPAR) between August 2011 and April 2012. It was undertaken as part of the IDRC programme to pilot ways of building capacity in independent public policy think tanks in countries working in the South using action research. However, it cannot be considered in isolation but has to be seen in the broader context of the capacity-building process in which IPAR is engaged. The six month capacity building project came at a time when we were considering how we could build the capacity of IPAR so that it became sustainable in the medium to long term. It acted as the catalyst for a longer term organizational effectiveness programme which is ongoing. We see capacity building as an integral element of our staff development and peer review process and our commitment to continuous quality improvement. We are committed to developing the capacity of all our staff and improving the quality of our research and policy advice as an ongoing process.

Building the capacity of the organization and developing an effective organization includes all functions and individuals and not only the research team. However, the element of the broader long term programme reported on in this chapter was specifically conceived of as contributing towards building the capacity of the research team to produce research and policy evaluation of high quality – that is, research to academic standards, conducted and interpreted with academic rigour, but aiming to be understood, accepted and acted upon by clients and the Government and to make effective proposals for change.

Our organizational effectiveness programme is underpinned by a theory of change. A theory of change provides a logical chain of stages through which a project needs to go in order to achieve the desired outcome(s). In the case of building the capacity of IPAR to deliver quality research outputs the logical chain goes from (a) improving administrative support, the research team individually and collectively reflecting on its development needs, increasing the research team's capacity and appointing more senior researchers, to (b) developing a reputation for producing quality research to influence public policy[9]. The long term objective is for IPAR to be respected in Rwanda as an independent public policy think tank managed and staffed by local researchers that influence public policy in Rwanda with the research teams producing policy relevant reports

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[9] Academic acceptability is not *sufficient* to make something a good policy research report, but it is a *necessary* condition for the report's credibility.

and other research outputs of publishable quality, with all members of staff making an appropriate contribution.

The action research project and the broader organizational effectiveness programme of which it is a part, was coordinated and driven by the two authors of this chapter; Pamela Abbott who is Director of Research and Antonia Mutoro who at the time the project was undertaken was the Executive Director.

The National Context

Rwanda is located in the Great Lakes Region of Central East Africa, an area of political fragility. However, following the devastating effects of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, which destroyed the fabric of society, Rwanda has become a relatively stable and peaceful country that is working successfully to overcome the problems of its past and harness the positive side of globalization to provide a secure and prosperous future for its people. It has a stable government and a growing economy, poverty is declining, economic transformation is beginning and the country is on track to achieving most of the MDGs. Policies are pro-poor and socially inclusive. Good governance has been at the heart of the country's development strategy and the aim has been to recreate a sense of national identity and loyalty through an emphasis on one language, one culture, one history and one people. However, it remains one of the poorest and most aid-dependent countries in the world. Population growth remains high; there is pressure on land and a trade deficit and there is a shortage of skilled and educated personnel at all levels.

The Rwandan Government is committed to evidence-informed policy making and proactively asks IPAR, amongst other research institutions, to contribute to policy debates. It looks to IPAR to provide independent policy advice based on the findings from rigorous research and policy analysis.

The Institute of Policy Analysis and Research and its Goals

The Institute of Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR) is a not-for-profit independent Rwandan public policy 'think tank' with core funding from the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) and the International Research and Development Centre (IDRC).The core funding was seen by the funders as an investment in building an independent public policy think tank in Rwanda driven by local staff. Its primary objective is to conduct timely and relevant research and policy analysis to inform the Government's development agenda. However, as part of its mandate it is also committed to building capacity amongst practitioners and academics for policy analysis and research and engendering debate on policy issues. Since it became fully operational in 2008 it has built a strong reputation for producing independent research to inform public policy. It is regularly asked to provide advice by the Government and has directly influenced a number of policies, for example, in supporting household enterprises and improving customer service delivery.

The Institute is small with a total staff of twenty two people. It is led by an Executive Director (ED) and has a team of nine researchers: the Director of Research (DoR), one senior research fellow (SRF), four research fellows (RFs), one work-based PhD student and two research

assistants (RAs). There are seven professional support staff (Administration and Finance Manager A & FM), Accountant, Procurement Officer, Knowledge Manager and IT Technician, Research Administrator, Personal Assistant to ED and Communications Officer and five other support staff (two drivers and three manual staff). Core funding from ACBF/IDRC covers the wages of all employees apart from four researchers. The work-based PhD student and one RA are funded from a three-year research grant and two researchers are paid from income generation. The DoR leads the research team and the A & FM, the professional support and manual staff reporting to the Executive Director.

Two major tasks confronted IPAR at its foundation. The first was to build the capacity of local research and professional support staff so that they could lead an independent public policy research institute. The second was to develop a strategy so that over time IPAR could diversify its funding sources to reduce reliance on development assistance to ensure independence and sustainability. The two are interrelated with core funding seen as an investment in capacity building that would ensure that the staff had the technical skills and experience to generate sufficient income to run the Institute.

Undertaking these two tasks has proved extremely difficult. The shortage of skilled, qualified and experienced local researchers, combined with strong competition for those that there are, made it impossible for IPAR to recruit local staff that were competent to manage research. It has also proved difficult to recruit expatriate staff with the requisite skills set. IPAR, therefore, decided to recruit bright,

enthusiastic Masters graduates and build their capacity in house with the support of a highly experienced expatriate Director of Research. Core funding covered the costs of running IPAR and provided funding for carrying out research projects, policy engagement and capacity building. The Director of Research was to mentor and train the local researchers as they worked on research projects, policy analysis and dissemination activities. The six month project reported on in this chapter was planned as part of this capacity building programme and was scheduled to take place in 2011.

However, IPAR was confronted with funding challenges in 2011 which threatened the Institute's survival. In early 2011 the Rwandan Government withdrew the seed operational cost funding it had been providing, leaving IPAR to find a way of raising about 30 per cent of its income from other sources[10]. Then in December 2011 the first phase of funding from ACBF came to an end and there was a seven-month gap before Phase 2 funding commenced. This meant IPAR had to raise funds to cover the gap as well as the shortfall already left by the withdrawal of government funding. An additional funding challenge is that the ratio of non-research staff to research staff (4:3) is well above the level generally seen as viable in a research institute. This is partly due to the difficulties IPAR has experienced in recruiting qualified and experienced research staff and partly due to having competent research related and administrative staff that can cover all the necessary functions.

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[10] The Government had exempted IPAR from taxes. It also provided rent free accommodation. IPAR was able to use the money saved as a deposit for purchasing its own premises with the mortgage paid by core funding given specifically for this purpose.

These challenges have had a negative impact on the OCB project on which this chapter reports. The capacity building project was led by the DoR but the main focus of her work had to switch from supporting IPAR researchers in carrying out research to build their capacity especially in areas such as proposal and report writing to fund raising and directing commissioned research projects. This means that much of the focus of building competency was on managing fieldwork rather than on writing proposals, literature reviews, policy analysis and reports as was originally intended. As a consequence the local researchers only increased their capacity to manage quality fieldwork and related tasks during the six month project endangering the sustainability of the Institute. The viability of IPAR, by the end of the six month project, remained as heavily dependent on expatriate researchers as it had done at the outset.

On the positive side IPAR was able to build strong relationships with Government agencies, a number of development partners and International NGOs though carrying out commissioned research.

Challenges and Opportunities Confronting IPAR
Shortly after the appointment of DoR a series of participatory workshops were held in 2010 and 2011 to identify the challenges and opportunities confronting IPAR. The main challenges related to various aspects of institutional capacity, for example, inexperienced researchers, a lack of organizational focus on core business and professional support staff with little understanding of research. The opportunities identified included a keen, enthusiastic and committed

staff and a Government committed to research informed policy conceptualisation and implementation (Table 1).

Table 1: Main Challenges and Opportunities Facing IPAR Identified in 2010

Challenges	Opportunities
• Raising funding to cover running costs in the short term • Developing and implementing a strategic plan for long term sustainability • Organization not focused sufficiently on outcomes • Research staff spending time on bureaucratic administrative work • Inadequate number of research staff and difficulty in recruiting more at the right level • Poor working physical environment • Research staff in post needing capacity building • Low productivity • No systematic staff development strategy or incentives for improvement • Disseminating policy recommendations to potential users so they have an impact	• Government, development partners and INGOs committed to evidence-informed policy making • Opportunities to tender for research consultancies and bid for research grants • A keen and enthusiastic staff willing to build their capacity • Core funding providing for staff development as well as enabling researchers to develop their capacity by leading a research project • Purchasing own premises • Proactively engaging with users and attending consultation and other meetings and workshops • Building on the success of the e-Update - a monthly newsletter sent to a data base of stakeholders • Engagement with the media for the publication of research findings

The main outcome from the workshops was a Capacity Building Action Plan (Table 2)

Table 2: Summary Action Plan and Progress 2011-2013

Challenge/Opportunity	Agreed Action	Progress/Outcome
Funding to cover operational costs	Tender for consultancies/apply for research grants	Income has been generated to more than cover the shortfalls in grant income following the withdrawal of funding from the Government of Rwanda.
Strategy for medium/long-term sustainability	Reduce the ratio of non-research staff to research staff	There has been a reduction in one non-research post but the review concluded that all the remaining posts were necessary and the number of researchers needed to be increased
Recruitment of qualified research and other staff	Aggressively recruit qualified and experienced researchers as well bright masters graduates training them as researchers and offering opportunities for promotion and registering for work-based PhDs	It has proved impossible to recruit researchers with the competence to work at SRF level. Appointing researchers that can generate income to cover the full costs of employing them has yet to prove viable. However members of the research team significantly improved the quality of their work even if they are not all yet able to work without significant supervision.
Improving staff performance	Staff Development and Performance Review (SDPR) Mentoring and training programme Research Staff Development Programme Financial incentives	A system of SDPR and a staff development programme for research staff has been approved by the Board of Directors. A research staff development programme is in place. Research staff can now be

		awarded additional increments and be promoted if they fully meet the criteria for the post they are in. The criteria includes being able to deliver high quality research outputs.
Reducing bureaucratic demands on researchers	Review bureaucratic and administrative demands	A review indicated that the bureaucratic requirements were necessary but that research staff were being unnecessarily burdened. A research administrator has been appointed and improvement is noticed.
Improving links with potential users of research and improving dissemination strategies	A senior person in each ministry to be identified as a contact point. An annual research conference Regular policy briefs Newspaper articles Radio dissemination	Research conferences were held in December 2011 and 2012 Newspaper articles have been published. IPAR has been asked by the Government on several occasions to make presentations and provide recommendations on specific policy issues. IPAR had become widely recognised in Rwanda as having expertise on a range of public policy issues. Commissioned research has been carried out for the Senate, a number of DPs and INGOs

The Organization Capacity Building Project

Method and Approach to Organization Capacity Building (OCB) and Action Research

The Capacity Building Project reported in this chapter was and is being undertaken with the research team. The IDRC project was

initially to last six months and we identified a small number of outputs to be achieved over that period. However, as we have already indicated the project was conceived as part of our organizational effectiveness programme which is ongoing.

Our approach to capacity building is inclusive and participatory. All staff are aware of the capacity-building programme and progress is regularly discussed with individual members of the research team as well as the team as a whole. However, we made a decision at the out-set not to brief the research team explicitly on the IDRC/ OCB project. This was to avoid the Hawthorne Effect: that the research team would make an effort to achieve the outcomes, because the team knew it was for a specific project to the detriment of other work. In other words it could provide a perverse incentive.

Our approach combined using action research to bring about organizational transformation by improving the performance of the research team (Koshy 2005) while encouraging the researchers to become self-reflecting practitioners (Schon 1991). Staff Development and Performance Review (SDPR), which is integral to our organizational effectiveness programme, uses action research in this second sense. It enables staff to review their performance against their job descriptions and targets, to reflect on the reasons for their performance outcomes and to agree what staff development they will undertake. The action research for the improvement of the quality of research outputs involved collective problem solving, with the research team working together to identify team weaknesses in delivery and agree and implement an action plan. The monitoring and evaluation of implementation has been undertaken on a regular basis

and modifications made as necessary. Central to the process is the DoR who is a social scientist with more than thirty years of experience of leading research and building research capacity. She was also familiar with Rwanda having carried out research and worked as a senior civil servant in the country for more than nine years.

When we began the OCB project, IPAR already had a quality assurance and enhancement framework for research staff in place. In addition to SDPR, the criterion for the promotion of research staff is based on demonstrating the ability to work at a higher grade. A structured programme of staff development was in place and the DoR monitored the researchers' work and reviewed all outputs before publication. Research staff are supported to gain higher education qualifications on a part-time basis, attend short training courses and speak at conferences where they present peer-reviewed papers.

Organizational Capacity-Building Needs Assessment
The needs assessment concluded that the main problem was not so much IPAR producing quality research and influencing public policy, but rendering more members of the research team fit to make a full contribution to it. In practice the ability to produce work of an acceptable standard was totally dependent on the Director of Research. As a whole the team was inexperienced and most of the research staff did not fully meet the person specification for the post they occupied. Too few members of the team were capable of producing high quality research reports or policy briefs without significant support and guidance and most were inexperienced in delivering oral presentation. The main strength was in carrying out

fieldwork where most, but not all, of the researchers had experience of *leading* fieldwork and delivering high quality data. None of the researchers apart from the DoR had been awarded research or consultancy funding in the past or carried out a research project from proposal to report writing under minimum supervision, although a recently appointed senior research fellow had a PhD. Productivity was generally poor and output low. There was a general lack of confidence and an unwillingness to work independently. The general view was that tendering for contracts, writing literature reviews, desk based policy analysis and producing research reports was the responsibility of the DoR. The researchers also expressed a concern that the administration did not always support the work of the research team adequately (Table 3).

Table 3: Capacity Gap Assessment of Research Team August 2011

Underqualified and with too little experience for level of post
Weak lifelong learning skills
Limited experience of leading research projects and of team work
Poor reading skills and therefore a general lack of a detailed knowledge of laws and policies and wider literature
No experience of writing proposals for consultancy and research funding
Little experience of designing research and training data collectors etc.
Limited experience of managing and supervising fieldwork
Generally trained to do only quantitative or only qualitative research
Limited experience of managing data entry and cleaning and quality-assuring quantitative data
Very limited experience of analysing qualitative data
Limited experience of analysing quantitative data
No experience of writing research reports, policy briefs, newspaper articles etc.
No experience of papers for peer-reviewed outlets
Limited experience of presenting research finding to users, peers or beneficiaries
Poor time management skills and a reluctance to plan and report on time use

Levels of enthusiasm and commitment to IPAR by the local research team members was high, however, and they were keen to develop their skills so that they could make a full contribution to the research and related work of IPAR.

Method and approach to Organization Capacity Building

The capacity gap assessment showed that the first priority was to build the competency of the research team so that more members could take independent responsibility for managing a small research project under guidance. This required building individual confidence as well as ensuring that researchers had the necessary skills and competency to independently manage research projects from bidding for funding to delivering a final report. In order to develop a plan to build the capacity of the research team it was necessary to consider what actions needed to be taken and in what order.

In the short and medium term we wanted to build the capacity of the research team so that the SRFs and RFs could produce research reports of publishable quality and were able to generate sufficient income to make up the shortfall from core research grants. To facilitate this we wanted to reduce the administrative burden on the research team and ensure that the organization became focused on its core work of delivering research to inform public policy, capacity building and engendering debate on public policy issues.

