Action Research and ORGANISATIONAL 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 on 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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Disclaimer
The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this book are entirely those of the authors and should not be attributed to the organisations to which they belong (Centre for Poverty Analysis, Sri Lanka; Grupo FARO, Ecuador; Institute of Economic Affairs, Ghana; Institute of Policy Analysis and Research, Rwanda; and the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Pakistan). Any text that has not been referenced or cited is the sole responsibility of the author(s).
## Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A &amp; FM</td>
<td>Administration and Finance Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACBF</td>
<td>African Capacity Building Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOG</td>
<td>Board of Governors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBRM</td>
<td>Brown Bag Research Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>Communications and Policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCB</td>
<td>Center for Capacity Building</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEPA</td>
<td>Centre for Poverty Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFA</td>
<td>Council of Fellow Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIPPEC</td>
<td>Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPAS</td>
<td>Centre on Migration, Policy and Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFID</td>
<td>Department for International Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>DGIS</td>
<td>Department of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands</td>
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<tr>
<td>DPs</td>
<td>Development Partners</td>
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<tr>
<td>DoR</td>
<td>Director of Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ED</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
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<tr>
<td>EEB</td>
<td>English Editorial Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAA</td>
<td>Finance and Administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAO</td>
<td>Food and Agriculture Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>GF</td>
<td>Grupo FARO</td>
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<tr>
<td>GoP</td>
<td>Government of Pakistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>GPPP</td>
<td>Ghana Political Parties’ Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>HR</td>
<td>Human Resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICMJE</td>
<td>International Committee of Medical Journal Editors</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communications Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDRC</td>
<td>International Development Research Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEA</td>
<td>Institute of Economic Affairs</td>
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</table>
INGO  International Nongovernmental Organisation
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  Organisational Capacity Building
ODI  Overseas Development Institute
OECD  Organisation 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
RFC  Retreat Follow-up Coalition
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

Policy research organisations, 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 organisations 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).

A policy community survey undertaken on behalf of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) in Africa, Latin America and South Asia suggests the demand for the services of policy research organisations 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 policymaking process. Across all regions (surveyed), think tanks are among the top-rated organisations for providing quality research, along with international agencies and international university-based research institutes” (GlobeScan, 2014, 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 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 organisations in the developing world, TTI is dedicated to strengthening these organisations’ 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 will 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 policymaking 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 organisations 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 organisations the flexibility to adjust and be proactive in the face of changing circumstances, as well as 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 organisations. A central premise of TTI is the need for
policy research organisations to build and strengthen their capacity to engage in quality research, to link with the policymaking processes, and to perform strategically, effectively and efficiently at the organisational level.

TTI places particular emphasis therefore on organisational capacity building (OCB), which is also linked closely with IDRC’s mission to help build research capacity in many regions, countries and organisations around the world. TTI’s approach is ambitious, understanding that policy research organisations 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 organisation’s internal dimensions and its needs and demands, as well as the external context – 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 a ten year period, an opportunity has been created for the program and the organisations it supports to learn together about which OCB strategies, approaches and methods succeed, and which are less successful. To understand how OCB takes place in the day-to-day realities of organisational life, TTI decided to pursue a relatively in-depth form of inquiry, an “OCB action research” project. The aim was to explore and track the actual processes of OCB experienced first-hand by five think tanks supported by TTI over several years. For each participating organisation, the project presented an opportunity to combine reflection and action within a process of
organisational change that would benefit both the organisation and its stakeholders – and generate valuable learning for TTI in the process.

In practice, the OCB action research involved each participating organisation framing the issues and questions it wanted to address according to its own needs. Five organisations – 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 Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Pakistan – accepted an invitation to participate in the project. A focus for all five organisations was to strengthen the quality of their research, as well as to enhance other inter-related aspects of their organisational performance. Their stories form the core of this book.

The assessment of research quality has been at the centre of much debate in academic, professional and public policy circles. If the quality of a think tank’s research is perceived as uneven and lacking in credibility, this may in turn may affect its uptake and use for policymaking and practice (Levin & O'Donnell, 1999; Mosteller & Boruch, 2002; Shavelson & Towne, 2002). However, there is still a lack of consensus on the specific standards for assessing research quality and the quality of evidence. For the purposes of this project, the authors took a broad view of research quality, considering issues such as objectivity, validity, reliability, rigour, open-mindedness and honest and thorough reporting (Johnston et al, 2009). Broad as their understanding was, the authors also recognised that an understanding of re-
search 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 authors describe in their own words how they went about building capacity within their own organisations. 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 of value to a diverse readership – including policy research organisations and their wide range of stakeholders and supporters. The book aims to provide readers with direct insight into how policy research organisations have actually gone about improving the quality of their research, including successes and pitfalls, in a “live” organisational 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 organisational capacity building themselves.
References


Chapter 1
Introduction
Peter Taylor

A. Facilitating Organisational Change – An Action Research Approach

Capacity building is about change, and in the case studies presented in this book, about change in organisations for the purpose of strengthening research quality. This introductory chapter explains how the organisational 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 organisational capacity building that underpinned the overall process and were crucial to what subsequently unfolded.

B. Organisational Capacity Building

According to the OECD (2006), capacity is understood as “the ability of people, organisations and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully” (p. 12), whilst capacity development\(^2\) is defined as “the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time”

\(^1\) Dr. Peter Taylor is Program Manager of the Think Tank Initiative at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada.

