



FINAL REPORT, April 18, 2019

External Evaluation of the Think Tank
Initiative (TTI) Phase Two, 2014-2019

Ian Christoplos Adam Pain Jups Kluyskens Pierre Fruhling

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents the overall findings, conclusions and recommendations from the external evaluation of Phase Two (2014-2019) of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI). Conclusions related to effectiveness, outcomes and impact are presented, as well as lessons to be learned from the TTI experience.

The Think Tank Initiative (TTI) was a remarkably ambitious, large and long-term effort with the purpose of supporting selected think tanks. It ran over a period of ten years (2008-2019) and provided support for 43 think tanks in 20 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, with a total budget of well over CAD 200 million. The overall goal was to strengthen independent policy research institutions in developing countries “to ensure that research results inform and influence national and regional policy debates”. The main part of the support provided consisted of core, non-earmarked funding. This modality was then combined with capacity development, monitoring and advisory support from TTI staff located in the different regions and from external experts, focusing on three broad areas: research methods and skills, policy engagement and communications and organizational effectiveness.

MISR, Uganda – developing a vision within a governance vacuum

It might be assumed that strong governance is a precondition for strategic planning and achieving visionary reforms in a think tank. The MISR experience suggests that this is not always true. Both before and after TTI support began, MISR had been operating without a clear and operational governance structure. Despite this, the organization has undergone a fundamental restructuring and has a clear vision for its work.

At the start of TTI Phase One a new director was appointed who ‘inherited’ a strategic plan for 2007- 2017 that was weak and completely unaligned with the needed reforms. Furthermore, MISR’s governance structure as a somewhat autonomous institution within Makerere University had ceased to function. TTI Phase One and the beginning of Phase Two have involved MISR using the ‘space’ provided by TTI core support to take the time and allocate human resources for exploring ways to continue internally-led strategic planning even without a governance structure in place to approve formal plans. Until early 2016 this planning primarily involved building structures and institutional arrangements within MISR focused on critical reflection over pressing research needs and defining responsibilities for guidance and direction in the absence of more formal governance oversight.

TTI support has proven vital for both enhancing the physical facilities at MISR and creating conditions for flexibly exploring new and more appropriate areas of research. The RPO (Regional Program Officer) also provided a discussion partner throughout. During 2017 an independent commission reviewed MISR’s work and concluded that MISR had achieved extraordinary results in raising the standard of MISR social science and humanities research. MISR’s innovative approaches were even cited as a lesson for broader university reforms.

This process highlights how TTI’s flexible core support can create conditions for finding alternative paths to forming a strategic vision and decisive management, even without the underpinnings of governance and strategic planning that often are assumed to be essential.

Giving young researchers the space to find their own roles in the policy arena

EDRI (Ethiopian Development Research Institute) in Ethiopia and MISR in Uganda, though very different types of organizations, both demonstrate strong commitments to providing young researchers with the space they want and need to define what policy issues they judge to be salient for the future of their countries. This is central to developing their own roles and careers in informing this discourse. MISR does this through a doctoral program with broad themes that give researchers the space to redefine key policy questions to reflect broader historical and cultural evidence. EDRI has done this by using TTI (and other funding) to arrange international degree training for promising junior staff who, upon their return, have been given considerable leeway in pursuing projects and partnerships

that reflect aspects of Ethiopian development policy where they identify knowledge gaps.

When asked why these outstanding young researchers stay at EDRI when they return, despite low salaries, the researchers and leadership emphasize that it is this freedom which provides the incentive to continue

... using research to reframe the policy discourse

Research by MISR into the history of land restitution in Burundi is an example of how their research is designed to reflect a long-term historical perspective, relating issues to the precolonial and colonial periods as well as the different phases of the development of the Burundi Land Commission. Also, the overall research program of which this study is a part (*Beyond Criminal Justice*), emphasizes a perspective outside of the narrow focus on victims and retribution pursued elsewhere. The research was designed to take the reader through the history of how land issues have been addressed and help to understand the limitations of continuing on similar paths. In research such as this, MISR situates its analysis as “theory making”, which is intended to take a distinctly different stance than from what MISR refers to as the “how-to guides”, which dominated MISR’s work before becoming part of TTI.