Two main theories of how to bring about change underpinned this project. The first was based on our experiences of working with the research team, and the second on behaviour change. We had initially discovered that operant conditioning, using a reward *and*

"punishment" scheme, worked better with the team than rewarding good performance and ignoring poor performance. For instance the contracts of poor performers, who did not show a willingness to learn, were terminated. This proved to motivate the more engaged researchers who had previously felt limited in their work by more unproductive workers. Good performers or those with a positive attitude were encouraged by providing long-term contracts, salary increments, and training as well as being supported to attend international conferences. The second theory was that to improve performance it was necessary to change behaviour. In the case of this project this meant changing the working practices of the research team and making them tackle tasks that they had found difficult. We agreed to do this by building their confidence, ensuring that they engaged with SDPR, planned their workload and streamlined time allocation on different tasks. We planned to provide them with on-the-job support from external trainers and expected them to work independently (in teams) on research projects, under the guidance of the DoR, with the responsibility of delivery at all stages of the research. We decided to bring in external trainers because we felt that it was important for the researchers to have training from a number of different experts. All of this was designed to enable the researchers to develop the skills to produce quality research outputs as individuals and as a team.

The planned interventions to enable us to achieve our objective were:

1. Appointing a research administrator and reviewing the support provided by non-research staff to reduce the time researchers spend on routine administration tasks;
2. Providing on-the-job training and mentoring by external trainers in addition to that provided by the DoR;
3. Implementing SDPR fully for all staff so that they all agreed their own performance targets and the support they needed to achieve them;
4. Supporting researchers in taking responsibility for the delivery of their own research projects to time, quality and standard including ensuring that they managed their time effectively. The intention was that the researchers would be supported by having feedback as they completed every stage of a research project from writing a proposal, through writing a literature review, formulating research questions, identifying appropriate research methods, managing the fieldwork and data entry, analysing the data and writing the report;
5. Appointing more qualified and experienced SRFs to provide leadership for RFs and RAs.

Findings
We had to adapt and change our plans in response to unanticipated circumstances at the outset of the project and to remain flexible during delivery as we adapted to further changes. It was not possible to implement our original plan for building capacity during the six month project due to the funding issues outlined above. The local

researchers were not able to work on their own projects with mentoring and peer support from the DoR as had been intended. Instead they had to work on contracted projects to generate sufficient income for IPAR to remain viable. We were able to implement SDPR, organise training sessions delivered by external trainers and appoint a research administrator. The DoR continued to provide on-the-job training and mentoring.

We found that building organizational capacity was possible but challenging in this circumstance. We were not able to provide researchers with the opportunity to build writing skills as we had planned as the research team was under constant time pressure to deliver the amount of contracted research necessary to generate the income required for making the organization viable. In the circumstances the DoR focused on income generation and writing the research reports and the rest of the team took responsibility for managing the fieldwork. The local researchers developed their practical research skills and gained more confidence in their own abilities to organise and manage fieldwork. The research team generally welcomed the approach taken to capacity building and feel that they have benefitted from the training delivered by external trainers as well as the on-the-job training delivered by the DoR. They have gained skills in quantitative data analysis using SPSS and in the analysis of qualitative data.

One of the strengths of the approach that we took is that it built a team; the researchers had to work together to deliver the research outputs. This has led us to realise that organizational capacity

building is about building a team and not just the capacity of individuals. The focus should be building a team that can together produce high quality research, deliver high quality training and organise events where there can be debates on public policy issues. The strengths of individual members of the team should be built on as well as enabling individuals to develop areas they are weaker in. The outcomes achieved by the research team are the product of thir combined efforts, rather than simply those of individual members; a strong team is able to produce more than any one individual member would be able to produce. The DoR would not, for example, be able to write high-quality research reports if the other members of the team were not able to manage fieldwork and ensure that high-quality data is collected. The DoR can ensure that the organization delivers using the strengths of each member of the team.

Identification with the organization and a commitment to building capacity was also found to be important. Individuals have to want to improve and be prepared to recognise their own weaknesses and strengths as well as recognise the strengths and weaknesses of other members of the team. This is essential if individuals are to improve their performance and engage in team work.

We found that progress was sporadic, that individuals develop some capacities more easily than others and that researchers make progress at different rates. In particular we found it difficult to develop the skills of the researchers in report writing. This was mainly during the project because there was insufficient time for inexperienced researchers to be supervised and draft reports that

would meet the expectations of external funders. However, it also relates to their lack of experience in independent writing, mainly limited to writing up a Masters dissertation.

In common with other organizations we have worked with, we found it challenging to obtain the support of professional support staff to provide support to the researchers. This is partly because we need to build the capacity of the research related and administrative staff and partly because it is difficult to get them to focus on the main work of IPAR – customer service delivery. There is clearly a need for more communication between the two teams so that each understands the work of the other and they can agree on how they can work together to ensure the organization remains focused on delivering high quality research.

Outcomes
The first point to note is that we have partially achieved the main objective of the programme. We wanted to build the capacity of the SRF and the SRFs to generate income and to take responsibility for a project from receiving the funding to delivering a publishable report. There are a number of reasons for this partial success and we discuss them below. We managed (and have continued to manage) to generate sufficient income to keep IPAR operating and laid the foundations for moving towards sustainability in the longer term. Although we had planned to appoint additional SRFs this proved impossible; we failed to get applicants with the necessary experience and skills set.

The action research enabled IPAR to identify weaknesses and make progress towards remedying them, though in many cases there is still a fair distance to travel. Much has been achieved and the capacity of all the team members has been developed through the specific training they have engaged in and on-the-job mentoring by the director of research. Furthermore progress has been made in furthering IPAR's reputation and influence. There is evidence that IPAR research has influenced Government policy and IPAR is increasingly being asked to contribute to policy debates as it has gained recognition as an established public policy independent think tank that can make an informed contribution. The Government now looks to IPAR for support and there is a general belief that IPAR has competent staff. IPAR has been commissioned by a number of government ministries and the Senate to carry out research. IPAR has also been asked to partner international research teams and provide expert briefings. We are, for example, working on a project on sanitation in formal settlements with the University of Surrey, UK and other partners and an evaluation of the Results Based Aid project in Rwanda with a consultancy firm from the UK. There is also a reduced reliance on the DoR to engage in all the income generation and report writing. In particular the SRF has generated income and led projects from start to completion. He is now developing a portfolio of work in his area of expertise. One of the RFs has recently been promoted to SRF and he is taking on more responsibility for coordinating research.

The capacity of individual members of the research team has been developed and they recognise this. Each of them has written a

capacity-building statement outlining his/her own progress, and these reflect their belief that there has been a growth in their capacity. In essence they say the same things but with some differences of emphasis. We would concur with their view that they have developed their capabilities. Two of the researchers have written research and consultancy tenders that have been funded demonstrating an ability to write a fundable research proposal. As one explained in a statement on capability:

When I joined IPAR, this was one of my main challenges. Currently however, through mentorship from my line managers, I have acquired enough skills to bid for research funds. I am currently very confident in writing any type of research proposal with very minimal inputs from my supervisors. [Researcher 2]

However, most felt that they still lacked the skills to write a proposal that was of sufficient quality to be funded. As one put it:

I have not had an opportunity to tender or bid for work individually. I have had an opportunity to draft research proposals, but more practice of this will be required for me to be able to say my proposal can win funds without so much input from my seniors. [Researcher 4]

Our analysis at the outset of the project was that the members of the research team had reasonably good fieldwork skills although not all had managed a fieldwork team. We, nevertheless, think that there has been significant development of capacity in this area and that one of the real strengths of IPAR is its ability to carry out high quality quantitative and qualitative fieldwork. The researchers recognize the additional skills that they have developed:

I had no problem with this [managing fieldwork] *when I joined IPAR, but I would say that there has been added value to my skill in this area.* [Researcher 3]

I have been able to manage field work for two commissioned research projects [and for] core funded work. At the start it was not easy but now I have learned to plan and forecast and manage well and work within the budgets approved. ... I benefited from training in M&E from an expert from IDRC. [Researcher 4]

One of our objectives was to build the capacity of researchers to be able to use both qualitative and quantitative methods. Much of the research projects we carry out require using mixed methods of research and it is important that the researchers feel confident enough to use both methods. Quantitative researchers often find qualitative research challenging and are often resistant to using it as they see it as lacking the validity of quantitative research. However, researchers have come to recognize that qualitative research can be rigorous and has strengths that complement quantitative research through working on projects that used mixed methods of research. Quantitative researchers have been able to develop their understanding of qualitative research and build their skills in doing so:

During the [time] I have worked at IPAR, my research capacity has improved tremendously. .. I was mainly a quantitative researcher but I have learnt a lot about doing qualitative research. [Researcher 1]

*Designing research and research tools: I have no problem with this as I have been doing this for many years. Wha*t *has been new was to design research tools for qualitative research and my skills are improving.* [Researcher 3]

Before I came to IPAR, I was familiar with individual interviews but my stay at IPAR has helped me to learn more about focus group discussions and deliberative forums and how they can be used to complement quantitative research and interviews. [Researcher 5]

Developing the skills of qualitative researchers to do quantitative research takes more time and effort and needs off the job training as they need to be trained in statistical analysis as well as using software programmes such as SPSS. None of the qualitative researchers have gained the skills to carry out quantitative research although they have had training in basic SPSS. However, the skills of the researchers that already had expertise in qualitative research have been developed further so that they can handle data management as well as analysis.

I have learnt new techniques of conducting impact and process evaluations through my work at IPAR. … I have also learnt how to deal with panel data in analyzing changes/ impact over time. [Researcher 1]

I have done this prior to coming at IPAR, but with the training I got at IPAR, I learned how to use EPI data, and refreshed my skills in SPSS. [Researcher 3]

We did an introductory training to EPI DATA, SPSS which was practical; this enabled me to manage data for one project to a satisfactory level. I will need more training in this area to be able to say I am confident enough to handle and manage data very well. [Researcher 4]

The major challenge we identified at the outset was that the researchers' report writing skills were virtually non-existent. Although this remains an area of substantial weakness, with only one

researcher being able to produce reports of publishable quality, without substantial help there has been some progress. The researchers have been more prepared to try.

I have developed my writing skills significantly. I have so far produced [two specific reports] and one paper has been accepted by [a journal]. [Researcher 5]

I have never had a chance to do this, but I think I have improved compared to the period prior to joining IPAR. [Researcher 3]

At a more general level the analytic and thinking skills of the researchers have improved. They are more inquiring and questioning in how they approach research and policy analysis.

Last but not least, I have developed an analytical spirit through the interactions of my mentor and her critical thinking helps me to explore some aspects that were previously not considered. [Researcher 5]

Lessons Learnt

We have learnt a lot about organizational capacity building from engaging in this project. The main lesson is that OCB is only possible if the staff want to learn; if they are willing participants in the process. The role of leadership in building trust with management and employing intrinsic and extrinsic rewards cannot be underestimated. Having core funding was essential to success. It would not be possible to build capacity and raise the funding necessary to keep IPAR going. An experienced DoR was also essential. It would not be possible to provide the level of on-going mentoring and training required if external trainers had to be relied on. Initial success was a spur to

further effort, demonstrating the importance of intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards motivating effort.

We have also learnt the importance of ensuring that the right people are recruited in the first place. Care needs to be taken that those offered posts have the capacity to develop all the skills and competences expected in a researcher. The possession of a Masters degree or even a PhD is not adequate proof of capacity to develop as a researcher.

We have learnt that for a research 'think-tank' to operate successfully not all the researchers need to be equally skilled at all tasks. It is what the team can do together that is important. On the other hand it is important that organizations have an adequate number of researchers to be able to train and deliver work tasks. Relying on a few researchers to generate income and write the reports is not sustainable.

The professional support team does not always understand how to support the research team. This is partly because key members are not experienced in working for small organizations or familiar organizations focused on delivering research.

The main lessons we have learnt from undertaking the project are:

- Unanticipated factors outside the control of the institution such as delays in funding can make it difficult to deliver; flexibility is needed;

- It takes time and effort to build the capacity of bright but inexperienced researchers to conduct and write up research projects under minimum supervision;
- Developing an organization so that it focuses on its core business requires capacity building of the professional support staff and a change in organizational culture;
- Building a self-sustaining independent public policy think tank, even with significant funding, is challenging - especially in a country where there is a shortage of qualified and experienced researchers.

Conclusion

The analysis of the outcomes shows that significant progress has been made in building organizational capacity but there is still some way to go. The main positive outcome is that researchers now work as a team and have a strong commitment to producing high-quality research to inform public policy. All the researchers have developed their skills and competencies and there is a strong desire to improve further. They take a pride in working for IPAR and in the work they do. Researcher turnover has reduced significantly.

Capacity building of adequate researchers remains necessary if IPAR is to become a self-sustaining, independent 'think-tank'. The balance of staffing between research and necessary non-research staff make it difficult for the Institute to generate sufficient income to cover its full running costs without core funding and sufficient internal income generation. The lack of depth and breadth in the research team poses a risk and means that loss of any researcher would have a negative impact.

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We also used capability statements of Researchers

Chapter 5

A New Face and Character for Research in Grupo FARO, Ecuador: A Think Tank's Internal Reforms for Research Capacity

Andrea Ordóñez

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This chapter summarises the main reflections and lessons from implementing the Organizational Capacity Building (OCB) initiative in Grupo FARO (GF), an eight-year old Ecuadorian think tank. The case focuses on the efforts carried out by the organization to improve its research capacity that can be summarized in three main approaches: i) creating a new structure and developing new internal research policies, ii) promoting awareness among researchers of the relevance of actively improving the research quality, and iii) implementing the policies and procedures previously designed. To reflect on over two years of reform, the chapter takes stock of information from both the actions that were implemented and the reflections of those participating in the processes. Ultimately the process brought into question the concepts of quality and relevance, as well as other dimensions of organizational capacity building that were not considered in the beginning of the project. After all, improvements in

the research outputs were improbable without considering the researchers in charge of producing those outputs, or the environment that surrounded them. The political context also became a relevant factor to consider with implications both at the internal and external levels.

Grupo FARO

Grupo FARO (GF) is a constituted Not for Profit Organization established in 2004. Its brief history can be summarized in two phases, the initial phase and a consolidation phase. The centre was established in the initial phase. In a stylized spectrum between research on the one side and advocacy on the other, GF was originally more involved in advocacy. This is explained partially by the nature of its main funders (international foundations and multilaterals), the initial staff and the projects that the centre launched. This is a key aspect of the organization's identity not only externally, but also internally.

In terms of the function that the organization played in the policy arena, GF has always seen its role as one of bridging differences between actors involved in policymaking. In order to achieve this during the initial phase, the centre focused on compiling and analyzing data (primarily official data acquired under the rule of the transparency law) on public programs and policies. These analyses were shared with a variety of stakeholders. The premise was that an apolitical analysis compiled by an independent organization could bring together fragmented actors to discuss possible solutions. This strategy however, had its limits since GF had not developed its own

policy proposals and recommendations. To do so, the organization required stronger analytical skills.

The consolidation phase began in 2009. With a new strategic plan, and a clearer theory of change, "research" – not only evidence – became one of the key institutional strategies, along with capacity building and communications. This shift reflected both a different internal perception of GF's identity and niche, as well as a different political context. Internally, staff members had started discussing the limits of the previous strategy and had self-criticized what could be seen as an over simplistic view on what research meant, and how it influenced and informed policy. Externally, the situation was more complex. When GF was funded, Ecuador had a history of acute instability, with seven presidents ruling in a period of ten years. The political scenario has recently changed, with a more stable state that is active and engaged in public policy. As a result, public officials and policymakers call for much more sophisticated analysis. The strengthening of the State, however, has also polarized debates, which has led to more complex public discussions. These changes are reflected in GF's main topics of interest and strategies, many of which are analyzed in this study.

Currently, GF describes its mission clearly: influencing policy through research, dialogue and collective action. This goal forms part of the fabric of Ecuador's history and politics and summarizes underlying notions about the national policy scenario and GF's role in society. The centre is one that seeks changes and wants to remain dynamic. GF has three strategies: to engage in research, improve

communication and engender debate and discussion with various stakeholders so that collective action can be taken to influence policies. While in the first phase focus was on the State, in the second phase, the policy arena was broadened to include the state, the private sector and civil society.

