First Think Tank Initiative Learning Event: Strengthening organizational learning and performance of policy research institutions through monitoring and evaluation

<u>Focus of the event</u>: Developing an evaluation culture in policy research institutions.

<u>Participants:</u> Executive Directors, and 1 additional staff member with hands-on responsibility for M&E in the organization

<u>Timing and location</u>
8-10 March, 2010, Nairobi (All Think Tank Initiative partners to mid-day on 10th)
10-11 March, 2010, Nairobi (additional day for Francophone partners, mid-day on 10th to mid-day on 11th)

<u>Background</u>
Monitoring and evaluation is a key dimension of organizational performance and adaptive management for all organizations, including independent policy research institutions. There is increasing interest in not only the creation of a strategic approach to M&E at the organizational level, but also in the development of an "evaluation culture". This infers of course, that a desirable evaluation culture is demonstrated by an organization placing a positive value on evaluation, and integrating it within its overall strategy, as well as paying particular attention to monitoring and evaluating change throughout all processes in which it is involved. A well-developed evaluation culture may be indicated by evidence that the majority of members in an organization:

- accept the use of evaluation
- understand why the organization uses evaluation
- can design or get advice on design of necessary evaluations
- make practical use of evaluation, particularly to support processes of organizational learning and development
- refer to a known, shared policy about evaluation in the organization.

In addition, an evaluation culture is likely to be underpinned by a set of shared values and principles. These may relate to the culture's orientation (action and learning-oriented), its philosophical stance (inclusive, participatory, responsive, transparent, reflective, self-critical, constructive) and its aspirations (interdisciplinarity, truth-seeking, forward-looking, ethical and democratic). Achieving all of these aims is challenging for many organizations. It is rare to find all in place, and difficult to create a shared view amongst all members of an organization. In the Think Tank Initiative, we are interested particularly in how evaluative thinking may sustain three key outcome areas: research quality; organizational performance; and research-policy linkages. This learning event is an important moment for peer learning. It will help to increase knowledge and awareness of M&E approaches amongst Think Tank Initiative partners, and is an

opportunity for sharing existing experience as well as to identify steps forward to strengthen existing practices.

<u>Aims of the learning event</u>
This workshop aims to help participants recognize the importance and need for evaluative thinking within their research organizations and to become aware of how this helps to promote research quality, effective policy influence/outreach, and the development of a strategic approach to research. The event will provide a series of concepts, practices, methods and tools that are conducive to the development of an evaluation culture within research organizations, and consequently will be helpful for the elaboration of an institutional M&E strategy. It will explore ways in which evaluative thinking can enhance some key organizational performance areas, including leadership, incentivization and motivation of staff, and managing the external boundary of the organization. The event will also provide an opportunity for participants to identify key learning topics for further peer and group learning activities.

<u>Learning outcomes</u>
Following the event, participants will be able to:
1.   promote an evaluation culture within their organizations through a strategic approach to M&E
2.   develop their capacity for evaluative thinking, in order to enhance research quality, effective policy influence/outreach, and the development of a strategic approach to research
3.   propose a process and key steps to be taken within their own organization to support the development of an evaluation culture
4.   identify possible future learning activities and support required for institutional strengthening.

Outline programme

Day 1, morning: part 1 - introductions and reconnecting; introducing the learning event
Facilitator: Peter Taylor

<u>Goals of session</u>
1.   Shared understanding of the programme, expectations and learning process
2.   Exchanged perspectives of M&E strategy and implementation in the Think Tank Initiative and opportunities identified for enhancement
3.   Identification of Think Tank Initiative partner M&E strengths and weaknesses, and of potentials for supporting evaluative thinking.

<u>Content</u>

- Reconnecting partners in the Think Tank Initiative and short update of progress since the Think Tank Initiative launch in Dakar.
- The Think Tank Initiative monitoring and evaluation strategy and impressions of partner institutions of its implementation

Day 1, morning: part 2 – **localizing understanding of useful evidence: why attention to pathways of influence may help our research**
Presenter: Sanjeev Sridharan, University of Toronto, Canada

Goals of session
1. Appreciation of benefits of an evaluation culture in research organizations, and of innovative ways of thinking about evidence and pathways of influence
2. Awareness of alternative M&E approaches and methods used by Think Tank Initiative partners in their research activities

Content
1. Introducing concept of localized evidence and pathways of influence
2. Notions of evaluative thinking and an evaluation culture
3. Examples of good organizational practice informed by evaluative thinking
4. Experiences from partner organizations regarding their approach to M&E

Day 1, afternoon: evaluative thinking and research quality
Plenary Presenters/facilitators: Stephen Yeo, Centre for Economic Policy Research, UK; Ernest Aryeetey, Brookings Institute, USA.