This “theory making” is, by nature, somewhat removed from the immediate concerns of most policy actors, but it exemplifies the range of entry points that grantees apply in their efforts to reframe policy discourses –from stimulating academic debate on underlying theoretical perspectives to discussing the concrete dysfunctions of incentives inherent in public sector salary scales that are out of sync with grand developmental ambitions.⁸⁶

CASE STUDY 18

Name of the grantee:

MISR, Uganda

Project:

Land restitution in
Burundi

Introduction

This doctoral research exemplifies how MISR develops the capacity of young researchers to undertake policy relevant research in difficult contexts. It also shows how a doctoral research project, no matter how relevant, may have inherent limits as a vehicle for proactive policy influence.

Background and purpose of the project

Haydee Bangerezako is a PhD fellow from Burundi and became interested in approaching land conflicts from a criminal justice perspective due to awareness of the importance of dealing with recurrent occupation of land of people returning after having been displaced. The role of the Land Commission and how its policy and decisions are tied to ethnicity were of such importance to Burundi in the future and for understanding political violence.

Main features of the planning process

Haydee introduced the topic at meetings at MISR and it was approved. A clear advantage of studying the issue at MISR was the ability to design the research to reflect a long-term historical perspective, relating issues to the precolonial and colonial periods as well as the different phases of the development of the Land Commission. Also, Beyond Criminal Justice, the overall research program of which this study is a part, emphasizes a perspective of outside of the narrow focus on victims and retribution pursued elsewhere. The research was designed to take the reader through the history of how land issues have been addressed and help to understand the limitations of continuing on similar paths.

MISR's research is explicitly characterized as being situated in "theory making",

which is intended to contrast the past (pre-TTI) focus on “how-to guides”, which situates the research in relation to how it may relate to policy formation.

Steps taken to ensure rigour and general research quality

The PhD fellow had clearly considered how to plan her research in order to assure quality despite challenges related to the extremely constrained political space in Burundi. The conflict in Burundi constrained the kind of data that could be collected, and she had to adapt the methods to the opportunities that existed. With her thesis she wanted to extend the topic, but that required fieldwork which became impossible when the conflict broke out, so methods shifted more to archival research and a critique of the historiography. Therefore, the research became less about land and more about how

the past impacts on how today’s land issues are constructed. She interviewed people in Land Commission who provided many of the reports upon which the research relies. She also followed the newspapers and spoke to a limited sample of people who went to the Land Commission to resolve conflicts. Archives were used to study land and land ownership resolution in the past.

Overall judgement of research quality

Methods are not explicitly described in the publications as PhD fellows at MISR are discouraged from going into methodological discussions in MISR publications. The main forum for peer review is the MISR research seminar, where senior researchers and other PhD fellows provide input and critique. Drafts are then revised before further research funds are released. A copy editor assists revisions. There is no external peer review for working papers. PhD fellows attend a writing clinic to enhance their skills.

The MISR Review is the main intended publication outlet for final research outputs. The journal has four editors, three of whom are from MISR and the fourth from the University of Western Cape. The majority of editors read each submission and decide whether to proceed or reject. If a decision is made to proceed at least one external peer review is undertaken. Then publications go to the copy editor.

Steps taken to ensure credibility with end-users

Due to extreme limits on public discourse in Burundi it is almost impossible to

take steps to raise these issues and influence policy there now. A more conciliatory approach to discussing the Land Commission has been encouraged to explore what openings might exist. Primarily, the PhD fellow has been very active in encouraging a more academic discussion of these topics.

Activities for enhanced policy influence

Haydee has been committed to networking and influence, but saw this as inevitably being put on hold in order to be able to complete her doctorate. She held a doctoral symposium to discuss, among other issues, how oral history can contribute to resolving conflicts such as these. Furthermore, she sees working papers as a means for critical reflection on how to present ideas. She is working on turning her dissertation into a book. Overall there is a network of researchers and civil society actors on Burundi where she is very active. The challenge is that these actors have no opportunities to work in Burundi now.

The research has not been published in French, but that is being considered. The discourse is Francophone in Burundi, but much of the discussions are in Kirundi. In general, the publication reviewed has some conclusions oriented towards policy recommendations, but these are very brief.

Evidence of policy influence from the project

Research designed to foster a stronger capacity for national/regional discourse on policy-relevant research issues is not the same thing as research that is designed to contribute directly to 'evidence-based policy formation'. MISR is strongly focused on the former and its eventual contribution to the policy eco-sphere is likely to mainly occur after the young researchers have left MISR to establish themselves at other institutions. As PhD fellows are only recently completing their studies and establishing their post-MISR careers, it is too early (and beyond the scope of the evaluation) to trace these influences, which are in any case likely to be diffuse.