This led to a change in the organization's structure. In the first phase, the centre was only organized thematically, meaning that each staff member was part of a theme based team such as public finance, education, transparency and so on. In the second phase, a new structure was developed where three new areas were created: the research area, the communication area and the capacity development area, along four core thematic lines social policy, environment, governance and technology. The new structure promotes multi thematic work and gives integrality to interventions and projects. Through all of this the centre has maintained its culture, which can be described as participatory, inclusive and deliberative.

Capacity Building (OCB) Strategy

Although the changes towards the second stage of the organization were conceived in 2009, they were implemented slowly, depending on the limited available resources for institutional development. Starting in mid-2010, GF became a Think Tank Initiative grantee. The initiative, which focused on strengthening organizational capacities, supported the centre with resources to implement these reforms much more rapidly and solidly. These changes coincided with the creation of the Organizational Capacity Building (OCB) group[11] –

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[11] See Introduction to this Book

formed by the five think tanks participating in this initiative - to reflect and learn throughout the process. The OCB process was aligned with a strategic line of research carried out in GF on think tanks, and the link between research and policy. The process, therefore, was compatible with the organizational belief that an organization should understand itself and its context critically in order to succeed.

As mentioned previously, think tanks are not pre-established organizations, and as such each centre must adapt its structures and strategies to the context in which it works. Furthermore, the spaces for learning about how to manage think tanks are sporadic and only limited quantities of resources on how think tanks work are available. The changes that were proposed were not a copy of an existing blueprint but a concrete response to GF's own context and institutional history.

The OCB initiative was led by the Research Area of GF and allowed the centre to reflect and learn about its vision, strategy and actions. This aspect, however, is just one part of the efforts to strengthen the capacity of the organization that also included: governance, human resources management and motivation, operations and sustainability. The strategy was based on the hypothesis that these changes are interconnected, and that working on them simultaneously will bring more sustainable change. In practice, the different efforts to strengthen the organization sometimes overlapped and required additional attention and dedication from staff members.

GF's OCB project began with the objective of strengthening its research quality and relevance, as this was a key window of opportunity identified while constructing the new institutional strategy in 2009. First, a clearer institutional research agenda that could guide the organization for the following years was developed. The agenda would become a pillar for GF's research strategy. The second objective was to improve research capacities of staff. In this case GF put forward new research processes and tested how these efforts could support researchers enhance their outputs.

Methods and Approaches of OCB and Action Research

The OCB process in GF was an accompanying process to the different reforms on research capacity within the institution. The overarching reform that will be analyzed in this chapter is the change in the organizational structure and the creation of the research area, and specifically the actions taken forward by the research area to aid researchers on improving their outputs. The activities were carried out by the researchers in three approaches: structure and process design, awareness, and implementation. *Structure* refers to the changes in the organization, specifically, the creation of the research area, while process design refers to the activities that delineate what the new area does. *Awareness* encompasses those activities carried out with the staff to evaluate the research carried out and recognize the relevance of improving it. *Implementation* groups those activities related to improving quality of the different research projects. These processes are carried out constantly and are not one set of linear actions. Instead of presenting a set of linear actions and reactions,

this chapter discusses these different approaches, each of which entailed different activities as well as methods for retrieving information and evidence.

Table 1. Summary of Approaches, Actions and Research Methods

Approach	Actions	Research Method
Structure and Design	- Modify the internal structure - Create new internal research policy and procedures - Compile new Research Agenda	- Interviews - Publication files - Notes from Strategic Board Meetings
Awareness	- Initial diagnosis - Meetings to discuss evaluation results and plan actions moving forward	- Documentation of diagnostic - Evaluation results and comparison from 2011 and 2012 - Notes – voice recordings of reflections after meetings
Implementation	- Oversight process to research outputs - Research guidelines - External peer review process - Establish conference fund	- Notes – voice recordings of reflections after meetings - Publications files - Planning documentation - Interviews

The OCB project lasted two years; information, reflections and data were gathered throughout this time. A crucial source of information has been the files of the publications. These files are a comprehensive

collection of documents that summarize the different steps each research publication went through including the peer review process and the evaluation results. Along with these files, physical and recorded notes on meetings that were carried out with researchers in the processes of discussing their research and their evaluations were maintained. The documentation that summarizes GF's annual plans was also used to review the way in which the OCB process evolved at the end of each year. Other relevant documentation with regard to diagnostics carried out, such as surveys, to evaluate our capacities or identify training needs were also reviewed. Critical meetings with staff were recorded to maintain the relevant reflections of the process, and interviews were carried out with researchers, reviewers and others engaged in the changes that will be described.

To analyze the information gathered, the activities were categorised according to the three previously mentioned approaches. Within those categories an analysis of the key aspects, and enabling and hindering factors was carried out (see Annex 1). Consequently an analysis within these categories led to the identification of key overarching topics that are discussed in the conclusions.

Approaching Research Capacity Development

The different actions carried out in the process are based on the concept –whether implicit or explicit – of research quality in GF. At the outset of the OCB initiative, quality was defined using two concepts: rigour and relevance. In terms of rigour, the proposed initial indicator was the number of publications in international peer reviewed journals. In terms of relevance, the focus was on the connection with relevant policy debates within Ecuador. Throughout

these two years the concept of rigour has evolved, in a constant balancing act between producing for academics and for policymakers, between long term focus and timeliness to current policy debates and between more applied and basic knowledge. By the end of the two years, the stage was set for the board and team leaders to jointly identify a way of prioritising audiences and research scope. In the following section the main findings and reflections from the three approaches carried out (structure and design, awareness, and implementation) are summarized.

Creating a New Structure and Designing Policies and Procedures
The first approach for improving the research capacity of the organization was a change in the structure, specifically, the creation of the Research Area. Now the centre has a matrix structure meaning that three strategic areas cut across the four thematic teams (Figure 1). For the Research Area this entails interaction in accompanying and overseeing research teams from the different topics that the centre works on. Although it holds power over the research processes and outputs, the teams are decentralized and are not under direct supervision of the Director of Research, but under each team leader. The objective of the position of Director of Research is to create an enabling environment, incentives, and rules to produce high quality research. Two specific initiatives carried out include developing an institutional research agenda and establishing a research process that enriches the projects' quality and relevance. To summarize, the Research Area is the conceptual and methodological guardian of the centre's work. The initial premise was that having a team with a clear mandate to oversee the research processes would strengthen the centre's research capacities. For the new area to actually impact the

organization, it required a change in the teams' priorities and behavior. This was formally established through policies and processes for research outputs.

Figure 1. Summary of GF's structure
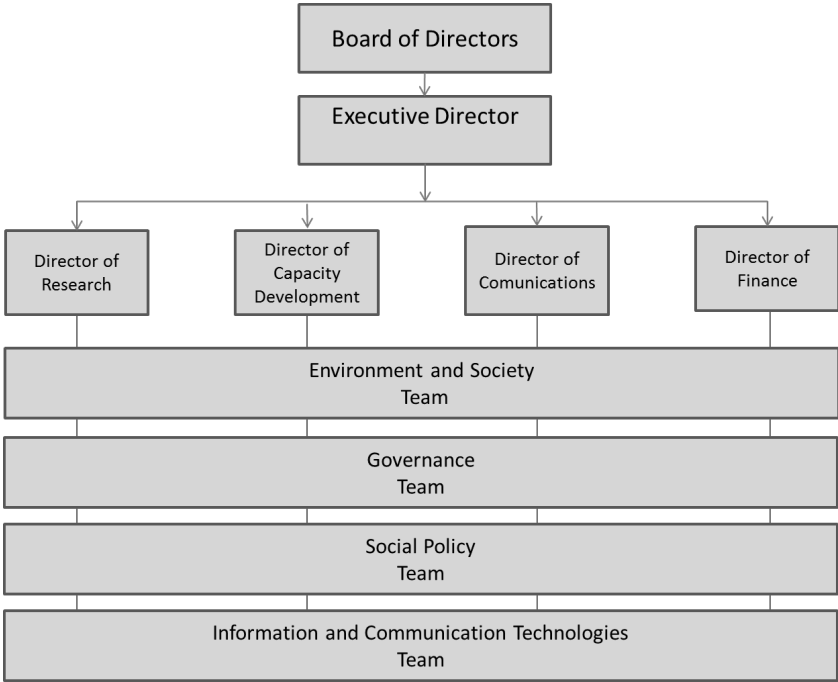
The Research Area took on the task of establishing a research agenda, in order to identify thematic priorities in the medium term. As GF's mission clearly states the objective of influencing policy included considering ways in which GF's research would impact policy: would it change national policies or did it have a subnational emphasis? Would it be aimed at informing policymakers in the political arena or the bureaucratic arena? What were the problems it tackled? These discussions were organized in a document that was later commented

on and debated upon by other researchers and policymakers to include new points of view and perspectives that would strengthen GF's work. The agenda set the thematic framework for what to focus on.

During this process the Research Area developed policies and procedures that would answer the question: how do we carry out our research and control its quality? The internal procedures establish who is responsible for what, as well as the required steps to carry-out a research project. At the same time, editorial lines, and specific types of publications were designed. The objective was to strengthen GF's identity beyond specific projects and create a unity among the different teams' work.

In general, creating this new area brought about positive impacts to the organization. There was a shift in the culture of the organization towards giving research more relevance, and including the quality of methodologies in strategic discussions, research processes and outputs. While at the beginning researchers were constantly reminded to follow the research processes and were hesitant to have their research externally reviewed, they became more receptive to receiving external reviews. As part of the process, researchers and the Research Area met to discuss the review jointly. These meetings provided a space to understand the comments and turn the revisions into actionable modifications.

Since research in a think tank is closely related to the policy cycle and politics, creating a research area increased the organization's

understanding of the links between research and policy, which became an important part of the discussion when deciding on a project or a new research output. Questions were posed such as who could benefit from this research? How was this project related to the policy debate currently going on? Furthermore, questions about the way in which the researchers see their work contributing to policy will also be incorporated in the new research protocol developed at the beginning of each research project.

Having a research area may have also strengthened GF's recognition and reputation internationally. During 2011, for instance, GF had no presence in international academic conferences. In 2012, it had five participations in such conferences, in addition to a wider presence in other national and international policy spaces. These efforts for visibility may have translated in a better ranking position in the Latin American Global-go-to Think Tank ranking which analyses, through perceptions, the public profile of think tanks worldwide.

The key aspects of implementing a new research area were: gradualism, simplicity and checks and balances. The changes were implemented slowly. Researchers were introduced progressively into the new processes and were given the flexibility to make mistakes in order to learn practically. The limitation of this strategy was that it took a while to fully implement the processes as compared to a strict enforcement strategy. However, considering GF's participatory and deliberative culture, this seemed the most appropriate approach.

Simplicity was taken into account when designing the processes to be implemented by researchers in their projects. The steps were intuitive and the objective was to set milestones and discussion points as the regular research process progressed. This made the processes easy to adopt by researchers. Checks and balances were established to guarantee the inclusion of various perspectives when reviewing and discussing a research output. External reviewers also provided an external opinion in addition to internal reviews. The Director of Research, for example, despite having the power to veto a research output, could not do so based only in his/her evaluation but would have had to consider other internal and external revisions.

Three key enabling factors that supported this process are the support from the Executive Director, the involvement of the Board and the fact that the Director of Research was hired internally. Having explicit support from the head of the organization was crucial in order to motivate and align efforts among different teams. This was also reinforced by setting realistic expectations of the changes that could take place with limited resources and with other reforms being implemented simultaneously. Some of the other reforms that were simultaneously occurring included for example: introducing a monitoring and evaluation system and performance appraisals for staff members. These additional initiatives also required time and effort from the researchers.

The Executive Director was also supported by the Board that discusses the strategic vision of GF's research. This active involvement of different leadership levels meant that research

became relevant throughout the organization. Furthermore, strengthening the strategic areas gave relevance to the organization as a whole instead of to a specific project being implemented. Previously the quality of research outputs was usually assessed by donors, and partners instead of through an internal process. Therefore, this change also increased the organization's independence. Hiring the Director of Research could have also supported the reform since the new internal position and its role within the organization maintained GF's essential identity and culture.

The aspects that hindered the strategy related to both internal and external weaknesses. For instance, the OCB process occurred while the organization grappled with the issue of monetary incentives and where to introduce them or not in the management of human resources. Unlike some of the other cases in this book, the OCB process did not include a structure of incentives for research in itself. However, starting in 2013, the organization as a whole has formalized a performance scheme that includes a monetary incentive.

Relevance of Quality of Research
As mentioned in the section on deploying a new structure, the processes were carried out gradually. A key aspect for this change was to generate awareness on the importance of improving research outputs. At the heart of these activities was internalizing the goals of quality in researchers' day-to-day activities. A method to compare the internal and external perceptions of GF's research quality was arranged. First, an initial diagnostic was carried out and secondly,

meetings to discuss the evaluation results of each team's outputs were implemented.

The initial diagnosis was based on the external policy community survey carried out by the Think Tank Initiative. This survey compiled information about how external stakeholders viewed the quality and relevance of each think tank's work. An internal survey based on the same questions and scale was carried out. Questions were related to the quality or the centre's researchers, research outputs, events, and outreach. The goal with carrying out this survey was to confront the external view with the internal perception of the centre's work. The results showed divergence between these two points of view. Internally, there was a higher appraisal of the researchers and research outputs than externally. Internally researchers thought they had a better understanding of the policy processes than external reviewers perceived. On the other hand, GF researchers had a lower assessment of the organization's communication capacities than the external public had.

The second activity was the annual evaluation of research outputs. Through an in-depth interview with experts in the different topics each research output was evaluated. Afterwards, the reviewers' insights were shared and discussed with each of the different teams. The discussions focused on how the inputs from the review could aid the team's future work and identify weaknesses that would be closely followed-up by the authors and the Director of Research in future projects.

The strategy to generate awareness of the importance of research relevance was successful in part because it was made personal. For example, contrasting internal and external perceptions allowed GF staff to spot glitches in their thinking and set a starting point for further discussion. Researchers discussed how their youth and short professional reputation could have an effect on the external perception about their work. They started to realize that putting a stronger effort on methodological expertise and developing processes that certified the quality of their work could also help their professional credentials. This meant that these activities eased the alignment of institutional goals with the researcher's personal and professional goals.

A second relevant aspect of these activities was that it created a sense of discomfort which generated awareness of the need to change. As noted previously by Heiftz (1998) and Wiseman (2012), a certain level of tension and intensity is required for change to take place. Without provoking this tension, change may not happen. On the other hand, provoking excessive discomfort may demotivate and create fear towards change. The results of the diagnosis and the evaluation were communicated on a supportive environment with the objective of growing and learning instead of punishing. Researchers were encouraged to identify what they could do to improve their outputs.

Although the evaluation of research proved extremely valuable in contributing to changes in practices, there was always the potential for some researchers to disregard the findings of the review on the

grounds that they lacked objectivity. Researchers sometimes, tend to rationalize the negative aspects of evaluations as a reflection of the evaluator and not of the output. Therefore it is important to keep the evaluation process as reflective as possible, and prevent it from being seen as a "witch hunt". Including a wider public in the evaluation of the research output could help to minimize this effect, but this is hard to do, simply because not enough local experts have been identified to make this option viable.

Implementation of Research Quality Processes

The implementation of the policies and practices that had been designed had complications as well. As mentioned initially, part of the Research Area's objective was to establish an internal order. In the implementation of the processes, three aspects were relevant: the guiding method along the entire research process, the external peer review process and the final verdict. Attempts were also made to support researchers that would consider sending research articles to academic journals. There were, however, no incentives to motivate researchers to do this in the first place (as detailed in the box below).