\(^2\) 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 “organisational capacity building,” or “OCB,” this will continue to be used throughout.
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(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 development value” (p. 8), whilst Ubels et al (2010) define capacity as the “ability of a human system to perform, sustain itself and self-renew.” (p. 4)

Taylor and Ortiz (2008) describe capacity building as an intentional process of change:

...the process by which individuals, groups, organisations, 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. (p. 1)

Although both the 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 the capacity of one individual, group or organisation can be “built” by another, often involving external agencies and inputs. Capacity building is equated frequently with training, which fails to recognise that capacities emerge in diverse ways. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that large quantities of resources (money, people, and 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 are they easy to demonstrate with evidence. Much of the emphasis on capacity build-
ing has traditionally been 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 organisational level, demonstrating links between interventions and outcomes becomes even more challenging. Rather like the relationship between research and policymaking, 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, holistic and grounded in identified organisational 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 available to organisations that want to bring about change, and guidance ranges from high theory to basic practical techniques. Indeed, the wealth of information and possible strategies to choose from can be overwhelming. Inevitably, organisational change is a vast field, with many different approaches and proponents (Clark and Ramalingam, 2008; 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: Strategic Change and Planned Change. These have directly informed the organisational approaches presented in the following chapters.

1. Strategic Change

Caluwé and Vermaak (2003) distinguish between four main change strategies that may be used:
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- 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 organisational 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.

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

- **Planned Change** highlights three key elements of organisational change: unfreezing, movement and refreezing. Each stage has a range of interventions associated with it to support the change process (Lewin, 1951)
- **Action Research** represents 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
Introduction

• **The Positive Model** does not require identification of a specific problem. Instead, the goal is that the organisation should work towards a preferred future and 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 that would guide the capacity building 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 organisation, helping to sustain momentum.
The following diagram\textsuperscript{3} illustrates the key steps that characterise action research as a basis for planned change.

**Figure 1.1: 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

\textsuperscript{3} Illustration provided by Ingrid Richter, personal correspondence.
practices elsewhere. Kotter’s (1996) eight-step process of successful change was also extremely helpful to the five organisations for reflecting on the nature of change that transpired. This process involves setting the stage for change, deciding what to do, making it happen and making it stick. In Kotter’s view, organisations 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 organisations 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 argue that all three elements – mind, heart and path, as epitomised by the image of the elephant – need to be taken into account if organisational transformation is to be achieved. 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. The authors of this book found that sharing ideas at an internal and external level in ways that connected directly with personal experience became a powerful force for learning and change within their organisations. The value of using a more emotive approach to promote transformation was recognised, but was not always easy to acknowledge in organisations grounded strongly in intellectual processes. It was at times referred to in the OCB reflections as the “elephant in the room,” a metaphor which inspired the illustration on this book’s cover.

C. Action Research for Organisational Capacity Building

The five action research studies set out to understand how change takes place when policy research organisations 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 organisations, the TTI and its stakeholders, but also for the wider development community. Action research was 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 in each organisation; it was timely – TTI funding for the abovementioned five policy research organisations over a five year period meant that action research could be located within the larger program of support; and it 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 is one particular dimension that each organisation saw as a crucial element of its overall performance to be addressed through OCB, but it is just one attribute amongst many others, including for example, reputation, culture, governance, impact, networks and strategy. All of these can overlap and influence each other. Also, policy research organisations 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 organisation 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 organisational 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 and experiences from other think tanks in TTI and beyond were drawn upon to help inform the action research. Organisations were invited to participate based on 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 they were already giving strategic consideration to their overall direction and specifically their research, and likely willingness to engage in a potentially complex process with uncertain outcomes. The participating think tanks were also in the process of transforming their organisations 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 ideas with the five organisations, 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 organisation were shaped by its particular context, and there was no attempt to force or predetermine the methods used to promote change on the ground. Had such a top-down approach been used for the OCB activities, it is very likely that the organisations 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 is summed up in Table 1.1. First, the specific nature or focus of the action research was identified. Second, processes were established to ensure that key stakeholders were closely involved, depending on their interest and relative influence in the change context. Third, each organisation needed to strategize 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.

**Table 1.1: Broader Conceptual Framework of OCB**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identify the focus of action research</th>
<th>Use the influence of key stakeholders to address systemic resistance</th>
<th>Build credibility and acceptance through actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work on specific areas of a complex process.</td>
<td>Use collaboration as a means to create and support key actors as influencers and supporters of accountability mechanisms and structures.</td>
<td>“Ride” the credibility built through actions; use it to develop awareness of actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop capabilities through collaboration and facilitation.</td>
<td>Link actions to the country’s strategic priorities.</td>
<td>Use results to build the case for broader change and stakeholder involvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gradually expand effort to work on the larger system of procedures and standards.</td>
<td>Work with and bring on board key partners, e.g. other departments or levels of the organisation or system, other donors, and other NGOs.</td>
<td>Use results to create support and reduce resistance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Organisational Capacity Building

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identify the focus of action research</th>
<th>Use the influence of key stakeholders to address systemic resistance</th>
<th>Build credibility and acceptance through actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflect on how change has occurred through the cycle of action research and build a conducive environment for colleagues who can also act as change agents.</td>
<td>Design and create accountability frameworks that will support compliance with new approaches.</td>
<td>Show the consequences of not changing based on experiences. Make change inevitable while preserving the need to maintain continuity, and indicate how change is necessary.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This framework, which combines 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, 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

