## TTF Organizational Development Grants Portfolio Review Summary and Follow-up

Vlad Galushko presented the parameters, findings, and lessons from the portfolio review. TTF had decided to examine its organizational development grants because this type of funding constitutes the largest share of its support to the field of policy research. The review came at a critical juncture, after the Fund had transitioned from core to organizational development support.[[1]](#footnote-1) It highlighted two findings: successful think tanks were more relevant in policy discourses and their greater relevance came as a result of consistent investment in organizational capacity. Among several lessons learned, Vlad emphasized the need to pay closer attention to the link between policy relevance and organizational development and to improve internal governance as a prerequisite to strengthening think tanks’ impact.

The subsequent discussion revolved around four questions:

* ***How to define a strong think tank?***

Chris Stone pointed out that the portfolio revealed variations in strength among think tanks within the same performance cluster. It also showed that worse-performing organizations could at times be stronger than their better-performing counterparts. Joern Gravingholt remarked that we should measure the success of a think tank not by its ability to cross a certain threshold, but by the distance it has travelled to improve. This would account for the different starting points at which think tanks begin reforms. Masha Djordjevic said the defining feature of a strong think tank was the capacity to be strategic about key parameters of operations and research. Vlad added that while such organizations use the framework of our grants to chart a path of development, they set their own pace and ultimate destination.

Jacek Kucharczyk stressed the need to broaden the concept of strength to capture wider policy relevance. Some TTF grantees (like UIPP in Ukraine) might not be classified as successes, but the individuals who lead them have contributed significantly to the policy field. Goran Buldioski raised the question whether in these situations TTF should provide fellowships to those policy experts who support our values, but have no appetite or ability for building a viable organization. Heather Grabbe used an example from the UK to show how a political cycle in the 1990s affected the policy relevance of pro-Labour think tanks. Responding to her remarks, Vlad noted that in Georgia expertise and knowledge of the policy process, not political connections, had helped our recent grantees influence decision-making. Goran emphasized the need to ensure that think tankers leaving for politics fully exit their policy organizations.

* ***How to balance elite and public aspects of policy conversations?***

Chris noted that think tanks should mix their outreach to different types of audiences. He hoped an organic division of labor would emerge with time between different groups. Heather asked whether policy groups should favor lighter outputs to catch the attention of ordinary educated stakeholders, or heavier products to earn research credibility and the trust of experts. Vlad answered that the specific output depends on the type of audience think tanks want to reach. TTF encourages grantees to think of any thematic analysis as an onion, where different layers (i.e., policy formats) are interesting to different audiences. Goran remarked that in Central Europe now many think tanks do not have a choice but to reach beyond discredited elites or risk losing trust by association. Such outreach requires modifying their products to make them more accessible for non-experts.

* ***How do differences in operating environments affect think tanks?***

Chris questioned whether the review exaggerated the differences in operating environments in the West and transitional democracies. Specifically, he pointed to the struggle of Western think tanks to be heard and to the prevalence of personal bias in policy-making. Goran responded that while TTF does not idealize the policy environment in the West, it believes policy data is more available to Western decision-makers if they want to reach it. Many Western capitals also have a greater number of voices advocating policy alternatives, which is not the case in the countries where TTF operates. Jacek agreed, underscoring that under the circumstances even think tanks considered mid-rangers in the portfolio review performed amazingly well.

* ***What should TTF do differently?***

Vlad stated that grantees should invest more in organizational development. Therefore the Fund should encourage our applicants to better conceptualize and sequence those interventions. Masha added that at this point TTF is better positioned to monitor grantees’ progress than in the past because it has developed an extensive list of indicators. Though not used prescriptively, the list can prod their thinking on organizational development. Goran said TTF should also look more at the maturity of think tanks. Assessing this factor would enable the Fund to design ways to help less mature organizations in addition to our grant. Diane Stone agreed and commended the improvements in the applications TTF receives, but noted the need for onward mentoring.

The discussion turned to the role of governing boards in mentoring grantees. Chris was interested in how TTF can balance mentoring on some issues and leaving it to boards on others. Masha described the evolution of the Fund’s approach on internal governance to provide a tailored response to grantee challenges. For example, in certain instances TTF recommends think tank rely on advisory boards as a means to receive external input while bypassing rigid national legal regulations on governance. Goran noted that if successful, boards provide more hands-on engagement than a donor. However, their composition also matters. For instance, Masha said she advised TTF grantees in the Western Balkans against including politicians or public figures on their boards because they rarely have time to provide substantive contributions.

## Next steps and follow-up

The portfolio review produced four lessons that remain relevant after the discussion. The first is the scope of change that think tanks decide to pursue within organizational development grants to make change digestible and long-lasting. The second is striking a healthy balance between formalizing new reforms and implementing them in practice. The third is bringing the issue of internal governance and the role of boards to the forefront of any think tank reform agenda. The final lesson is connecting internal strength and development with policy relevance.

The portfolio discussion drew out three additional aspects. First, TTF should conceptualize how it defines the strength and policy relevance of a think tank. Doing so would provide a basis for monitoring the progress of our grants. Second, the Fund should develop a set of monitoring and evaluation indicators to assess the effect of our intervention. TTF already administers a baseline diagnostic survey prior to awarding a grant and requires applicants to submit an implementation plan for each year of our funding. It is now only a matter of connecting these instruments into a coherent whole to enable tracking key indicators over time. Finally, TTF should improve the onward mentoring component of its support by designing a package of “plus” assistance that would offer tailored options in addition to our grant to less mature organizations.

1. For definitions and differences between these types of support, please consult the TTF Portfolio Review Document, pp. 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)