Incentives for Research Quality

During the two years of the OCB process, GF did not include a specific monetary incentive for the number of research outputs. Although other centres follow this strategy, GF's vision of performance has included other aspects such as communications, policy engagement, management skills and leadership. In this context, a more encompassing appraisal system has been launched starting in 2013 that will include a monetary incentive for those that exceed their goals in these areas. This appraisal system, however, does not tackle the challenge of connecting researchers – especially junior ones –

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with international journals and conferences. As a starting point, GF has created a fund to support researchers attending international conferences where they present an original manuscript. The fund seeks to increase both GF's presence in academic circles as well as to expand the researchers' knowledge of cutting-edge topics in their fields. (Although this will be a monetary investment by the organization, it is not a direct monetary benefit for the researcher.) After speaking at a conference the researcher is also required to share what he/she has learnt from the conference with the rest of the staff.

The current research internal process includes a constant oversight from the Research Area in the research process. This includes, an initial meeting to discuss the research plan, conducting support meetings in the process, an external peer review and a final verdict on whether the document will be published or not. Some of the key aspects of the implementation of these activities include a shift in power and responsibility on the research output, and the flexibility to learn – in the process – about what makes research sound and relevant. Before, the research policies were put in place, the majority of research reports did not have a clear author. This meant that they were more like a consultancy report than an academic one. As a consequence of this process, researchers were not accountable to their individual quality and relevance. By explicitly stating the authors of reports from the outset, researchers gained the responsibility for the given output that they could previously circumvent. While the authors gained responsibility, the Research Area gained the power to veto a given output, a structure that seems to be beneficial to keeping an organized internal process. These processes revealed other issues such as authorship disputes. In some cases, a significant

contributor could be omitted from the authors list, while in other cases people who had not contributed significantly wanted their name included in the authors list. These cases exemplify the need to encourage an ethical research culture, as well as clear guidelines on how to solve such disputes (Box 2).

Box 2. Authorship and Research Quality

Promoting an ethical research culture has been identified as a key aspect of organizational capacity development. Within this broad concept, ethical authorship practices are essential for external recognition as well as internal collaboration. Setting goals of writing more articles could create a negative incentive for unethical authorship. With this in mind, GF includes an authorship section in the research protocol that is filled out at the beginning of each project. This means that right from the beginning a team discusses how each one contributes to the project and how this reflects in an ethical authorship of the final document. For this, GF follows The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), guidelines that state: "Authorship credit should be based only on:

(1) substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data;
(2) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and
 (3) final approval of the version to be published.

Conditions (1), (2), and (3) must all be met. Acquisition of funding, the collection of data, or general supervision of the research group, by themselves, do not justify authorship."

Promoting ethical authorship has additional benefits in the research capacity of the centre since it prevents false expectations among researchers, encourages collaboration and a fair distribution of work within a team.

A second key aspect of these activities was the flexibility given to the process. Although initially, there was an urgency to establish very clear protocols and forms that the researchers should fill out, the Research Area did not establish them immediately, but opted instead for a more open-ended, flexible approach. This involved establishing an editorial line, which included different publication series: briefs, reports, proposals, and working papers. A general guideline on the uses of these series served as a starting point for discussion. Even though some researchers wanted to have more rigid parameters, the Research Area decided to develop them progressively and the organization learned from the research processes and output. This flexibility meant that each meeting was personalized in accordance with the gaps identified by the Director of Research or the researchers themselves. While some were advised to look more closely into the policy context and talk to more stakeholders, others were encouraged to review theory and other literature. At the time of writing, the Research Area is starting to use a more structured research protocol that responds to what has been learned through the OCB process.

Internally, there were some favourable and some negative aspects for implementation. On the positive side, having full time staff carrying out these processes allowed follow-up of each team in relative detail. An accompanying positive process that occurred was the reform of human resource management, which included defining positions in the organization (their roles and responsibilities) as well as performance agreements and indicators. This process is not only

carried out to increase research capacity but to improve performance in general; it also clarified the expectation that the organization had for each staff member.

On the negative side, the organization had weak project management and monitoring. This meant that in some cases, the overall implementation of a given project ended up affecting research outputs. For example changes in staff members slowed down the research process. This was accompanied by weak knowledge management in general. This meant that when researchers changed or left their positions, it was difficult for the new ones to easily gain the knowledge of the previous researchers in an ongoing project. Finally, researchers had questions about the relationship between their research and the policies being implemented. In general, they felt that they had no formal training in certain areas, and had little experience in identifying ways in which their work could impact policy.

External factors also affected the implementation of the designed policy and procedures. In general, universities in Ecuador are not oriented to research which means that graduates do not necessarily have the necessary skills to succeed in their research endeavours. This contextual weakness also meant that there was a limited pool of reviewers for research outputs. Furthermore, the epistemic communities are small, and since researchers within a field often know each other, it is difficult to maintain double-blinded peer review. As a result, GF now has an open review system.

Conclusion

Improving research capacity at a think tank is a long term process and this study examines only some initial strategies and results. A negative external factor is the lack of a vibrant research environment in universities, among students and even professors. As a result, researchers that become part of GF have – for the most part – limited experience with rigorous research and even less experience with engaging in policy debates. The efforts carried out within the organization can tackle some of these aspects implicitly but cannot replace formal training and education. In this context, hiring researchers with stronger capacities and experience with research is a fundamental strategy for the centre in the future. The challenge remains, however, since there is a high demand for such professionals in both the public sector and universities. This means that processes such as the OCB will still be relevant to strengthen the organization's capacity and its ability to influence policy. For a successful implementation of these strategies, some of the reflections of the work carried out over the last two years in GF can be summed up in four key aspects: i) people, ii) leadership, iii) ethics and iv) a constant reflection on the impact of research in policy.

At the beginning of this chapter we set forward a stylized description of two stages in the centre's short history, an initial phase and a consolidation phase. This chapter reflects on the changes put forward when the limits to the initial strategy were acknowledged and a path towards having more academically sound research started. Now the organization is better equipped to carry out research, more aware of

the complexity of policy analysis and committed to improving its work.

When putting forward a strategy to change the organization it might be tempting to forget that it is researchers who are ultimately responsible for delivering good quality, honest work. The reform efforts in the last two years have prioritized researchers by promoting an alignment between personal development goals and institutional ones. Furthermore, activities of awareness were meant not only to inform researchers but to touch on emotional aspects, to change behavior and attitudes towards their work. Sometimes this meant provoking tension and frustration that inspires and sparks change. As researchers are fundamental in this process, the way in which they are led impacts directly on the work they carry out. A variety of aspects relate to leadership skills – in GF's case – both the Director of Research and the rest of the thematic leaders were highly relevant. Some of the key leadership skills identified include: i) balancing a regulatory approach with one of learning, ii) setting realistic expectations and iii) promoting an environment that allows researchers to work creatively but also pushes their development. Coincidently, strong leadership is crucial to overcome the problems of a young organization such as the lack of coordination among areas, the rotation of staff and the incipient knowledge management systems.

Throughout the process it has become clear that part of the Research Area's roles is to promote an enabling environment for researchers to reflect and develop original ideas. This is a change in the culture of

the organization that has been gradually taking place. So far, the efforts have focused on increasing the relevance of planning out research products and using insights from external revisions and evaluations to improve outputs. These processes have also shown the importance of promoting an ethical environment where researchers take into consideration the relationship amongst themselves as well as with external stakeholders. Although the shift in the internal culture is noteworthy, a broader strategic change in the research carried out has been considered necessary to support the internal changes carried out so far.

Consequently, the Board and team leaders have jointly established a pathway for GF to strengthen its research capacity now not only with an internal perspective, but with an external one. They have decided that a shift will be implemented in the next years to combine different approaches to research with the goal of impacting policy. After an analysis of the context, it has been decided that the organization should balance the improvements made in the two phases of development in order to fulfill its mission. From the first phase described in this chapter the organization should maintain its connection with the policy debates through research focused on monitoring and evaluating policies and programs. From the second phase, where stronger research processes were developed, it should evolve policy ideas and proposals that would enrich current policies.

Finally, the OCB processes in GF show the constant feedback loop between strategy and internal processes. While at the beginning, a new vision of the centre's research capacity inspired a new structure

and procedures, it is this day to day experience of strengthening internal processes that has inspired a strategic change in the organization. Ultimately it is the process of reflection on internal transformation that has probably had the most significant impact of carrying out broader institutional change.

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Annex

Approach	Actions	Key aspects	Enablers	Limitations
Structure and New Processes	- Create the research department. - Go beyond paperwork to action and relevance. - Agenda de participation.	- Gradual approach. - Simplicity. - Communication. - Checks and balances.	- Support from Executive Director. - Active participation and involvement of Board. - Realistic expectations. - Leadership – hiring internally.	- Lack of structure in other areas. - Rotation of staff. - Lack of researchers. - Difficulty collaborating with universities. - No clear incentive structure. - Risk: lack of Funds for long term research goals.
Awareness	- Initial diagnostic. - Share evaluation results.	- Compare perceptions internally and externally. - Objective: change in the goals and objectives. - General overview of individual evaluations and reviews gives an overview of spaces to develop.	- Realizing the personal and institutional dimension of research. - Align personal efforts with institutional efforts. - Creating a space of certain tension and discomfort.	- Different types of researchers: some researchers more activists and other more academic. - Difficult to objectively evaluate publications. - Limited pool of experts for revisions are unavailable.
Implementation	- Follow-up process to research outputs. - Peer review process. - Support to write in peer reviewed journals. - Linking external researchers.	- Power and responsibility shift. - Flexibility to learn in the process how to make meaningful research.	- Having full time staff in a new area. - Staff familiar with projects and topics. - Implementation of Committee to approve projects. - Little research culture in college and university education. - A parallel process of human resources organization, distribution of research responsibilities.	- Weak project management. - Weak data / knowledge management. - Divergent skills. - Lack of practical connection between research and policy. - No clear standards for research. - Difficulty finding reviewers. - Little research culture in college and university education. - External politics. - Researchers tend to forget about the ultimate goal of policy influence.

Chapter 6

Change from Within: A self-reflection of Action Research for Organizational Capacity Building at the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Sri Lanka

Nilakshi De Silva and Priyanthi Fernando

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This chapter documents the experience of the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), a Sri Lankan think tank, which experimented with a group-based, participatory process of organizational capacity building to improve research quality. Set up in 2001 as a non-affiliated, not for profit organization, CEPA aims to balance independent research grounded in the living experiences of vulnerable women, men and children, with policy influence and the ability to respond to the information needs of the development sector in Sri Lanka and the region. To this end, the organization carries out research for client-

based consultancies as well as its own independent research agenda, and also engages in communication and policy influence activities. CEPA strives to maintain a balance between these three different aspects of its work with a view to ensuring its continued relevance and independence as a southern think tank.

CEPA has had an interest in improving its quality of research for some time. As a result, several issues had already been identified and some solutions, such as guidelines and procedures for certain aspects of the research cycle, were already in place. However, many researchers felt that a period of financial difficulties within CEPA had resulted in a shift away from the focus on research quality, to various short term, client driven consultancies. As the financial crisis eased, and CEPA moved back towards a balance between responding to the market, policy needs and the accumulation of knowledge, it was felt that there was a need to systematically address the issue of improving organizational capacity to generate quality research.

The Organizational Capacity Building (OCB) action research focused on improving CEPA's organizational capacity in a holistic way. Multiple activities were designed to address what had been identified by the staff as gap areas, including revisiting and revising existing research quality standards, setting up peer review mechanisms and improving staff incentives for methodological innovation. The OCB action research was also specifically designed to address the question – what is 'research quality' for a think tank such as CEPA whose mandate is not just to generate robust evidence but also to influence policy and practice?

The chapter is organised as follows: part 2 provides a brief background to CEPA as an organization and the context within which it functions; parts 3 and 4 focus on the OCB action research, providing CEPA's rationale and expectations of participating in this activity as well as the methodology adopted. Part 5 discusses the findings from the action research on organizational capacity and a reflection about how change may be happening within CEPA, and part 6 concludes by drawing out some possible lessons from CEPA's OCB experience.

CEPA, in context

The Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) was established to contribute robust evidence for the development of effective national development policies and practices. Its organizational vision is therefore articulated as 'a world in which policies and decisions which affect the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable women, men and children are based on non-partisan, robust evidence which is effectively used by state and non-state actors to influence meaningful change in the lives of the poor'[12]. CEPA was set up at a time when there was a negotiated ceasefire agreement between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and a vibrant 'development sector' supported with considerable development assistance from bilateral and multilateral donors. The overwhelming support from international donors for post-tsunami reconstruction, the end of the war in May 2009, and the post-war development scenario, including Sri Lanka's graduation into a middle income country, are milestones in the country context that

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[12]CEPA strategy document, 2010

have affected the evolution of CEPA's research agenda, its institutional structure, the way it works and the directions of its policy influence.

The original organizational and financial concepts behind CEPA emphasised the idea of diversity and balance. In as much as the organizational structure and way of working emphasised a balance between CEPA's own research, response to the market and a degree of policy influence, the financial concept was based on funding coming from multiple sources such as client-based assignments, long term research projects, and CEPA's own funds generated through interest from CEPA's development fund. In the twelve years of its existence, CEPA has faced many external challenges, one of the most severe being the decrease in donor funding from around 2008/2009. This financial crisis pushed the organization towards an unsustainable pursuit of short term, client based assignments for survival.

This shift in focus had implications for what was understood as research quality within the organization. Many of the client assignments available during this period tended to be advisory in orientation, had very short timelines, limited budgets and lack of emphasis on adequate literature reviews and theoretical frameworks. Lean budgets and unrealistic deadlines for deliverables meant severe pressure on resources and time. Organizational practices to ensure quality, such as close supervision of data collection, multiple researchers cross checking analysis, peer reviews and so on, were increasingly compromised. The core funding support provided through the Think Tank Initiative since 2010 marked an end to this

period, and a welcome return towards the original concept of organizational and financial balance for CEPA. With the return to balance after the crisis period, there was also a greater interest in, as well as space to address, organizational capacity to generate quality research.

CEPA is organised in a matrix structure, with staff mapped to certain competency areas (PIM: poverty impact monitoring, PAM: poverty assessment and measurement, CAP: communications and policy, and FAA: Finance and Administration) and thematic issues (post conflict development, infrastructure, vulnerability, migration and environment and climate change). In practice, CEPA's structure is more fluid and teams are drawn from across the skill teams and thematic areas based on the skills required to work on any given assignment (Figure 1). Research programmes are developed along thematic lines or undertaken to improve CEPA's competency areas, with a view to achieving a balance between long term research programmes and short term client assignments.