D. 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 organisation’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 organisation’s workload. Though it would bring some additional requirements for reflection and planning as part of the process, these should be of practical use and of added value to each organisation
• The process would commence in each case with some form of reflection in which the organisation reviews its own purpose for OCB
• Based on the outcomes of this reflection, a small group of staff within each participating organisation would develop a strategy for OCB over time, focusing on a specific OCB-related issue that they would like to explore through a process of action and reflection
• A member of TTI’s team would act as a supporter, and if needed, as a facilitator, working closely with the think tank OCB groups to iden-
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tify questions to be addressed and the key milestones for an action research process

• A system would be established by each organisation for tracking results and analysing 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 developed by the organisations

• 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 each think tank’s context would inevitably create particularities. However, to generate learning that extended beyond each organisation, 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 that might be generalizable to the wider TTI cohort of think tanks.

Another anticipated feature of the study was the possibility of linking up the five participating organisations 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 the sharing of experiences, collective learning and direct collaboration were clear. This interaction, facilitated via webinars and occasional face-to-face meetings, proved a very valuable dimension
of the OCB process. Each of the cases was reviewed by participants from other organisations, 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 “customised” by each participating organisation. Avoiding the notion of a “blueprint,” each organisation drew on ways of working that connected best with its own internal and external circumstances. As the five organisations 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 organisation, for example, took a very holistic view of its organisational capacity as a means of 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 organisations. This supported a collective approach initiated by the participants of the organisations to engage in reflection and learning that informed the overall process, as well as having immediate, practical use for each organisation.

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 organisation’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 organisations, the demand for change was internally driven and involved an insider approach, in contrast to many organisational change processes that are either promoted or facilitated by external actors.

**E. 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 organisational capacity; organisational 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.
References


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Organisational Capacity Building


Chapter 2
Enhancing Research Quality through Organisational Capacity Building: The Case of the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), Ghana

Michael Ofori-Mensah, Jean Mensa, Lucas Rutherford, Ransford Gyampo and John Kwakye*

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A. 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.

* 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 issues. Through numerous publications, for example, the IEA makes important information available to policymakers 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 viewpoints of the IEA’s research fellows on pressing issues of economic and political significance are sought after by civil society and the media. The Institute also provides training programs aimed at strengthening the capacity of key governance institutions, such as parliament, the judiciary, the media and civil-society organisations. Thus, the Institute is simultaneously a centre for policy analysis, a forum for the exchange of ideas, and a resource centre for public education.

B. Internal Structure

The Institute’s research work is organised under three program areas: the Economics Centre, the Governance Centre and the Survey Unit. The IEA undertakes economic policy research in its Economics Centre, which 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 con-
duct 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, including 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.

1. 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 policymakers’ 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 of the most influential people in Ghana, spanning government, civil society, traditional authorities, faith-based organisations, the private sector, academia and development partners.
2. 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 program, 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 creation 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.

3. Impact on Governance and Development

The IEA’s policy and legislative input has shaped several national policies and legislation, 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 as well as 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 of the IEA’s recommendations.

The relevance of the IEA’s research to Ghana’s on-going democratic process is also attested to by the degree of public buy-in and owner-
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ship, and the 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 organisational 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:

• How to remain relevant, as a policy think tank, to Ghana’s development
• How to groom and strengthen the research skills of more recently-hired (second generation) research staff, specifically junior research assistants
• How to develop a system to retain institutional memory and knowledge in the core areas of the Institute’s work
• How to develop and retain in-house capacity and knowledge about conducting surveys and polls in order to reduce dependence on external resource persons and external sources of data
• How to maintain a focus on long-term national policy challenges while still responding to emerging questions and issues
C. Method and Approach of OCB and Action Research

1. Strengthening Research Quality through OCB

The IEA’s decision to select research performance as the focus of its OCB process was 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 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 policymakers.

2. Overall Goal and Strategy for OCB

The overall goal of the IEA’s OCB process was to strengthen research quality. To achieve this goal, the Institute undertook a strategy of addressing gaps in staff and institutional capacity in conducting research. This strategy involved an inter-related capacity-building package comprising the following:

• External training for research staff
• Coaching of junior researchers by senior research fellows
• Peer review processes involving senior and junior researchers
• Institutionalization of performance evaluation mechanisms
• Introduction of staff incentives in the form of monetary rewards and public recognition of professional excellence
• Strengthening of ICT and knowledge management systems
• 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 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, which was relatively new and still undergoing a formation process, and therefore identified as a unit that could benefit from the OCB action research process. Strengthening this unit was intended to ensure that all information and lessons relating to conducting surveys, including survey methodologies, processes and learning, were documented to build institutional knowledge and experience. Institutional capacity building was how-
ever extended to include the reinforcing of performance evaluation systems, the development of ICT systems and databases, and the expansion and upgrading of relevant equipment.

3. Underlying Concepts and Theories
The IEA defines quality research as a “robust, evidenced-based and timely research activity that responds to and addresses a particular policy gap.” The IEA conceives of institutional strength as the robustness of internal structures and processes through which an organisation 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 is also conceptualized as the resonance between the organisational culture and the products and services it delivers. The OCB process was therefore grounded in the recognition that the strength of the Institute’s organisational culture as well as its internal systems and structures were critical to performance. The idea of the journey being as important as the destination, the process being as critical as the product, and lessons learned being as important as goals achieved have become fundamental concepts underpinning the IEA’s action research and OCB processes.