Appendix:

- **Interviewees:**

Haydee Bangerezako, Mahmood Mamdani; 3 July 2018

- **Publications:**

- Haydee Bangerezako (2016) The Politics of Indigeneity: Land Restitution in Burundi, The MISR Re- view, Issue 1, August 2016

CASE STUDY

19

Name of the
grantee:

MISR, Uganda

Project:

Land research

Introduction

This doctoral research project was intended to contribute a historical perspective on long-standing debates in Uganda about policies for pastoralism and agricultural intensification.

Background and purpose of the project

The policy discourse into which the research was designed to contribute was the desire to undertake legal reforms related to land acquisitions to address issues related to the geographical expansion of cattle production within Uganda and the long-standing debate around pastoralism versus settled production with 'improved breeds'. An additional factor related to land acquisitions was the expansion of oil production. In both there were signs that the benefits to these changes were not equitable and there were significant risks of speculation aggravating negative effects. Benefits were apparently being accrued to high level government and military officials. Policies were perceived as being ad hoc and with unclear implementation, thus creating a demand for research.

Main features of the planning process

Research was conducted by PhD fellow Frank Muhereza, who joined MISR with the intention of broadening the debate (rather than changing policies per se) around pastoral issues, as well as to broaden the debate and enrich the discourse with evidence, i.e., to bridge knowledge at MISR with the public domain. His research proposal was discussed and went through a peer review seminar.

MISR's research is explicitly characterized as being situated in "theory making",

which is intended to contrast the past (pre-TTI) focus on “how-to guides”, which situates the research in relation to how it may relate to policy formation. The tone of the working paper can be seen as polemic, which suggests an intention to support civil society efforts to question land acquisition trends.

Overall judgement of research quality

Methods are not explicitly described in the publications as PhD fellows at MISR are discouraged from going into methodological discussions in MISR publications. In the interview the researcher described how it was necessary to rely considerably on secondary data and interviews with local authorities, as well as a cattle producers’ organization and lawyers who were representing the producers. Actual interviews with pastoralists were difficult due to their having moved and dispersed. The study is largely rigorous.

Steps taken to ensure credibility with end-users

Frank has a NGO background and should therefore be able to produce credible outputs to respond to users’ needs in the future. However, it is unlikely that the data presented in the publications reviewed, framed very much within the academic discourse, would generate credibility among non-academic readers. The discussions surrounding the research were characterized as being “intricate” due to the discomfort among authorities about the issues being raised, but there was a perception that the data was sufficiently rigorous to be seen as credible.

Activities for enhanced policy influence

In this research the ability to influence policy is largely reliant on the background of the PhD fellow in Ugandan civil society and even in politics and consultancy, which has provided him with the skills and networks to (in the future) bring this research to the policy arena through advocacy efforts. However, his attention until now has been entirely on completing his doctorate and he has not had time to more actively try to influence policy. The PhD fellow sees problem with being a researcher and being involved in policy influencing activities at the same time. Policy actors are invited to MISR seminars and MISR researchers are invited to engage in civil society activities, but engagement in policy discussions is seen to be part of his role as an individual, rather than as a representative of MISR per se. This reflects MISR’s intentions to provide young researchers with knowledge so that they are equipped to

engage, but not emphasize teaching them how to engage per se. Mahmood Mamdani wants the land research to continue in the future as it is very central in Uganda and elsewhere. The intention is to clear assume a position as a research institute, not taking sides, but rather highlighting dimensions that are not currently part of the public discourse.

Evidence of policy influence from the project

The PhD fellow recognizes that the policy issues are much broader than the cases analysed in his research. The research is being cited, but the policies have not been influenced so far. Changes are on hold, which itself could be an indication that the research has raised difficult issues. One presidential candidate asked for a copy of the research.

Appendix:

• **Interviewees:**

Frank Muhereza, Mahmood Mamdani, 3 July 2018

• **Publications:**

- Mahmood Mamdani (2015) The Land Question and Customary Tenure: Some Preliminary Policy Recommendations. Policy Brief No. 6, October 2015
- Frank Emmanuel Muhereza (2015) The December 2010 'Balaalo' Evictions from Buliisa District and the Challenges of Agrarian Transformation in Uganda, Working Paper No. 17, January 2015