Figure 1: Teams and Themes within CEPA

	SKILL TEAMS		
	PIM: Impact Monitoring, M&E	**PAM:** *Synthesis of macro data analysis*	**CAP:** *Policy analysis, communication for development activities*
Infrastructure	SLRC Team	SLRC Team SLRC Team	SLRC Team
Environment			
Migration		SLRC Team	
Post Conflict			
Vulnerability			

(RESEARCH THEMES)
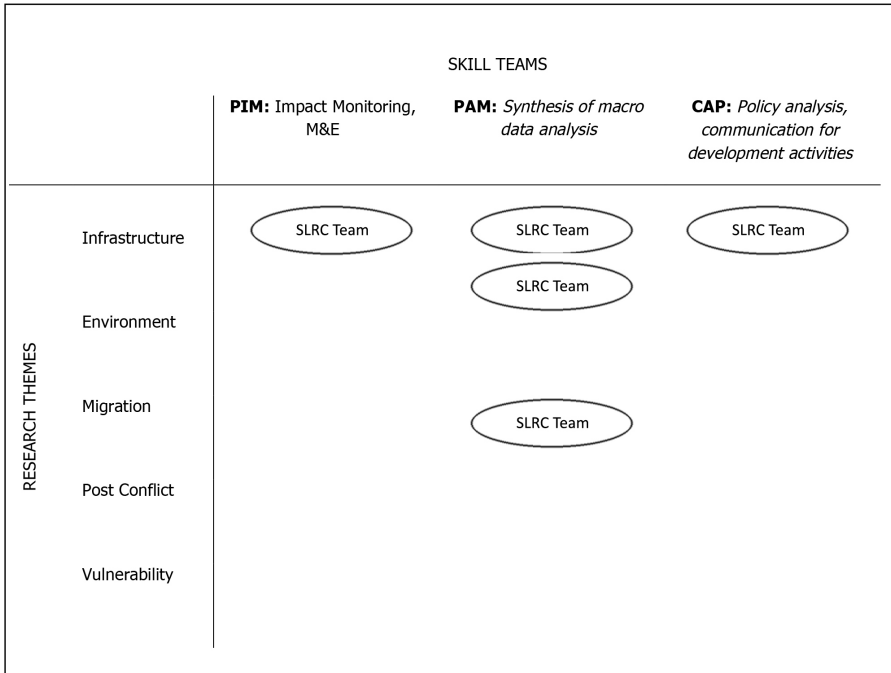
In many ways CEPA is unusual in its organizational culture. CEPA has the characteristics of what is called an "organic organization" where 'rules, regulations, procedures, and policies tend to be few and are defined broadly rather than precisely, loosely rather than rigidly, and are often informal rather than written. Employees are allowed to exercise a great deal of discretion' (Cengage, 2006). At CEPA, decision making is relatively decentralised. Project Team Leaders, drawn from among senior and mid-level staff,[13] together with other members of the project research team, have the authority to decide on the research design as well as all implementation aspects. The full CEPA

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[13]CEPA researchers are categorised as Senior Professionals, Professionals, and Junior Professionals according to education and experience.

team meets every fortnight to share information about activities, resolve 'corporate' issues and get feedback from colleagues on research questions, communication strategies, events etc. The organization emphasises team work. Job descriptions tend to be broad and generalised and mentoring is expected, rather than mandated. Staff members are encouraged to mix across teams and skill groups, with seating arrangements and the lunch hour encouraging such links in an informal atmosphere. Overall, CEPA's way of working has the following characteristics: flexibility, shared authority in decision making, interdependence, a multi-directional communication approach, staff participation in problem solving and decision making - interactively and in groups, and relatively few broadly defined rules, regulations, procedures and processes.

Why OCB?

Producing high quality research evidence has always been an integral aspect of CEPA's *raison d'être*. As CEPA overcame its financial difficulties, research quality re-asserted itself as a key driver of the organization's work. Ensuring quality means taking a non-partisan and independent approach, using robust research methodology, and being relevant and focused on change in policy and practice. The discussions on quality within CEPA have also been influenced by the exposure staff have had through new international partnerships to quality practices and standards of other research organizations, (e.g. the Overseas Development Institute, ODI; the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium; COMPAS at Oxford University, CIPPEC in Latin America, Sustainable Development Policy Institute in Pakistan and so on) and by the drive to be more efficient and financially sound.

Research quality has been the subject of debate at several of the organization's annual staff retreats since its inception. In 2010, when the organizational retreat was held after a lapse of 2 years, the emphasis was on maintaining and improving quality, and staff identified a series of issue areas which needed attention. The OCB initiative provided a useful space to formulate and carry out the activities identified at the 2010 retreat to improve CEPA's research quality.

The push to embark on the OCB initiative came from various sources. First, there was the internal push that came from the organizational vision of providing non-partisan, robust evidence. There was a felt need for clear quality markers that were necessary to ensure that the restructured research agenda following the financial crisis, the expanding workload, the recruitment of new research staff, and the continued provision of client services would not jeopardise the robustness of the evidence produced or undermine research quality.

A second push came from the need not just to carry out high quality research but also *to prove* that this was indeed the case. There were several factors that influenced this need. Predominantly comprising of qualitative researchers, CEPA staff was faced initially with having to prove the robustness of the evidence generated to audiences whose perception of quality was strongly linked to quantitative analysis. Competition for research assignments (a key feature of the financial crisis period) and the need to market CEPA also required proof of research quality. The success in securing a grant from the

Think Tank Initiative (TTI) that had research quality improvement as one of its organizational development goals meant that CEPA was obliged to showcase positive changes to research quality in its regular reporting.

This last factor, the grant from TTI, the identification and recognition of CEPA as a think tank or policy research institute and the reporting this entailed, provided the third push for CEPA to think more systematically about research quality. A think tank or a policy research institute has multiple functions: to produce rigorous and robust research, to respond to the market for poverty research and to influence policy. All these functions have their own quality markers, and this can become a problem when the quality markers pull in opposing directions. For example, the market may demand rapid analysis, while rigorous research may demand a thorough review of the literature. This kind of conflict has been reflected in one respondent's view below.

> 'I also think that we could be more academic in our approach to research, that places more emphasis on literature reviews and linking findings to theories and existing work. I think we are still searching for the right balance between practical, useful, timely and low cost work and academically rigorous work.'
> - Respondent No.15, Staff Survey, January 2012

These conflicts and tensions needed to be resolved into a coherent and balanced set of quality markers that would help CEPA go beyond client satisfaction (the quality marker for market oriented research

consultancies) and peer-reviewed journals (the gold standard for academic research).

The OCB action research programme became the platform through which CEPA could discuss its own responses to the question of what is quality research and the ways in which an organization can prove whether its research is of a high quality, with other like-minded think tanks from Asia, Africa and Latin America. In retrospect, it is likely that the initial push to join the OCB group came more from an opportunity to work with, and learn from, a global group of think tanks, and less from a coherent understanding of 'OCB' and what learning about it would do for CEPA.

Method and Approach of OCB and Action Research

As an 'organic organization' with a participatory orientation, CEPA undertook the OCB project in the same spirit. The initial objectives and activities were identified at the Staff Retreat in 2010. While these were refined further in discussions between the Poverty Impact Monitoring Programme (PIM) and CEPA management and a draft plan worked out, the objectives and activities of the OCB were shared with the staff from an early stage. From the beginning, awareness and the 'buy in' of the staff, especially the research staff, was felt to be important, and to this end, several rounds of consultation and information sharing were carried out. Participation at these meetings was voluntary but the meetings were marked by high attendance. Early in the process, a detailed presentation was made to all staff where the OCB action research was introduced, and at this discussion, all research staff were encouraged to join at least one of

five new groups tasked with specific activities to improve CEPA's research quality. This process of consultation appeared to be successful, as nearly all the research staff joined one of the task groups set up to carry forward the OCB activities.

For administrative purposes, the OCB project is located within the PIM programme team at CEPA. PIM is not responsible for CEPA's research agenda, or for 'the organization', and as such, it may not be the most logical place to locate the OCB project. However, PIM's impact orientation and skills in monitoring, evaluating and identifying lessons from activities was the main rationale for this choice which recognises the value placed on learning from the OCB process. PIM's involvement in the design gave the OCB process a strong emphasis on reflecting, understanding and documenting the lessons, successes and failures of the process. A theory of change of how the OCB activities would lead to the desired outcomes and goals was also worked out (Annex 1), to strengthen the implementation and monitoring processes.

In the theory of change which CEPA used, the problem that the OCB was to address was broken down to a set of inter-related problems as follows:

- There is no overall definition of rigour and quality of research that is understood and communicated to stakeholders by CEPA. Terms such as 'rigour' and 'robust' are used but it was felt that many people used these terms, within and outside

CEPA, without a clear and specific understanding of what they meant in a given context.

- CEPA's existing standards and procedures for ensuring research quality do not represent all stages of the research cycle. The guidelines commonly practiced at CEPA, such as field code of conduct, data entry and data management procedures, are concentrated at the data collection and analysis stages of the research cycle.

- Existing research quality standards are not formalised and are not strictly enforced. There is also, no formalised mechanism to introduce these to newly recruited staff.

- Mechanisms for research quality validation, such as the peer review, are not mainstreamed and have not been consistently applied.

- Staff are not sufficiently proactive to search for new methods and methodologies that may expand existing knowledge on poverty issues.

As these issues did not fall within the job description or mandate of any one position or team within CEPA at the time, working on these issues added to the workload of research staff. Further, substantial work was involved in addressing each of these issues, for example, a review of the existing literature was required to assess CEPA's research quality. To aid this process therefore, it was decided to establish the five groups, which would be able to delegate the work among a number of staff as well as foster consultation and participation, to tackle the problems identified above. The groups, each with between two to four staff, were tasked with addressing

one objective as follows: (i) to define 'research quality' as appropriate to CEPA and develop a set of quality principles for all stages of the research process; (ii) to establish an internal and external peer review mechanism; (iii) to revisit existing research quality procedures, identify gaps and introduce new procedures; (iv) to engage with stakeholders and development professionals to generate a wider conversation about quality at research and; (v) to increase quality of support to staff to encourage greater openness to new methodologies and new thinking in research methodologies. Each group was anchored by a member of PIM, who was tasked with logistics, such as calling meetings and documenting the discussions. As mentioned above, despite the likelihood of adding to the workload of staff, almost all research staff showed enthusiasm for engaging with these activities and volunteered to join one or other of the groups, based on their areas of interest.

In addition, it was felt that there was need for an M&E system to track research quality, which was in line with CEPA's understanding of what research quality is. Unlike the group tasks which necessitated creating new task groups, designing an M&E frame fits within the skills and competencies of the PIM team, and they were called on to design and implement a research quality M&E plan for CEPA. As part of this process, in January 2012, PIM carried out a staff survey on perceptions about CEPA's research quality and to establish the baseline, and repeated it in February 2013. This chapter draws on the analyses from these surveys which provide useful insight on how change may be happening within the organization.[14]

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[14]See Annex 2 for format of the staff survey questionnaire.

From these activities, three main outputs were expected, namely (i) a statement of research quality at CEPA which would guide the staff as well as communicate to stakeholders, such as clients and partners, how CEPA understood and practiced quality in its research; (ii) a complete and comprehensive set of guidelines, which may be contained in a manual, to guide new and old staff undertaking research, through each stage of the research cycle with attention to research quality; and (iii) an M&E frame for research quality, with appropriate indicators identified, and sustainable systems and mechanisms in place to ensure implementation. These outputs reflect CEPA's initial understanding of the avenues through which individual and group knowledge and efforts can translate into organizational capacity. The OCB goal, towards which these activities were aimed, was articulated as follows:

> "all research staff to know what comprises research quality; research is carried out to the identified quality standard; and CEPA has the ability and M&E data to 'prove' its research quality".

The OCB was based around a reflective learning approach. As staff worked on research assignments as well as specific activities within groups to promote organizational capacity for carrying out quality research, they were expected to reflect on what these experiences meant. Reflection was encouraged at three levels: at the organizational level, regular structured meetings where research quality related information was presented and an open discussion

format was used to reflect on the presentation; at the research quality group level, regular progress meetings where groups working on some element of research quality reflect on what was working, progress, challenges etc.; finally at the individual level where the research staff were encouraged to reflect, at least through the annual staff survey, on research quality at CEPA and how their work may, or may not be, contributing to change in research quality.

Data for the OCB research was drawn from several sources. The main information source was documentation of meetings such as staff retreats, minutes of staff and group meetings and individual reflections from formal sources, such as the staff survey on research quality at CEPA. More informal tools such as diaries which contain personal reflections, emails and other exchanges among staff which relate to the research quality conversation at CEPA, have also provided useful information. The data was analysed using Nvivo software, to identify what factors contributed to organizational capacity building and what factors hindered positive change. The main findings from this analysis are discussed below.

Findings

Looking back over the past two years, CEPA is recognisably the same organization but there are some, potentially significant, changes, both at the level of individual researchers and at the level of the organization. An examination of these changes illustrates how CEPA as an organization may be changing and evolving, and can also provide useful insights into how planned changes may be engendered.

Mainstreaming Quality Research into CEPA's Work

One of the most striking changes over the past two years is how discussions on research quality have been localised and broad based within CEPA. From an esoteric conversation that engaged a few senior researchers, research quality has become a regular topic of conversation, discussed in multiple forums and among diverse research teams. Individual researchers have also become more conscious of how their own, day-to-day work, be it in research design, data collection, analysis or reporting, contributes to or detracts from CEPA's overall research quality. This is linked to some internalisation of CEPA's core belief that research quality comes from having quality at every stage of the research cycle, and not just from the quality of the final report or communication output. This internalisation was further encouraged through a self-reflection process promoted through the OCB project. For example, the annual staff survey on research quality asks a question on what specific activities the individual staff member engages in to ensure the quality of their research, which promotes a culture of self-reflection, and perhaps eventually change and improvement.

At the individual researcher level, there is a greater willingness to discuss quality issues in relation to various aspects of CEPA's work, as well as engaging in activities, such as undergoing training on research methods or attending meetings to discuss research quality in relation to a particular study. This greater openness to review and critique is a positive sign of change in researchers' mind sets and shows a real commitment to ensure quality of individual and team work.

Attitude to New Ways of Thinking about and Engaging in Research

Insularity, or lack of openness to new ideas and ways of thinking, can undermine the possibilities of research adding new knowledge, particularly on long standing social concerns. There is now much greater openness among CEPA researchers to link with and locate their research in a wider context. This change is manifested in a number of ways. Firstly, there is greater use of literature reviews and scoping of existing knowledge to help fine tune the research question. This is due in part to greater availability of resources, such as access to journal databases through the TTI, as well as the recent shift towards longer terms assignments which require literature reviews as part of the assignment deliverables. There is a sharp increase in staff participation in conferences, which has increased by close to 100% between 2010 and 2013, again due in part to availability of funds, through the TTI, to support travel and conference participation. Increasingly, more professional level staff are presenting at conferences (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Presentations at Conferences by CEPA staff, 2010 – 2013
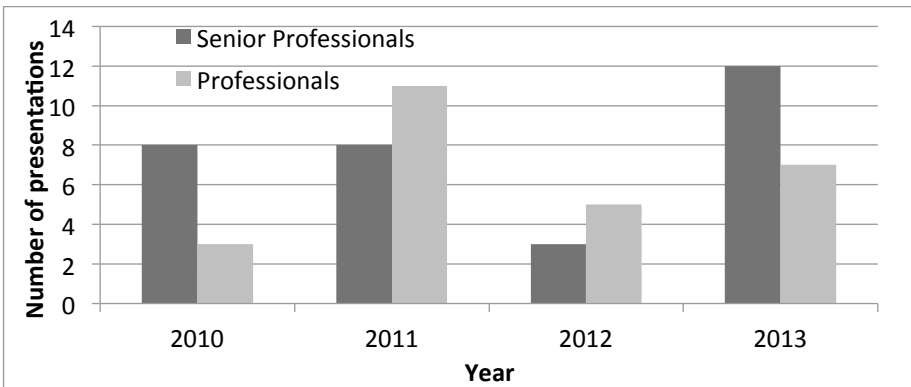
There are also more opportunities for professional level staff to be exposed to researchers from outside the organization as CEPA has recently adopted a policy of encouraging individual consultancies. At the same time, long term programmes which are carried out through global research consortia have helped to expose the staff to working with research partners and through them, to other research, research methods and standards and means of ensuring research quality. These changes are influencing CEPA's research quality which can be seen through greater use of new and innovative research tools and methods, such as, for example, adapting the Citizen Score Card tool for infrastructure benefit monitoring or wider use of Nvivo Software to analyse qualitative data.

Progress towards Defining Research Quality for CEPA
The most tangible change from the OCB process is the development of CEPA's research quality standards. After intense discussions about the theory and practice of research quality, the organization has achieved a better understanding of the concept as defined by academia as well as what may be applicable to think tanks such as CEPA. These standards highlight CEPA's long held belief that research quality derives from ensuring quality at every stage of the research cycle, from research design through to reporting and dissemination (Annex 3). They identify quality criteria for each stage of the cycle; for example the analysis stage (for qualitative methods) identifies three criteria as follows:

- *Procedural rigor*: transparency or "explicitness" of the way the analysis was conducted.