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

4. OCB Action Research Process
The IEA adopted a rigorous process that entailed management and staff jointly identifying the key issues that OCB would focus on. A small team of researchers was formed to lead the OCB process and a lead person was identified; they formulated the broad goal for the process and the key questions to be addressed through action research. The team also defined capacity building activities and established a framework for documenting, monitoring and evaluating the process. 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:

- How do we ensure high quality research?
- What are the weaknesses in our research process that need to be addressed?
- What methods or activities are we going to adopt?
- How will we evaluate success?
5. Action Research Process

The IEA’s action research process began with the identification of a core group of researchers to participate in and lead it. This team held fortnightly meetings, and they developed guiding documents to enable focused reflection by staff. A strict procedure for detailed documentation and filing of staff members’ reflections on the OCB and action research processes 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 following the development of an abstract. The outline is discussed at a research-in-progress meeting, after which the researcher produces a first draft, which is then discussed at a second meeting, with input from external resource persons. The draft is then fine-tuned and presented at a roundtable discussion to which relevant experts and policymakers are selectively invited. Finally, feedback from the roundtable is incorporated into the paper, which is then published.

Engaging a broad range of research staff early in the action research process yielded positive results. 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 were also important for maintaining momentum and interest in the process, as
this allowed the research group to keep track of responsibilities and progress. Having one staff member take the lead in developing the action research plan and putting in place initial systems and processes was yet another value-adding strategy.

6. Data Collection and Analysis
The regular research-in-progress meetings are the main source of data for this research. These meetings provided an invaluable forum for keeping all members of the core team up-to-date on progress and for discussing emerging issues. Furthermore, these meetings were the forum for data analysis and performance monitoring. File notes prepared at the end of each meeting provided a record of progress over time, and these records represent the primary documentation for the action research process. The purpose of these records was 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 for each meeting – a one-pager with a few questions tracking each research member’s progress since the last research-in-progress meeting.

D. Findings
1. Significant Experiences during the 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, which shall be discussed in further detail in the Challenges section below. Although the team member left unexpectedly, his departure ultimately made almost no difference to the action research due to the strong documentation compo-
nent within the process. In fact, because all meetings, reflections, decisions and developments during the OCB process had been judiciously documented and recorded, there was no institutional memory lost with the lead team member’s departure. The process continued smoothly, as members of the team were able to find all relevant information because it was 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.

2. Successes and Results Achieved

**Development of in-house capacity in conducting surveys:** Research assistants and senior research fellows have been trained on how to conduct surveys. The IEA prepared a Survey Manual\(^5\) 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, IEA staff carried out the entire processes of data collection, coding, analysis and presentation of findings for two critical surveys undertaken during the OCB project. 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 2.1).

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\(^5\) See Annex.
Box 2.1
“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 improved significantly, resulting in an increase in publications. Prior to the OCB process, the Institute produced about eighteen publications a year; since the OCB process, it is now producing an average of twenty-five publications a year, and these papers are being written by both senior and junior researchers. A notable paper produced by senior fellows and research assistants through joint research is the first IEA Petroleum Transparency and Accountability (P-TRAC) Index Report (February 2012), an annual index that monitors the three aspects of the oil and gas chain: revenue transparency, expenditure transparency and contract transparency. It serves as a scorecard to rank the government’s performance in managing the above aspects of the oil and gas chain. Another paper of note is “Fiscal policy, macroeconomic instability and debt: The case of Ghana” (June 2012), examining the effect of fiscal policy on key measures of macroeconomic instability and on output
growth. This paper finds that, historically, fiscal policy has had a de-stabilizing influence on the Ghanaian economy, while exerting an 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 degree 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 with 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 fieldwork; they were not acknowledged in the papers they contributed to, 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, and 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 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 or her peers for outstanding research performance.
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and activities, and a trophy is presented to the individual with the most nominations.

Generally, these non-monetary incentives served as motivation for researchers to improve their skills 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 their strengthened capacity, junior research assistants 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 labour than what had been 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 were mindful of the fact that they could not carry out their research workload alone. Hence training junior researchers was integral to lessening their workload 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 policymakers to the IEA’s policy recommendations. The Institute’s website traffic has also increased. Before the OCB process, media practitioners and policymakers sought the opinion of the IEA and cited its work on average once a month. However, after the OCB process, more research papers were produced, and on average, the opinion of the Institute is now sought by the media on significant national issues around which it had conducted research at least three times a week. On key policy issues, policymakers most often cited IEA research outputs publicly during radio and television discussions.

Recognition of the importance of internal reflection processes: The OCB process introduced the Institute to the practice and value of regular internal reflections. This was 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 organisational development processes. This is to become a core feature of the IEA’s organisational 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 is now able to respond in a timely manner to emerging policy questions because junior researchers have an increased capacity to
contribute to 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.