Goals of session
1. Expanded understanding of evaluative thinking and research quality
2. Examples shared of M&E good practices that contribute to strengthening research quality - from different contexts and from Think Tank Initiative partners

Content
- Review of external experiences, approaches and methods for M&E in relation to research quality
- Sharing understanding of monitoring and evaluating research quality in Think Tank Initiative partner organizations
- Expanding awareness of strategies and approaches for leadership that promote evaluative thinking for research quality (Executive Directors only)
- Understanding of practical methods and tools for M&E of research quality – what is currently being done, and what could be done in future (Think Tank Initiative partner staff with M&E responsibility only)

Day 2, morning: evaluative thinking and research-policy linkages
Plenary presenter/facilitator: Enrique Mendizabal, Overseas Development Institute, UK

<u>Goals of session</u>
1.   Awareness of potential of evaluative thinking for increasing policy influence
2.   Appreciation of contributions of M&E for leadership and management in navigating complex policy systems
3.   Awareness and understanding of M&E methods and tools that support and promote research-policy linkages

<u>Content</u>
- Locating evaluative thinking within research and organizational strategies for policy influence
- Leadership and management capabilities to support navigation of complex policy systems (including political, social, institutional dimensions), whilst safeguarding independence of policy research institutions– scanning the external environment, gathering relevant information, decision-making for policy influence (Executive Directors only)
- M&E Methods and tools to support policy influence by research organizations (including case studies of innovative methods tested in policy research organizations) (Think Tank Initiative partner staff with M&E responsibility only)

Day 2, afternoon: evaluative thinking and implications for organizational learning and development
Session facilitated by Peter Taylor and members of Think Tank Initiative facilitation team
Inputs from event presenters and Think Tank Initiative partner organizations

<u>Goals of session</u>
1.   Awareness of M&E approaches and methods that support organizational performance of policy research institutions
2.   Recognition of key leadership capabilities required to promote an evaluation culture in policy research institutions
3.   Understanding of methods and tools that support M&E operations and practice within the organization
4.   Identified goals for building evaluative capacity in each partner organization, and strategies to achieve these goals (possible actions, available resources, etc.)

<u>Content</u>
- Dimensions of organizational leadership that promote an evaluative culture; practices (consultations, etc.) and approaches needed to define the organizational mandate and the long term research agenda (examples, case studies)
- Methods and tools required to operationalize M&E at the organizational level (examples, case studies of how to "take the temperature" of the organization, e.g. organizational assessment approaches, indicators of organizational performance)

- Developing a set of institutional goals and a strategy for achieving these (each Think Tank Initiative partner works on its specific situation, supported by interaction with Think Tank Initiative team, resource persons and other participants)

Day 3, morning (event ends at mid-day)
Facilitators: Think Tank Initiative team, supported by Wieteke Beernink (independent consultant, the Netherlands)

Morning: Goals
1.   Agenda developed for support to Think Tank Initiative partners in meeting their M&E related goals
2.   Identified potential for Think Tank Initiative support in other themes/issues for organizational learning and development
3.   Process to take forward a Think Tank Initiative learning agenda – linking monitoring, evaluation and research

Content
- Debriefing on outputs from day 2 and reflections on the first learning event.
- Discussion of areas and themes of interest to partners for further learning events and/or support
- Building a process to take forward the Think Tank Initiative learning agenda

Day 3, afternoon and day 4, morning
Facilitator: Adama Ndiaye (independent consultant, Senegal)
Support from resource persons as required

- Continuation of learning event for French-speaking participants to address any issues emerging that require further exploration through French medium.

Evaluation of the event
This event, as the first in a series of learning activities, provides an important opportunity to reflect with partners on how best to provide a support to organizational learning and development within the Think Tank Initiative. A structured process will be designed that enables all participants (from partners, Think Tank Initiative team, resource persons and facilitators) to reflect on different dimensions of the process (preparation, the event itself, and future directions), to provide feedback that is brought together and recorded in a coherent way, and to inform future actions and planning for similar events. In this sense, the evaluation will follow a developmental approach, and be grounded in evaluative thinking that also provides a useful model for participants. The evaluative process will be supported by an external consultant/facilitator, Wieteke Beernink.

Methodology

The learning event will promote a sharing of relevant experience of M&E amongst Think Tank Initiative partners through peer exchange, as well as providing input on specific topics (approaches, tools, methods, etc.) from experienced resource persons. The event will combine both plenary and group sessions on the key topics, with the main emphasis on experience exchange through facilitated discussion and debate. A small number of formal presentations, ideally drawing on some stimulating case studies, will be scheduled to introduce state-of-art concepts and approaches. Some of these may be provided by participants who have already begun to develop an M&E strategy. For some sessions, participants will be divided into groups according to their organizational role (e.g. Executive Directors, and staff with hands-on roles in M&E).

Pre-event preparation
A pre-event electronic discussion (using the Google groups facility) will be supported (and moderated) in mid-February, lasting approximately 1 week. The aim of this e-forum will be to provide a space for participants to begin sharing experiences, challenges and opportunities for M&E in relation to research quality and policy influence. This will serve to raise interest in the theme of the event, and to help highlight some key issues in advance that will benefit the Think Tank Initiative team and resource persons in preparation of their sessions

An overview of key literature relevant to the theme, and listings of available M&E resources and support will be prepared in advance of the workshop.

Documentation of the event and follow-up
Key inputs (review of literature, resource listings, speaker presentations) will be collected and made available to Think Tank Initiative partners. Written outputs from each session will be documented and made available on demand to all participants. Think Tank Initiative partner statements of goals and intended approaches to support M&E within their organizations will be collected for further use and action by the Think Tank Initiative (via Programme Officers, or via future learning events and activities). A short "highlights" briefing on evaluative thinking in policy research institutions may be made available as a Think Tank Initiative output from the event. Opportunities for further dialogue/engagement around the theme of the event will be discussed during the final session, and a plan will be developed which provides support to this as far as possible.