- ***Interpretative rigor***: validating the interpretation, through triangulation of the analysis.
- ***Reflexivity:*** a demonstration by the researchers that they are aware of the socio-cultural position they inhabit and how their value systems might affect the selection of the research problem, research design, collection and analysis of data.

Such criteria are currently being used as the basis on which an M&E system to monitor CEPA's research quality is being developed.

Interestingly, before the quality standards were developed, the staff survey also showed that several researchers were concerned that there may not be a sufficiently common understanding of what quality is, and that in order for organizational research quality to improve, such a shared understanding would need to be promoted. Now that quality standards have been developed and linked to an M&E process, this suggests potential pathways from individual to organizational capacity and back again, as individual concepts of quality are consolidated into organizational level statements which then reflect back on the work of each staff member.

Improvements in Procedures and Guidelines
CEPA had a series of guidelines which were developed by the staff over the course of the past twelve years, to respond to the demand from within CEPA to systematise and maintain quality in relation to its work. Many of these procedures relate to administrative aspects, but there are some which relate to research quality such as a staff code of conduct in the field, guidelines for planning field research,

CEPA reporting format, referencing and policy on translation. A drawback to their use, especially by new staff, has been the lack of a systematic way to introduce these guidelines to staff as well as to enforce and monitor compliance.

Through the OCB project, staff accessibility to CEPA's procedures and guidelines has improved with all guidelines now available in one easy to find location. This has helped to increase awareness and use. While this activity has also helped to identify gaps in the research process, it is often demand from individual staff members which creates the urgency to actually develop and implement guidelines. For example, as CEPA moves towards mainstreaming the internal and external peer review system to ensure research quality, the Communication and Policy (CAP) team, whose responsibilities include ensuring and enforcing quality of research outputs, has developed a set of guidelines for the peer review process.

Organizational Research Quality M&E Framework
One of the problems identified at the start of this action research is CEPA's limited ability to show or prove its research quality as a think tank. The design of an M&E framework to generate such information, which is also appropriate for the organization's vision and mission, efficient to use and effective, was tasked to the PIM team.

A framework has been designed and is being piloted within CEPA. It consists of three pillars, namely (i) monitoring the quality of the research processes; (ii) monitoring the quality of research outputs; and (iii) systematic reflection and learning (Annex 4). A series of tools,

many of which are reviving and enforcing existing procedures, have been developed to collect the M&E data relating to the three pillars. For example the Process Reflection Form, which should be completed at the end of every research assignment, provides information on the quality of the research process by requiring the team to reflect on the fit between the research objective and the methodology, the effectiveness of the methods used and policy relevance of the research. Similarly, the Client Feedback Form provides information about the client's acceptance and response to the assignment carried out by CEPA. While the three pillars of the M&E frame reflect CEPA's core belief that research quality is achieved by meeting quality along the entire research cycle, the tools of data collection and indicators of quality adopted by the M&E frame reflect CEPA's need as a think tank to have a level of research quality that combines academic rigour with market responsiveness and policy relevance.

Systematic reflection and learning is the third pillar of the M&E system. The annual Staff Retreat will continue to provide the main space for staff to reflect on CEPA's research quality, but it is hoped that this reflection will be more effective and focused as it will be based on reporting from M&E data over the past year. In addition, a new fortnightly meeting has been introduced into CEPA's calendar to provide a space to discuss quality relating to ongoing research. At this 'Tuesday Meeting', researchers volunteer to present their work, focusing on methodological and quality issues relating to a stage of the research cycle, for quality review by peers within CEPA. There has been a good response to the Tuesday Meeting, with high levels of attendance and staff reporting that the discussion helps to keep the

research quality agenda in the forefront of everyone's minds. There is also a high demand to have individual research projects discussed at these meetings and studies for review have been identified for several weeks ahead.

There are challenges in developing a suitable M&E system to monitor CEPA's research quality. In the spirit of how this entire exercise was undertaken within CEPA, the orientation of the M&E system too is largely towards improving rather than towards reporting to management or other external parties such as donors. As such, indicators identified so far tend to be largely qualitative or based on degrees of quality. Since CEPA's organizational culture does not respond well to traditional incentives and penalties at the individual level, such as those linked to remuneration, *encouraging* staff, through support and example, to ensure research quality remains the guiding principle. In line with other activities under this project, the M&E system too is being developed in a participatory manner, with constant reflection on its adequacy and effectiveness.

Discussion and Reflection: Pathways to OCB
Looking back over the last two years, it can be seen that within CEPA, the OCB action research did not follow the theory of change that was originally envisaged. As shown in Annex 1, the OCB project was designed to be implemented in a linear manner through five newly created groups, where members volunteered on the basis of their interest in some aspect of CEPA's research quality. Assigning staff to pieces of work based on interest has been an effective strategy in CEPA but in this case, it did not yield the expected results. As can be

expected some groups were more interested and motivated than others, and the work completed reflects this variance. Almost all the groups met between 3 – 5 times over the course of one year, but then eventually collapsed. Time pressures from other more pressing assignments was cited as the most immediate reason for this collapse but to some extent, varying levels of capacity and interest in the issue within these groups may have also contributed to insufficient motivation to work as a team.

However, while the OCB groups collapsed, the tasks assigned to these groups have been picked up and worked on by other existing teams within CEPA. For example, the CAP team has developed a peer review mechanism independently of the OCB group assigned to develop such a mechanism; the funding and proposal writing team is generating a demand for CEPA research quality statement which can be shared with clients; and the admin team has supported the development of a policy to encourage senior and mid-level staff to engage in individual consultancies to help incentivise methodological innovation. These changes are linked to the individual and group based reflexive processes through which the OCB project was implemented, and also the strongly participatory orientation through which CEPA works. As individual staff members understood the importance of certain elements and activities, they came together in other teams to initiate change.

Why and how these changes, which were begun through the OCB, have progressed outside the OCB project provides further credence to CEPA's organizational culture as 'organic' and based on 'bottom-

up' processes. Change happens through individual buy-in rather than through hierarchical rule based enforcement. Introduction of new structures (groups with specific allocated tasks) helped stimulate and fosters group and individual reflection. Although these structures proved temporary, they engendered a vibrant discourse on research quality throughout the organization. OCB meetings were open to all the staff, research as well as non-research staff, and many attended even if they did not actively participate in discussions. At these meetings issues of research quality were discussed in the abstract, as well as practically in relation to CEPA's work. Because they were open to everyone, it can be seen that over time these discussions helped promote a multidirectional, decentralised, and informal conversation on research quality within CEPA. In this culture therefore, it appears that organizational capacity for quality research is being built through an organizational form of osmosis than in a more linear, directional manner, which further reinforces the need for sharing of information and ideas, across traditional organizational boundaries regardless of position, or team.

At the same time, the OCB experience suggests the need for balancing this bottom up process with structure and leadership. Halfway through the action research, a question arose as to ownership of the OCB work plan among the involved researchers, and whether asking staff to engage in these activities under the OCB / TTI name could undermine their buy-in to the reflection process. The PIM team, which led the OCB project within CEPA, was particularly concerned about this:

> '[the team] discussed the issue of 'ownership' and these activities being called 'OCB' – GL[7] felt that there may be some resistance when activities come as 'OCB' as opposed to CEPA ... AB[15] noted that the way we present it, the OCB has taken over quality conversation at CEPA – for example in the time sheet and in the server, quality issues, the progress of the groups are tracked under OCB, which promotes people thinking of quality conversation as something we are doing _for_ OCB, and not something we are doing for ourselves...KF[7] on the other hand, felt that unless we had the OCB tag people would not have worked on it, these issues were identified for many years but we are systematically working on them only now. She didn't feel there was any problem in what we called the work.'
>
> - Extract from PIM team meeting minutes, April 4, 2012

As a result of the above discussion, the PIM team stepped back from the Action Research. Perhaps due in some part to this, the groups set up under the OCB project slowly ceased to function over time, while other teams took up and carried on their work. Overall, now that there is broad-based staff buy-in to the research quality conversation, it may also be timely to consolidate this energy into more formal, organizational level processes and systems. While PIM has stepped back from the OCB, it continues to provide leadership on monitoring research quality within CEPA, a function it is well suited to do as the repository of M&E expertise within CEPA. Activities are also underway to formalise the research quality statement into a manual / resource pack for existing staff as well as to induct new staff. Finally, there is a move to build on the work done to define and identify research quality for CEPA by supplementing the internal peer review

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[15]_Initials used in quotation refer to staff members who contributed to the discussion_

process with a research advisory committee, which will draw on external experts to provide additional support to research teams through the research cycle of each study.

Conclusion

Understanding what research quality is for a think tank is a challenging task, not least because of the wide variation between such organizations in terms of context, vision, mission and goals. Given its commitment to providing robust evidence to support change in development policy and practice, CEPA works within a fluid and unstable context; post war, Sri Lanka is undergoing many changes in the political, social and economic spheres, and the external environment facing the country is also changeable and uncertain. Responding with quality research to the problems and issues critically facing the development sector in the country requires a relevant and effective understanding of what 'research quality' means for CEPA, as well as indicators and information to know and prove its quality and to maintain its reputation and credibility in a volatile environment.

The OCB project helped CEPA to think through some of these issues, less from a hierarchical rule enforcement orientation and more from a participatory orientation, which in itself encourages out-of-the-box thinking. CEPA is now much closer to defining its research quality, which goes beyond an academic focus on robust methodology, to reflect the needs of the context within which it works and the core values it holds. Individual staff members constantly show their awareness of these issues as well as enthusiasm to ensure research quality in their own work. It remains to consolidate the progress of the past two years into systems and structures which are in line with the organizational culture and which will, in fact promote quality

research. It is hoped that the research quality M&E system would help to guide this process.

At the end of two years, there is also progress towards a better understanding of how to build organizational capacity within CEPA. Firstly, CEPA's strategy to build organizational capacity was strongly focused on the individual - not however through traditional means such as training, but by encouraging group and individual reflection. The strategy relied heavily on individual researchers understanding the importance of research quality and what this entails in their work, as well as having the commitment to carry out the activities required to achieve such quality in their work. There are no individual incentives for carrying out high quality research and no individual penalties for producing anything less than quality work. What standards and guidelines there are, remain unenforced and there is no explicit penalty imposed by the organization on individual researchers for failure to follow these guidelines. Instead researchers are encouraged to pursue research quality through regular discussions and feedback, which functions as a non-threatening form of peer pressure. This, it is clear, is a longer and more uncertain route to organizational capacity building. Yet, in an organization such as CEPA it can be more rewarding and sustainable in the longer term as staff, both junior and senior, are given the space to think innovatively and critically, and together, come up with customised solutions.

Reflecting on what has changed, it is possible to see the pathways through which this kind of individual change can translate into organizational capacity building. More staff members have bought

into the need to ensure a common understanding of research quality for a think tank, as well as to showcase the quality of their research. As a result, there is a strong demand from within CEPA to articulate and document 'CEPA's research quality standards'. These standards reflect CEPA's institutional memory and in some ways the tangible aspects of OCB. There is also recognition of the benefits of working in teams where skills may be transferred through hands-on training. These are further ways in which individual capacity can translate into capacity of other individuals and thereby into a larger, organizational level capacity.

This is a process that can be led internally from within the organization. In the case of CEPA, the OCB action research to address research quality was led by research staff, and not by management. The participatory nature of CEPA's culture led to some re-assessment of PIM's role, part way through the study. But the noticeable slowing down of activities when PIM disengaged from pushing the research quality agenda confirms the need for champions within the organization to provide leadership and structure, at least until the initiative has taken hold within the organization.

Overall, participating in the OCB action research has helped CEPA to become more organizationally self-aware. It has generated momentum to engage with the issue of identifying and improving the organization's research quality and provided insights on how to set about doing this in a way that could result in sustainable, stable organizational capacity building. The most satisfying achievement is that while CEPA has changed for the better through this process,

these changes were achieved while maintaining CEPA's participatory, supportive and organically oriented organizational culture.

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Annexures

Annex 1: CEPA's OCB Project – Theory of Change

- CEPA is unaware of its own research quality
- No consensus on what comprises research quality – within CEPA and among (relevant) research community

PROBLEM

| Mixed perception of CEPA's quality among staff, clients, peers, target audiences etc. | Have quality standards for some aspects but not others, patchy implementation | Staff incentives are not geared towards ensuring research quality |

| Group 1: review standards and identify gaps | Group 2 and 3: identify (external) markers of quality – lit and KPI | Group 4: establish mechanism for (internal and external) peer review | Group 5: identify staff capacity needs and plan for CB |

ACTIVITIES

Periodic Reflection

Group reflection – *minutes (every meeting, monthly?)*

?

Individual reflection – *reflexive documentation tool 1 (Quarterly)*

CEPA-wide reflection
1. Group Feedback Meetings - *reflexive documentation tool 2 (quarterly?)*
2. Retreat – *documentation*

OUTPITS & OUTCOMES

CEPA quality statement	CEPA quality manual / guideline	Research quality Monitoring System
		- Indicators identified
		- Functioning and sustainable mechanism in place

All research staff know what comprises research quality; Research is carried out to the identified quality standard; CEPA has the ability and M&E data to 'prove' its research quality

Annex 2: Staff Survey Questionnaire on Research Quality

The Staff Survey is an open-ended questionnaire administered to all staff through Google Docs. It was carried out in January 2012 and repeated in February 2013.

The Questionnaire
1. What do you understand by "research quality"? How do you recognize high quality research?
2. What do you think about CEPA's research quality? Is it high / middle / low? Why?
3. Do you think CEPA's quality of research has changed over the past year? In what ways? Why?
4. In your opinion, what contributes most to CEPA maintaining and improving its research quality?
5. In your opinion, what is the biggest challenge CEPA faces in maintaining and improving research quality?
6. What do you currently do to ensure the quality of the research you do?
7. During the past year, did you make any changes in the way you work, to increase the quality of your work? If so, what are they? And why did you make these changes?
8. In relation to your own work, what helps you most to ensure research quality?
9. For you, what is the biggest challenge in ensuring quality in your own work?
10. Are you a member of any group working on strengthening CEPA's research quality?
11. How do you think the work your group is doing, is contributing to CEPA's research quality? Give an example/s.

12. Is the work of your group completed? Are any tasks outstanding? Why?
13. Any other comments, thoughts, questions or unresolved issues (including thoughts on this questionnaire...)?

Annex 3: What does 'Research Quality' mean for CEPA?

For CEPA, the definition of research quality needs to cater to, and be useful, practical and relevant for its situation, i.e. its work as a think tank. The following are some emerging, overarching criteria which provide the base for developing a quality statement for CEPA.