E. 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 the goals it set was helped by the fact that a wide range of the 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 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 experi-
enced high-calibre staff, whose capacities have been built over the period of TTI support on a long-term basis. Overall, this has strengthened the organisation 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:

• A shared drive to improve the quality of research
• Having one staff member with sufficient capacity taking leadership in developing the plan and putting in place initial systems and processes
• Establishing broad consensus at the outset, ensuring ‘buy-in’ by staff members and their on-going engagement in the process
• Maintaining the management’s commitment to the process
• Putting in place an incentive package to reward staff
• Establishing an organisational culture that is receptive to change
• Availability of TTI core funding

F. Challenges to the OCB process

1. The Sudden Departure of a Lead Team Member

As mentioned previously, the lead member of the OCB team left the organisation 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 workflow of the OCB process. Nonetheless, thanks to the structures and systems in place, as well as thorough documentation, the process continued (see Box 2.2).
Box 2.2: Explaining the “Lucas Rock”

To ensure the smooth implementation of the OCB processes at the IEA, Mr Lucas Rutherford, a researcher in the Governance Unit, was appointed to co-ordinate. He was tasked with convening research-in-progress meetings, which involved documenting and initiating discussions on the progress made and challenges encountered in the implementation of the OCB process. 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 “Lucas Rock” was coined to reflect the effect of his departure; it presented an initial challenge to the OCB process, as the team had come to rely on him to coordinate activities. In order to address this setback, a research assistant was appointed to replace Lucas as coordinator. Significantly, the meticulous documentation and filing of all relevant material implied that institutional memory was not lost, and the process was taken up where Lucas left off and it continued to run smoothly.

2. Rescheduling OCB Meetings

The demands of the policy and civil society environment meant that unplanned activities entailed rescheduling 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, or 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 alternative meeting times. In fact, the role of a lead OCB
team member was crucial in coordinating the rearrangement of meetings.

3. Managing Time
One key lesson learned in the OCB process was 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 meetings. The process also put some pressure on the Institute’s on-going programs and activities. Carrying out the action research process while maintaining the Institute’s regular broad range of initiatives and programs placed significant time pressure on management and staff.

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

G. Conclusion
The IEA’s participation in the OCB process using action research has been significant in enhancing the quality of research 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 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 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 organisational culture in sustaining organisational performance.

These insights have implications for the IEA’s role and sustainability as a national policy think tank. More effort will have to be put into deepening staff members’ commitment to the organisation’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 have 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, remains indebted to TTI and IDRC for the opportunity they offered the Institute to be part of the OCB process.
Annex:
Organisational 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

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

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- Dr. Abid Suleri (Executive Director, SDPI)
- Irum Haider (Research Associate)
- Dr. Vaqar Ahmad (Deputy Executive Director)
- Foqia Khan (Assistant Research Fellow)

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6 The authors are associated with the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in the following capacities: Mome Saleem is the Research Coordinator; Asif Saeed Memon is an Associate Research Fellow and Duaa Sayed was associated with the institute until 2013 as a Research Associate.
A. Introduction
The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) is one of the premier think tanks in Pakistan. The Institute works in the 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 TTI in 2010 in a bid to ensure its financial sustainability and secure its future. When the opportunity arose to participate in the OCB program, SDPI joined with enthusiasm, as the Institute had already been considering the options available to implement and mainstream processes and practices to ensure improved quality of policy research and advocacy. The OCB program therefore afforded SDPI the opportunity to embark on this action research-based capacity building program.

SDPI aimed at improving several organisational and working areas in order to maintain its position as a leading think tank and enhance its research quality. The areas that SDPI targeted through this project are:

• Research quality
• Organisational performance
• Policy linkages, communication and outreach

This chapter analyses SDPI’s progress through OCB planning and implementation. It begins with a description of the organisation and the context within which SDPI operates, followed by a description of the
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crisis that led SDPI to consider organisational development as envisaged by the OCB program. The following section describes the process by which the institute determined its capacity shortfalls and the tools it used to fill these gaps. Results are highlighted, and lessons learned from the OCB Action Research program during the last two years are discussed.

B. National Context

Since its foundation, SDPI has expanded its research to cover different themes, including economic growth, the environment and climate change and the social sector. During the 1990s, SDPI produced high-quality work in policy-relevant research areas. SDPI was able to influence policymaking through outreach activities such as seminars, conferences, round tables, consultative meetings and orientation sessions. However, despite this successful policy outreach environment, the organisation was operating in a volatile social, political and economic system. The organisation’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 organisations faced a constrained operating environment. Similarly, following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 in the United States and subsequent conflicts in Iraq and Af-
ghanistan, 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 organisations promoting a Western (neo-colonial) agenda further restricted the research and advocacy space. However, the year 2008 signalled 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 organisation build linkages with key policymakers. The devolution of power meant a change in the power structure within which the organisation conducted its advocacy activity. In order to remain relevant in this new era of decentralized policymaking, SDPI began forging partnerships in the provincial headquarters.
C. Why OCB?

Since its creation, SDPI has worked towards policy research and advocacy for sustainable development in Pakistan. However, the organisation was less mindful of its own sustainability, and as of 2005, SDPI found itself under significant financial stress. This had a direct impact on the institution’s structures and processes. While the organisation survived and to some extent thrived in the face of external instability, SDPI started to struggle due to poor internal processes and diminishing financial resources; the institution was sustained financially by short-term projects and lacked core funding.

The organisation continued working with a skeleton staff of a few senior and mid-level researchers, on whom the burden of multiple on-going research activities fell. In order to counter the growing pressure created by this situation, SDPI recruited a number of entry-level and mid-career researchers, who were tasked with carrying 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 time to the younger researchers. The situation invariably led to a decline in the quality of the research outputs being produced by the younger researchers at SDPI.