- Methodologically sound, scientifically rigorous, conforming to the quality standards set out within the methods
- Clear, relevant research questions and appropriate methodology that would provide accurate, non-partisan evidence
- Situated within the available literature and using a sound theoretical frame
- Fit for purpose (fit between research and the way the findings are likely to be used)
- Relevant
- Timely
- Ethical treatment of respondents, participants
- Analysis disaggregated for various groups, such as women, ethnic groups
- Honest and thorough reporting

In parallel, CEPA staff has also begun the process of identifying quality criteria along the stages of the research cycle. While this process is still ongoing and substantial aspects, such as research conceptualisation is still under development, the following are some of the ideas that are emerging:
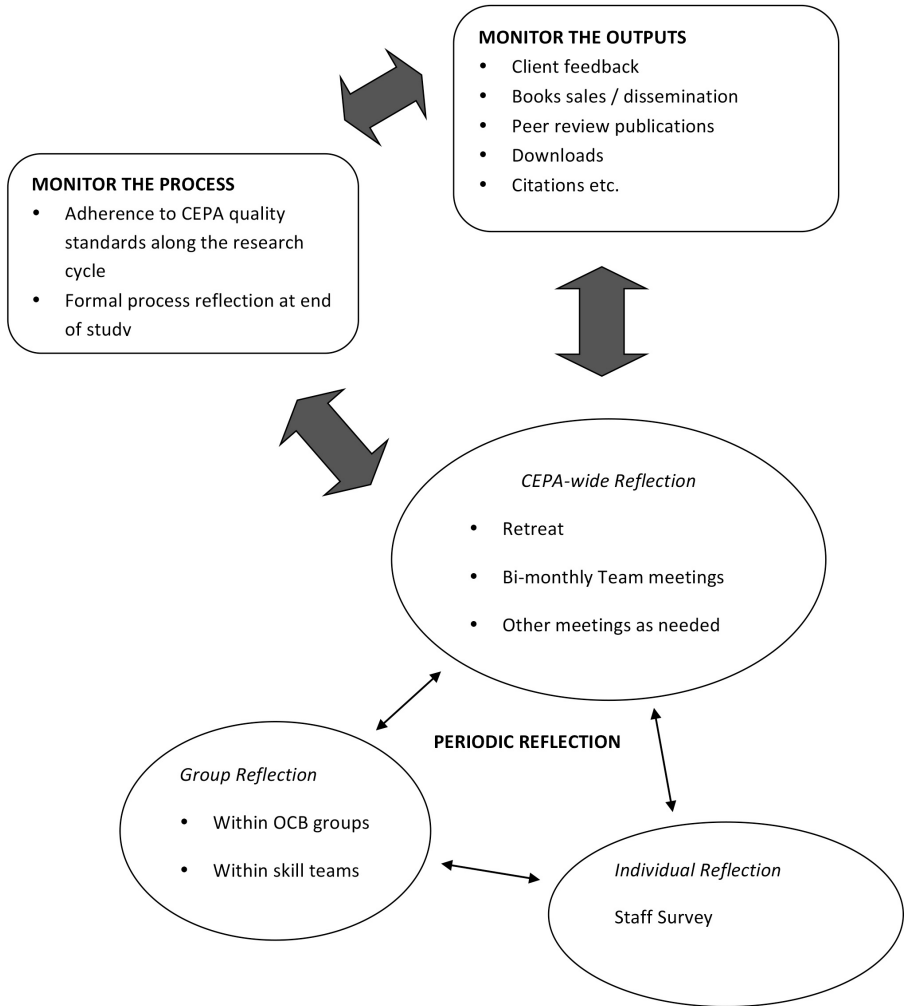
Steps	Criteria
Research Design:	***'Strong' Research question:*** relevant, new, focused, researchable, clear and justified in terms of a background and previous work (e.g. literature review/contextual analysis) ***Explanatory Analytical Framework:*** fit for purpose, grounded in theory, internally coherent and consistent. ***Robust Methodological Framework:*** operationalises the analytical framework, provides rationale for choice of methods, opportunities for triangulation, and draws on what we know works ***Validated by Peer review***
(a) Conceptualisation Step	***Coverage:*** how decisions about suitability and quality of materials to be included, are made ***Synthesis:*** How well the literature is summarised, analysed and synthesised ***Significance:*** rationalisation of the practical and / or scholarly significance of the research ***Methodology:*** analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the methodologies and research techniques used ***Rhetoric:*** coherency of the arguments and clear structure of the review
(b) Literature Review Step	***Validity***: correspondence between the data and conceptualisation, including sampling frame ***Reliability:*** consistency of instruments to gather the information on more than one occasion ***Adequacy:*** coverage and completeness of the data ***Ethical:*** informed consent, privacy and security of respondents, treatment, conditions and safety of the field team *Additionally, for qualitative data collection:* ***Richness:*** data is rich in detail about the living experiences, events and situations of respondents, expressed in their everyday language and containing meaning and emotions ***Reflexivity:*** researchers have critically and explicitly reflected on the methodological limitations of the research and excluded the possibility of personal values entering the data collection process. ***Accuracy:*** data collected is reflective of and records the views and ideas of the respondents
Data Collection	***Procedural rigor***: transparency or "explicitness" of the way the analysis was conducted. ***Interpretative rigor:*** validating the interpretation, through triangulation of the analysis. ***Reflexivity:*** a demonstration by the researchers that they are aware of the sociocultural position they inhabit and how their value systems might affect the selection of the research problem, research design, collection and analysis of data
Data Analysis (Qualitative Methods)	***Addressing of objectives***: the aim of the research as set out in its terms of reference are clearly defined and addressed through the report. ***Clarity of Message***: report follows a clear structure, is methodologically sound and presents the findings or conclusions in an objective manner. ***Editorial accuracy***: report or assignment follows CEPA's guidelines for writers and editors, uses the Harvard referencing guidelines and is written in clear, grammatically correct language.

Reporting	**_Timeliness:_** appropriate timing when the subject is topical and talked about externally **_Clarity and integrity of the message:_** coherence of the research **_Relevant audience_** (includes the findings being shared with the respondents) **_Appropriate communication output for customised audience_**
Dissemination	

Source: Presentation made to CEPA Members, AGM, 2013

Annex 4: Outline of CEPA's Research Quality M&E Frame

MONITOR THE OUTPUTS
- Client feedback
- Books sales / dissemination
- Peer review publications
- Downloads
- Citations etc.

MONITOR THE PROCESS
- Adherence to CEPA quality standards along the research cycle
- Formal process reflection at end of study

CEPA-wide Reflection

- Retreat
- Bi-monthly Team meetings
- Other meetings as needed

PERIODIC REFLECTION

Group Reflection

- Within OCB groups
- Within skill teams

Individual Reflection

Staff Survey

Chapter 7

Insights and Lessons from the OCB Action Research

This book addresses a key question. How does a think tank build its organizational capacity, and in particular, how does it use its enhanced organizational performance to strengthen its capacity for research? Each of the five organizations that participated in this action research faced a different set of challenges and opportunities in their quest to achieve their full potential. After a thorough self-assessment which included looking at weaknesses within the organizations with a view to improvement, the authors have presented their findings through a series of self-reflective and deeply informative cases. Each case has taken the reader through the challenges and opportunities experienced by the organization, and insights into how these were addressed. This in turn allows us to reflect upon some of the lessons learned throughout the process. In doing so, the authors identified four sets of cross-cutting themes:

- perceptions of change moving from the individual to the organization;
- the importance of organizational culture;
- understandings of resilience and sustainability; and
- the potential for policy research organizations to shape their external environment through the changes they themselves experience.

Reflections

Capacity building from the Individual to Organization

Building the capacity of individual researchers is an integral aspect of OCB in policy research organizations. These often take the form of direct approaches, such as staff attending external and internal training programmes. SDPI, for example, has a strong in-house training programme which responds to the needs identified by staff, and has recently provided training on a variety of topics, including monitoring and evaluation, data analysis, presentation and writing skills. Although training still remains popular, the organizations profiled in this study have moved beyond that traditional capacity building approach, and have also adopted less direct approaches to promoting individual research capacity. These include mentoring, and various forms of peer review.

Mentoring is highlighted in almost all the cases as an effective method of capacity building for research quality in individuals as it provides the ability to learn on-the-job and within the limitations imposed by the context, especially for less experienced researchers to learn from more experienced and knowledgeable senior researchers. Given the limitations of individual training, which too often is carried out in a relatively sterile class room environment, the experiences of these organizations point to the effectiveness of on-the-job mentoring to build capacity for quality research. These efforts require the dedication and commitment from senior researchers, who must devote time and energy to developing the skills of junior researchers. Fortunately we have seen many cases where this has indeed happened.

Peer reviews have taken the traditional form of peers reviewing written outputs but also via customised meetings where researchers can present their studies to their colleagues and peers for review and feedback. Peer review guarantees high quality of research outputs but also as a means of developing research capacity of the staff.

Mentoring and peer review often target and support individual capacity building. However, by institutionalising these processes within the organization, we may see a shift towards organizational capacity building. For example, the case studies highlight a number of ways in which organizational systems and structures enhance the process of researcher capacity building. Supportive systems can relate to processes for performance recognition, staff assessments and other staff incentives, including monetary incentives in certain cases, although financial rewards are often a rather controversial issue. In order to keep up the momentum of good work by individual researchers, IEA Ghana felt that recognition and celebration were necessary at the organizational level. Incentives included acknowledging professional prowess and contributions of individual, opportunity for staff to participate/present at prestigious forums nationally and internationally and/or monetary rewards for younger staff members for writing papers. IPAR Rwanda used a combination of "reward and punishment", which they feel has helped to reduce certain perverse incentives at the organisational level. Sometimes this involved making tough decisions, including the termination of contracts, but the strategic use of rewards has led to overall

confidence building of a relatively young and inexperienced research staff.

There is of course a need to compare sustainability of any incentive scheme with the sustainability of the outcome. Financial sustainability of monetary incentives is no doubt a dilemma. Therefore IEA linked its annual appraisal system to the award of annual increments. Through this approach, self-reflection on the reasons for the performance output and an associated need assessment were inculcated in the staff. As another example, Grupo FARO has an annual fund to support staff participating and presenting papers at international conferences, thus gaining exposure to a wider set of experiences and also contexts. However there is no single formula for what is effective. What works and what does not work in a given situation seems to be driven largely by the organizational culture prevailing in that organization. Even so, there have been some real achievements demonstrated through these five cases, leading to enhanced team work, reforms in the existing research culture, and very critically, an expanding pool of more experienced researchers which in turn is necessary for sustaining change in the long term.

The cases have demonstrated a variety of strategies used to promote individual and organizational change with a view to strengthening the capacity to carry out high quality research. In most cases, these strategies reflect the values placed by the organization on the preferred balance between individual capacity and what can be seen as organizational capacity. Although separating personal capacity and organizational capacity in terms of research is complex, the cases

demonstrate that individual capacity development by itself is not sufficient; it needs to be combined with more collective approaches, coupled with the introduction and strengthening of structures and systems at the organizational level.

Organizational Culture

In all five case studies in this book, organizational culture has been a crucial influencing factor when deciding on the best strategies for an organization. It also acts as a lens through which staff or the organization view the success and failure of the actions carried out, and consequently come to conclusions on what has worked well – and what has not. The concept of organizational culture as an informal social system and shared assumptions, beliefs and values among the different members of an organization is not new. The link between organizational culture and organizational performance has also been the subject of much research, most of it focused on the performance of private sector organizations in developed countries. Still, there has been relatively little attention given to organizational culture of policy research organizations, particularly those based in the global South.

Although the action research processes described in this book did not explicitly seek to examine organizational culture, the authors have identified several 'bright spots" through documenting their experiences. The descriptions of organizational structure and of ways of working among team members presented in the case studies help to show how aspects of organizational culture influence the nature and pace of organizational change as well as the organization's perception of, and striving for, improved research quality. The

variance in organizational culture within an organization appears to be determined by a number of factors: the distribution of power, the nature of transactions, the strength of commitment to the larger group, the level of trust, the way in which status is conferred, the amount of risk taking that is encouraged, the priority given to rules and to time, and the orientation towards past, present and future (O'Reilly, 2013). As our case studies show, engagement in an organizational capacity building process and focus on research quality has a reciprocal impact on the culture of the organization.

Policy research organizations that have an "organic" culture (CEPA), or 'participatory, inclusive and deliberative' as Grupo FARO describes itself, tend to have open and receptive day to day relationships, and regular collective activities (e.g. staff meetings, retreats) that create continuous opportunities for learning. They are naturally geared towards reflexivity. Others with a stronger sense of hierarchy may require a process such as the OCB action research to stimulate the introduction of an internal reflective process that brings together experienced and junior researchers. The process of joint reflection enables the internalisation of change, and is seen to lead to greater motivation and greater commitment to the larger group and to the organization's goals. A participatory culture may require organizational change to be introduced more gradually, as experienced by CEPA, and may need to be balanced with a more intense and challenging organizational environment that takes staff out of their comfort zones. In turn, this may help to stimulate creativity and innovation in research.

Organizational culture also influences what researchers see as incentives for better performance. In some think tanks, the culture of participation and commitment leads researchers at every level to take responsibility for research quality, irrespective of monetary or non-monetary incentives. Their motivation derives from the status accorded to them by their peers, and the recognition that they are contributing to the overall objectives of their organization. For example in IPAR Rwanda, mentoring of junior researchers by senior staff to assist them in publishing their research outputs helps to build a sense of self-confidence and prestige which can reinforce further quality research.

Maintaining research quality, and institutionalising organizational capacity also requires managing institutional memory. As part of the action research process, a culture of systematic documentation helped make an important contribution to institutionalisation of organizational development processes.

While much can be learned about the influence of organizational culture from the cases described in the book, a critical perspective is needed to apply any of these lessons in other contexts. Policy research organizations, coming from very different traditions and with distinct vocations have, as a result, myriad organizational cultures. Given that organizational culture was such a powerful influence in these change processes, it seems wise not only to appreciate its importance, but also where possible to understand it well (through analysis and evaluation) before any significant actions on capacity development are taken. In this sense, carrying out the

OCB process from within, with staff members that knew the spirit and nuances of the organizations – even tacitly - was a crucial element for success.

Resilience and Sustainability

Sustainability is one of the major struggles highlighted in the case studies. While the immediate goal of the OCB action research endeavors was to improve research quality and thus clarifying their identity and reputation as high performing policy research institutions, the institutions also shared a medium to long-term goal of becoming more sustainable. This would enable them to become more resilient to shocks, both external and internal. This longer term goal of sustainability was arrived at due to various reasons: whether the spur was a challenge in the form of financial sustainability (SDPI & IPAR Rwanda); external political challenges (Grupo FARO); or the teething pains of growth and expansion (IEA, CEPA & Grupo FARO).

At Grupo FARO, the overarching goal of sustainability was to be achieved through diversity. As the institution embarked on the second stage of its development in 2009, it recognized the need for greater cross cutting and coordination between its various thematic areas. At IEA, as the institution embarked on a phase of expansion, the focus was on research improvement by internalizing and mainstreaming research strengthening mechanisms as opposed to relying solely on training workshops and other external tools.

At SDPI, the focus of the institution was to increase diversity of thematic work and a sound mix of short-term, medium-term and long-term work, which ensured the institution's financial

sustainability while simultaneously improving research quality. At IPAR Rwanda, also faced with financial challenges, improving research capacity was seen as the central aspect of guaranteeing the sustainability of the organization and reducing its dependence on consultancy work. Both IPAR Rwanda and SDPI were wary of becoming consultancy based institutions as opposed to thriving research based policy think tanks. Finally, CEPA took on the challenge of improving research quality through a thorough internalization of the action research process. In doing so they introduced a participative mechanism where the entire research staff of the organization was involved in the process of organization capacity building.

Although there are clearly differences in their drivers, the common theme across the five organizations was the idea that improved research quality would represent (among other things) an increase in the organization's sustainability. While this was more clearly indicated in some cases compared to others, the theme of organizational resilience through greater quality and diversity of research work emerged as a repeated goal.

The financial situation of each think tank was an important contributor to its relative resilience, and also a determinant of its sustainability. Indeed, the impact of a financial crunch acted as the impetus for some organizations to engage in a process of organizational change. The question of funding and its relevance and importance to research quality in think tanks is an essential one to address. The development of Think Tank Initiative (TTI) has to an

extent been informed by other programs of support to policy research think tanks, for example, the work of the African Capacity-Building Foundation (ACBF), the former Secretariat for Institutional Support for Economic Research in Africa (SISERA) managed by IDRC, the work of the Open Society Institute (OSI) in supporting think tanks in Central and Eastern Europe, and the Australian government's support to the Knowledge Sector Initiative in Indonesia.