At the same time, some of the most important functions of SDPI were shut down or drastically curtailed due to continuing financial constraints. This included the Urdu Publications unit, which produced a newsletter, translated versions of research publications, etc., and the Resource Centre, where a number of 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 adversely affected SDPI’s advocacy and outreach functions. The burden of producing quality research output grew on senior staff, who focused on their specific areas of expertise. This resulted in a narrowing of the scope of SDPI’s work into a small number of sustainable development themes.

Support units (Finance, Human Resources, and Administration) faced similar issues, and procedures of recruitment, record keeping, website maintenance and logistic support for institutional activities suffered a great deal. Staff was bound to work under tight budgets to complete projects. There continued a battle of everyday survival and the organisation resorted to taking up small-scale projects. Through this time, SDPI’s reputation survived, largely based on its past work. Research work continued on a small scale but had less policy relevance to cater to the emerging needs of the state, which was 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, thematic diversity and comprehensiveness were missing from the research that formed the content of seminars.

A leadership change in 2007 provided a catalyst for much-needed reform, but the decline that had been set in motion exhibited its inertia, and the institutional crisis reached its apex in 2009. At this time, there was a considerable turnover in staff: senior researchers whose salaries were no longer affordable for SDPI left the organisation, and
those who remained took major salary cuts. The vicious cycle continued: with depleted human resources, income-generating projects had to be turned down due to the lack of the institutional capacity to carry them out.

In 2009, the management at SDPI felt that there was a high risk that the Institute would close. Around this time, SDPI began a lengthy process of planning its revival, aiming to return to its previous standard and scope of work. The organisation began a concerted effort to return to the status reflected in its vision of being a ‘center of excellence.’ It was in this institutional environment that IDRC’s Think Tank Initiative grant emerged. It provided the core funding that allowed the organisation the breathing space required to pay staff salaries and to take on bigger projects that would sustain the organisation. This, coupled with SDPI’s relevance in the policy environment, allowed a comeback. The TTI grant enabled leadership and management to invest more time in strategizing organisational 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 organisation, and so a lengthy staff retreat was planned in 2011 with technical input from TTI.

During this process, the OCB initiative was offered as an opportunity to conduct a rational (action research-based) analysis of the organisation’s problems, develop a plan to tackle these problems, and then to implement them. The OCB process was designed to help and support TTI partners who were striving and struggling to improve capacity of specific areas within their organisations, including research quality,
policy outreach and organisational capacity. The underlying themes of the OCB project dovetailed with SDPI’s stated goals, which had emerged from frequent internal discussions of the organisation’s challenges. These included a shortage of competent and senior-level staff, which left young researchers without mentoring. As a result, a decrease in the quality and quantity of 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 organisational capacity building. The main objective was “to build SDPI’s capacity to support quality research.” The overall action research aimed at enabling SDPI to produce quality multi-disciplinary research on various aspects of sustainable development in Pakistan and to 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 would help address the problem of capacity in a structured way, and that individual capacity building would help build organisational capacity. The OCB process was also expected to provide an opportunity to share and learn from other organisations who were 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 organisation. SDPI focused on all three areas offered by the OCB to build capacity: research quality, policy outreach and organisational capacity. The rationale for this was rooted in
the crises during which the organisation had lost its capacity: it was believed that building organisational capacity in the areas of Finance, Human Resources (HR), Management Information Systems and Administration would facilitate and remove constraints in research-related activities, which in turn would improve policy advocacy and outreach.

D. Method and Approach of OCB and Action Research

There was recognition within the institution that the capacity to conduct quality research and advocate for policy change was limited. To address this, OCB was undertaken in three stages at SDPI: (1) an assessment of the institution’s research capacity and research needs; (2) the implementation of various tools which emerged from the assessment exercises; and (3) monitoring the implementation of OCB. These are discussed below.

1. 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 endeavour that 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 organisation. This helped highlight weaknesses with reference to stated organisational goals (vision and mission statements). Strengths of the organisation 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 its researchers, which was done by deploying different methods discussed below. The following questions were kept in mind for this process:

• 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 of individual research staff?

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

**Retreat, 2011**

The 2011 retreat was held during the month of March, with technical support from IDRC. The retreat was helpful not only in setting the direction for the Institute, but also in identifying hurdles and areas for improvement by 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 weaknesses of the organisation 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 the causes of poor research quality was identified (Table 3.1). The participants were then encouraged to consider the following questions to arrive at the best set of solutions:

• What is SDPI’s current capacity with regard to 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 learned to enhance organisational research capacity?
• How can SDPI facilitate staff retention?

### Table 3.1: Causes of poor research quality

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Core Research</th>
<th>Policy Linkages, Communication and Outreach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Low research capacity of staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Poor or no mentoring of mid-career and young research staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Lack of trans-disciplinary research</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Limited advocacy efforts due to limited policy research output</td>
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</table>
Organisational Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Issue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Low access to quality journal articles</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Poor knowledge management (lack of systematic documentation of SDPI’s work)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Staff retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Financial welfare</td>
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</table>

The ways and means to address the problems 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 the OCB action research at SDPI.

Two tangible outcomes of the retreat were:

- All major units – research units, the centre for capacity building, and the policy advocacy and outreach unit – prepared four-year strategic work plans.
- An ‘Actions Marked’ matrix\(^7\) was formulated to carry out functions to enhance the research program and to develop organisational capacity.

**Survey of Young Researchers**

Following the incorporation of the OCB 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 organisation’s capacity. A short survey was designed to serve as a

\(^7\) See Annex B.
Organisational Capacity Building

starting point. The survey was administered online to twelve young researchers, while making adequate accommodations for respondents' time and anonymity. A total of twelve questions were used to determine the work tenure history of the respondent, their future plans, their reasons for working at SDPI and for leaving it, recommendations to improve the situation and areas requiring attention at the organisation. Once the survey had been filled out, the data was collated and analysed.

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

- A congenial working environment
- Institutional history and reputation, leading to credibility in the job market for those having worked at SDPI

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

The survey results also highlighted a number of challenges and weaknesses at SDPI. The Institute was found to be lacking in the following areas:

- Staff training
- Mentorship by senior colleagues and external experts
- Financial resources for conducting relevant policy research
- Incentives for researchers
- Competitive salaries
The survey findings were helpful in identifying training needs, organisational reforms, and ideas for enhancing research. In most cases, these 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 and weaknesses, and in identifying important and influential stakeholders who could play a vital role in achieving SDPI’s goals.

2. Implementation: The Action Plan

The retreat and staff survey not only helped the organisation understand the nature of the capacity deficiencies at SDPI, but also aided the members of the organisation in working towards solutions for each set of problems, as presented in Table 3.2 below. While further details are presented in Annex B, the tasks highlighted here were specifically tailored towards tackling the problems and their causes highlighted during the action research. One of the challenges often faced by organisations 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 organisation was already in crisis and there was a sense that extreme action was needed; and second, the plan was participative and involved feedback from all SDPI staff on the capacity building of the organisation.

Some of the tools proposed already existed at SDPI but were formally incorporated as part of the OCB process (e.g. the Policy Review and Advocacy Meetings), while others were newly introduced (e.g. the weekly Brown Bag Meetings, as explained in Table 3.2). The mecha-
nisms adopted by SDPI to affect organisational change fell within four broad categories: human resources practices, capacity building, knowledge management and monitoring of the OCB process. A brief description of each of these is given below.

### Table 3.2: Causes of and solutions to poor research quality identified at SDPI's 2011 Retreat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified Causes</th>
<th>Recommended Solutions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Core Research</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Low research capacity of staff</td>
<td>• Staff training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Brown Bag Research Meetings (BBRMs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Poor or no mentoring of mid-career and young research staff</td>
<td>• Senior level researcher recruitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mentoring explicitly included in senior and mid-career researchers’ terms of reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lack of trans-disciplinary research</td>
<td>• Recruitment of researchers with cross-cutting experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• An overall organisational realignment of research themes with a focus on cross-cutting issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy Linkages, Communication and Outreach</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Limited advocacy efforts due to limited policy research output</td>
<td>• New advocacy and outreach program introduced, incorporating multiple events and media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use of advanced technology and innovation: social media and creation of SDPI’s own web-based television called Sustainable Development Television (SDTV)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8 Also referred to as Brown Bag Lunches, where discussions on on-going research; writing circles and reading circles are conducted every Friday afternoon.
Organisational Performance

| 5. Low access to quality journal articles | • The Resource Centre tasked with devising mechanisms to enhance research staff’s access to online journals |
| 6. Poor knowledge management (lack of systematic documentation of SDPI’s work) | • Intranet archiving of all internal documents and 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 | • Improved financial processes and planning and diversified sources of funding |

**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 Centre 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. Second, weekly research review meetings were launched in the form of Brown Bag Research Meetings (BBRM), an amalgamation of two separate interventions that had been 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 organisational 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 receiving feedback and constructive criticism. Third, 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 people with this profile in order to ensure a good mix of research experience within the organisation. Researchers were also recruited in multiple areas in order to develop an atmosphere of multi-disciplinary research. At the same time, the Terms of Reference of all senior and mid-career researchers were amended to incorporate relevant goals for improving the research capacity of the institute. This included formally incorporating targets for research outputs, training workshops and the 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 and publish their own research work. Categories of papers for which monetary incentives were allocated include the following: peer reviewed journal articles (W, Z and Y category Journals), monographs, research reports, chapters in peer reviewed volumes, anthologies, working papers, policy briefs and newspaper articles. An annual Research Quality Award was also allocated for the best papers of the year. Finally, an innovative
approach was taken to seating arrangements within SDPI’s building that has proved highly beneficial (see Box 3.1).

**Box 3.1: Efficiency through deliberate inefficiency**

In the process of enhancing research quality in an organisation, 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, has been done away with for research staff at SDPI. Rooms within the organisation are dedicated to the research units, but no labels are attached to any office space. Instead, 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 resulted in a formalized research partnership. Similarly through this arrangement the crucial element of gender has been mainstreamed into various research projects. For example, a research study analysing 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 archive system accessible to all permanent staff. Also, a virtual resource centre is being developed to enhance the Institute’s ability to access outside literature, as is a mechanism for documenting and archiving the Institute’s own research outputs.

3. 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, and the unit heads were made part of a consultative process in order to discuss the hurdles in implementation and suggest solutions. The RFC was comprised of the Executive Director and the heads of all units, and it was chaired by the Senior Advisor of the Centre for Capacity Building (CCB) at SDPI.

Second, the Policy Research Advocacy Meeting (PRAM), which had been a regular feature to monitor and assess research and advocacy at SDPI, was incorporated into the OCB process. The PRAM consisted of quarterly meetings between unit heads and senior researchers to discuss achievements and progress in the previous quarter and plans for the next quarter.