Several important lessons emerge from these experiences. The first is the need for a long-term perspective. The experience of ACBF support to policy research think tanks in particular throws light on the fact that major improvements in organizational performance and financial sustainability are unlikely to emerge within a short time-frame. This is particularly true in difficult operating environments like much of sub-Saharan Africa, where prospects for stable government funding are limited, and where technical resources to support organizational development are typically scarce. A second key lesson is that long-term core support – while critical – is insufficient on its own to engender the kinds of changes in organizational performance envisioned by the program.

The five organizations presented in this book generally depend on two major sources of funding - project based funding and core funding – although the balance between these varies significantly from case to case. While project based funding is by nature restrictive and dedicated to a specific set of activities, core funding (such as that provided by the Think Tank Initiative) offers a wider range of options on how the money is spent. The availability of funds which could be

allocated to undertaking certain activities was important when deciding to embark upon and carry out an OCB initiative. Core funding provided the opportunity for each organization to create time and space for OCB related work. It contributed to needed salary costs of staff to undertake the work. It was also a means of enhancing organizational capacity to attract, recruit and retain researchers who could become involved in OCB activities, alongside their other research roles. All the organizations featured in this book were also able to utilize the options created through core funding to invest in capacity building of junior staff members – a contribution that generally is difficult to source from consultancy and short-term project income. This is a significant factor in ensuring long-term sustainability.

The importance of long-term financial support is indicated by some of the following factors:

• Long term collaborations and partnerships with institutions in the U.S and Europe can be aided through core funding to institutions in developing countries, by facilitating joint research projects – this ensures that together organizations can address global policy matters effectively.
• Opportunities for policy research may change over time depending on the political environment or new ideas, and policy research organizations can be more prepared for these kind of opportunities if financially strong.

- Impact on policy changes increases over time as the credibility of the policy research organization with policy makers increases. It is therefore essential to maintain high quality research.
- Often policies need to be modified or adapted according to external and internal influences/changes. Policy research organizations need to have a strong financial foundation to ensure that they have an infrastructure to support those changes, for example through ongoing data collection or tracking of indicators.

Ultimately, the goal is for organizations to value and plan for investments in their organization independently. However, organizations may need assistance to accurately assess their own weaknesses, to identify appropriate sources of external training, mentoring and advice, and to monitor implementation of changes. While the long-term goal is to permit organizations to manage these kinds of change processes on their own, lessons from experience underscore the need for active support and mentoring, particular in the early stages of change.

The policy research organizations featured in this study are all important members of the civil societies of their respective countries. The issue of relevancy and credibility is therefore of grave concern for them. For the sake of financial sustainability, in the absence of core funding, these organizations were forced to rely on donor funded projects. While these projects can be topically relevant, they often come with their own sets of deliverables, timelines, and outputs and outcomes that do not correspond with the policy cycles of national

politics. The result is inevitably a loss of creativity, and a restriction on the innovation of research ideas. Core funding offers reprieve from this roadblock which can greatly constrain the ability of think tanks to be forward-looking, responsive and innovative. Through core funding, policy research institutions are given the breathing room to pursue unsolicited research activities that are relevant to the policy environment in which they operate.

Core funding is not the sole answer to the research quality puzzle, however. The case of IPAR Rwanda highlights the limitations of core funding in serving as the sustaining and driving force of OCB. Prior to receiving the TTI grant the organization was receiving funds from the African Capacity Building Foundation and the government of Rwanda with the salaries of all except four researchers drawn from this fund. The withdrawal of funding from the Government of Rwanda left them devoid of 30% of their income. If the funding is not actively channeled towards enhancing research quality, it can become a crutch for think tanks. IPAR Rwanda has met this challenge head on, as have the other four think tanks featuring in this book, using the TTI grant to develop research capacity through the OCB process to the extent that they are able to raise multiple sources of income - thereby spreading the risk and ensuring sustainability.

Finally, core funding has been crucial not only because it has given the organizations the space to carry out innovative research or hire better researchers, but because it allows room for reflective approaches, including action research for organizational change to occur.

Shaping the External Environment

The analysis of the cases so far in this chapter has focused on the internal context of the organization. However, every organization is located within a wider context. In their efforts to make a difference through their work, policy research organizations are not simply focused on the academic quality of their research but see it as a basis for a wider purpose of informing and changing policy in the national, regional or even global context. In short, they wish to be relevant. The cases reveal that the work on developing their research capacity goes hand in hand with their capacities to influence policy. This is clearly reflected by the debates that the organizations have gone through internally to identify exactly what research quality needs to be, in relation to their identity and context. By challenging the solely academic notions of research quality, the organizations themselves become agents of change by stretching the boundaries of what is understood by useful research with the potential to influence the external environment. As a result, the process of reflecting on the quality of the research also entails reflecting on the organization's impact on the external context.

The OCB process also encouraged the organizations to increase their interactions with the external environment. This has given them the opportunity to strengthen their research capacity by learning new research tools and methods that help them to address national policy questions. They have widened their networking with researchers and peers in other organizations, participated in external trainings, and developed collaborations with peer reviewers based in other institutions.

In terms of observable results, it would be a step too far to suggest that the OCB process could be linked directly to changes in relevance and visibility of these five organizations. However, the cases reveal that while implementing the OCB process, all five organizations have been either invited to participate in new international research projects or engage in governmental task forces. Although these are not final markers of their influence, we could form a working hypothesis that improving research quality will help generate, in the middle and long term, more opportunities and growing organizational capacity to inform policy.

Conclusion

It would be oversimplifying to suggest that these lessons and insights are applicable to any policy research organization undertaking a process of OCB through action research. As noted in the introductory chapter, this study set out to test theory in practice. The findings suggest that there are indeed strong signals that a structured, long-term process of reflection and action, with a high degree of organizational commitment and involving both individual engagement and organizational reform, can bring about real, positive transformation – in overall performance, and specifically in the quality of research.

A summary of key lessons regarding goals, drivers, benefits and challenges is provided in the following figure.

Goal of change
Improved research quality
Shared understandings and ownership of organizational needs
Reflexive culture within the organization
Established community of practice on OCB
Strong, sustainable organization

Drivers of change
Technical needs for quality improvement
Desire for relevance
Financial consraints/crises
Policy windows open for engagement with data and analysis
Need to incentivise performance of staff
Gaps in information and knowlededge management

OCB

Benefits
Research quality strengthened and quality assurance mechanisms
Improved organizational processes, structures
Improved organizational M&E
Enhanced relationships within and between institutions
Increased incentivisation of staff
More conducive organizational culture

Challenges
Time and staffing constraints
Difficulties in assessing the causes of change and the extent to which change has become institutionalised
Competing organizational priorities (bringing in funding, engaging in public debate, publishing research vs managing a process of OCB
Sustaining the change - "making it stick"
Documenting and managing information over time
Maintaining a participatory, reflective, learning-orinted culture when under resource constraints
Establishing the link between individual capacity building and OCB

Several conclusions may be drawn out on what is needed to support a successful OCB process, which hopefully will encourage further reflection, and even experimentation, by other organizations interested in capacity building and change:

- Increased capacity at the individual level feeds into organizational capacity. In terms of the approaches used to build organizational capacity for quality research, three elements seem to have been particularly useful in all the organizations engaged:
  - Coordination and teamwork is encouraged and rewarded
  - Mentorship is essential for the development of young researchers
  - The goals of the organization and the researchers working within it are aligned.

- There was huge value in finding the bright spots in the culture of the organizations. Organizational reflexivity can actually support the building of organizational capacity for quality research. Systematic documentation of that reflection can also help retain and strengthen the institutional memory as a way of reinforcing positive change.

- Flexible financial support facilitates OCB in policy research organizations. Core funding in particular appears to create spaces and allow innovation at the organizational level that might be difficult without this type of resource. This reinforces

the belief of the Think Tank Initiative and its funders, that core funding is a crucial element in the building of organizational capacity building. There is no doubt however, that unless policy research organizations explore and put in place mechanisms and processes that help them move towards sustainability, core funding may remain a temporary crutch; with its removal, the organization may face serious challenges in terms of performance or even survival.

- Deliberately creating a space for organizational learning and reflection is highly valuable as a promoter of change. The organizations that participated in the OCB process of course may have introduced some of the changes and actions described in the chapters independently of the action research project. Participation in the OCB initiative was possible, however, because the organizations themselves had already identified research capacity as a key aspect of their development. At the same time, all the organizations valued the opportunity of reflecting on the process, as well as sharing it with each other. Through the various forms of interaction involved in the OCB process (monthly conference calls, periodic face to face meetings), the participants in the action research entered a very rich dialogue about what worked, what did not and why. This was both informative and an important source of collegial reflection which stimulated individuals to consider questions that they would not perhaps thought of themselves.

- Action research seems to work well as a facilitator of capacity building within what, fundamentally, are knowledge driven organizations. The fact that progress is being recorded, analyzed and evaluated is a part of the action research approach that seems to appeal to researchers and that relates to their own work.

- Despite their academic orientation, the action research approach – and particularly its reflective, inclusive dimensions, helped participants move beyond a rational, research based approach to capacity development. Time and again we saw that change happened through development of positive relationships and an inculcation of values including mutual trust and respect. Almost by default, the approach touched upon emotional dimensions, and in this sense each organization "brought the elephant back in" to their collective efforts to promote positive organizational change.

"Making it stick" – the quest for sustainability
The long term impact of the OCB process in each of the organizations of course has still to be seen. How are the gains and advances achieved through OCB made to "stick" (Heath and Heath, 2007)? Are these changes that set the organization firmly along a road towards sustainability, or are they temporary fixes that fall away without significantly changing the nature of the organization? What are the factors that appear important if the capacity built up is to be sustained – or, as Ortiz and Taylor (2009) ask, how can it become "standing capacity"?

Throughout the cases, it is clear that maintaining the spirit of the organization, creating a sense of belonging as well as personal motivation were key elements of success. Combining rational and emotional aspects, both at the personal and the organizational level allow for change to occur and stick. Following a participatory and inclusive approach proved highly conducive to ownership of change by a wider group of staff. Furthermore, and as noted above, the OCB process allowed the think tanks to share their experiences, with those of others in different contexts and on different issues. Exchange among the participating think tanks was not only a source of innovative ideas to problems in each ones institution; it was an exercise of learning from each other's experiences. Explaining and sharing the process through an ongoing dialogue constantly allowed each organization to elaborate a better understanding of its own experience.

The gains made in the OCB processes within the five cases in this book all face the test of continuity, given that the goal of OCB is to make a significant, lasting, positive change in the organization. We believe, from the experiences described that there are five key factors essential for achieving a sustainable organizational transformation.

- **Ensuring clarity and inclusiveness at the planning stage:** Clarity of the objectives of change proved crucial. The likelihood of sustainability of the organizational change was determined right from the start - at the planning stage. Clearly

setting objectives was very important to design insightful activities and to develop ownership of the processes introduced. Staff members needed to be fully aware of the objectives set forth in order to own it. This was essential since the needed change was required not only in one-off behaviours, but also in the mindset and habits of researchers. All the organizations followed an inclusive approach, allowing various stakeholders within the organization to become aware of institutional needs and gaps. Importance was attached to relationships and team-building, and attention was paid to values, trust and mutual respect. At the planning stage, input was received through surveys, planning meetings and retreats according to the context of each organization. This allowed the staff to recognize the need for change, own the activities and become custodians and implementers of the plan.

- **Institutionalizing processes**: Shared ownership of a plan was not enough to support deeper change. Once plans were set in place, it proved important to institutionalize the processes adopted to bring the required change. To implement the OCB process, identification and support of the core team or unit responsible for ensuring implementation, follow-up and assistance was crucial. Depending on the structure of the organization, the think tanks chose either an existing unit – such as the research coordination unit, capacity building unit or the Director of Research office – or to form a specific group for OCB. In some cases the mechanism changed over time. Independently of how the core team was composed, some of

the think tanks also established completely new mechanisms to give continuity to the process and to maintaining contact with the rest of the members of the organization.

- **Strengthening knowledge management**: At times, all five organizations faced the challenge of incorporating the OCB processes into their day to day operations. In some cases, changes were made on an organization-wide basis; in others they were piloted with smaller groups, in accordance with an agreed plan. Whichever strategy was taken, the cases demonstrate that for the changes introduced to stick, maintaining a reflective perspective throughout the full process was vital. This in fact was a key feature of the action research process, whereby the think tanks developed a plan, acted (through implementing the plan) and then took a step back to reflect on what was taking place. This allowed the organization to fix any glitches that they observed along the way, or to respond to unexpected outcomes (both desirable and undesirable) encountered in the process. They could discuss, and learn from, why some strategies failed, and find ways to institutionalize those that were worth maintaining.

- **Maintaining ongoing organizational reflection:** documenting the knowledge produced as part of the process of OCB supported reflection, and was also a means of producing evidence to feed into valuable organizational discussions. This helped prevent the various processes from becoming stale, keeping them on track and minimizing the impact of disadvantageous changes, such as members of the team

involved moving on. It also proved useful (even if sometimes tedious) to maintain systematic documentation of key processes. Ongoing reflection allowed approaches that might be perceived as relatively risky to be reviewed and adapted more continuously such as the use of incentives.

- **Financial Sustainability:** Due to lack of core funding at an earlier time, many of the organizations in this book were forced to engage in "responsive research", for example by undertaking frequent, short-term consultancies. This works well in the short term in terms of responding to immediate needs but often these needs are determined by external factors. However in order to respond effectively to local needs there needs to be long term sustainability that includes, a strong infrastructure, retaining qualified research staff, building their careers and allowing them to grow within the organization. Core funding helped these think tanks to engage in long-term planning, establish their own research priorities, strengthen their policy engagement and communication capacity, and pursue research and engagement that is responsive to national needs and opportunities, all of which contribute to the organization's long-term sustainability.

Looking forward

The experiences described in this book have been immensely valuable for the action researchers involved in all five institutions, and indeed for a wider group of staff who interacted in many of the processes. They have also been very important for the Think Tank Initiative which, as noted in the Foreword to this book, seeks to

support think tanks in strengthening their organizational performance, research quality, and policy engagement and communications. There is no doubt that questions over how best to help think tanks build their organizational capacity will still remain. The lessons and insights from the OCB experience reveal a great deal of learning on how think tanks can build their own capacity, and how a program such as the Think Tank Initiative can provide support most usefully. Sometimes this is simply a question of providing the financial resources, to give the space for organizations to reflect, identify new directions, take steps forward, and adjust their path as they go. At times, there is a more facilitative role that external actors can play, in accompanying an organization in its efforts to become stronger and more sustainable.

Perhaps the most important lesson from this shared work is that change needs to come from within. Incentives of different kinds (both internal and external) may help to drive change, but ultimately it is the energy, interest, relationships and commitment of an organization and its staff which seems to lead to the most significant transformation. The action research described in this book promoted an institutional readiness, a necessary prerequisite for positive interaction. By setting aside time and space to come together and share new directions in a mutually supportive environment, researchers found ways of improving existing mechanisms and exploring nascent ideas within their organizations. Hopefully these experiences will help to lead them, and others, on a path towards long-term sustainability.

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Policy research organizations, or think tanks, undertake research, analysis and engagement on a wide range of topics as diverse as poverty alleviation, budgetary analysis, institutional governance and social inclusion. Their work enables both policymakers and the public at large to make informed policy decisions. Worldwide, the number of think tanks is steadily increasing. Evidence also suggests that think tanks are having an ever greater influence on policy-making in many countries, so the credibility and quality of their research is hugely important for their reputation. In 2010, five think tanks supported by the Think Tank Initiative in Africa, Asia and Latin America embarked on a journey of organizational capacity building. Using action research as their navigational and motivational tool, they shared a common vision – to strengthen their institutions, and the quality of their research efforts. This book tells the stories, in their own words, of the organizational and processes changes that took place, the challenges and successes encountered, and the lessons learned along the way.

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ThinkTank
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