Third, the Council of Fellows and Advisors (CFA) has been a regular feature of SDPI. To gauge 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 CFA for endorsement or to get further clarity or make decisions on topics such as training needs, 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.

**E. Impacts and Findings**

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

**1. Core Research**

While the process covered different facets of the organisation, a key organisational component of the OCB process was the 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 organisation. Within its own operations, the process of building organisational capacity required the CCB to augment its operations from conducting training for external clients to include in-house training geared towards enhancing the capacity of research staff. Some of the areas covered by the CCB’s in-house training agenda included writing skills, monitoring and evaluation, proposal writing, data analysis, presentation skills and interpersonal communication skills. The training sessions were helpful not only in imparting
research skills, but also in improving the organisational environment by addressing how individuals interact with one another.

In 2011-2012, the CCB held a number of training sessions for internal staff as well as for external clients. Staff members were also given opportunities to take advantage of international training sessions. 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, the German Development Institute, and the German Federal Enterprise for International Cooperation 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 the Food and Agriculture Organisation (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. 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 organisational needs. Notable amongst these policies were the Study Circle and Reading Circle, which were merged to become the BBRM, as described above. This forum proved successful in engaging research staff, and because the meetings were held during the lunch break every Friday, and did not interfere with regular work
schedules, they generated strong participation and enthusiasm. The BBRM was successful not only in 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 and younger staff members were encouraged to provide insights and inputs into the research presented, and to point out any red flags. This process allowed the architect of the research study to revise his or her work before it was externally scrutinized. Through this exercise, researchers also gained 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 were required to have a doctorate 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 organisation was not solely accomplished by hiring more experienced researchers; SDPI took the initiative to develop the skills of the existing pool of young researchers to eventually take on more responsibilities. 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 outputs. Figure 3.1 below highlights the increase in the number of in-house publications, includ-
Organisational Capacity Building

...ing working papers, policy papers, policy briefs, research reports, monographs, books, and contributed chapter series.

**Figure 3.1: Number of In-House Publications, 2007 to 2014**

The incentives for producing quality research were not restricted to monetary transfers but also included opportunities to present papers internationally and to engage with international institutions. The entire process of mentoring and enhancing the research capacity of young researchers led to an increase in high-quality research outputs, which was not limited to policy papers and briefs but also included newspaper articles. This addressed the dearth of research-based poli-
outreach during SDPI’s crisis period. 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 organisation’s recent success stories are highlighted below.

• The 2012 Global Go To Think Tanks Index Report ranked SDPI 26th among the top 40 think tanks in Asia. SDPI was also ranked among the top 70 think tanks working on environmental issues in the world.

• 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 the Pakistan Electric Corporation, which is intended to guide the Government of Pakistan’s Energy Policy.

• SDPI hosted the South Asia Economic Summit in September 2012.

• The Minister of Planning and Development has requested that SDPI initiate a research group to give feedback on Vision 2025.

• The Prime Minister has requested that SDPI chair the Economic Advisory Committee.

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9 Excluding China, India, Japan and South Korea
10 http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=think_tanks
2. Organisational Performance

The process of improving research activities was not limited to the capacity building of research staff: concerted efforts were made to engage support units in the process. Most notably, the human resources division was tasked with introducing performance goals that helped not only in monitoring research performance and quality, but also in introducing annual performance-based increments. This led to improved motivation among the staff, which in turn decreased staff turnover.

In addition, in the quarterly PRAM meetings, researchers highlighted that a performance-measuring tool was required to ensure research quality, and different goals were assigned based on which researchers’ individual performance was evaluated. Generally, the goals included publishing a number of quality papers, holding a number of research seminars and conducting trainings on relevant thematic areas. The targeted number of outputs was decided upon in consultation with the supervisor and the associate every year after the annual evaluation.

The Institute’s financial mechanisms were also revived and improved. Various financial incentives, such as gratuities and the provident fund, had been put on hold during SDPI’s crisis period. Following the revival of the institution, these mechanisms were reinstated. Additionally, new funds were introduced, such as a benevolent fund for staff welfare, provided to staff members in cases of emergency. The medical insurance policy for the organisation 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 organisation. 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 levels. The advancements in the ICT processes in the organisation resulted in a diversification of SDPI’s communication mechanisms, which led to the strengthening of advocacy activities at all levels. During the course of the action research process, it became evident that seminars were not sufficient for effective policy engagement either at the community level or the national level. The use of new media tools such as Twitter and Facebook, round table meetings with policymakers and civil society institutions, and a dedicated web based TV channel (SDTV) proved to be more effective.

Though a key component of research activity, policy advocacy is managed by a dedicated unit within the organisation. The manifestation of SDPI’s improved research quality is its continuous thematic advocacy campaigns, which require quality research to inform and support them. A formal system of policy outreach was put in place for extensive engagement with policymakers through the Advocacy Unit, regularly sending policy briefs and recommendations to relevant ministries and policymakers. The high quality of the research on which these outputs were based formed the basis for SDPI’s presence at the important government policy drafting and steering committees men-
tioned in the last section. SDPI faced a challenge with regards to policy advocacy following the devolution of powers from the centre to the provincial ministries in 2010, when the organisation felt the need to ensure its presence at the provincial levels. The Institute’s quick response to this major change in the operating environment ensured the relevance of SDPI in the current political scenario.

SDPI’s Ahmed Salim Resource Centre, as mentioned previously, had significantly downsized during the organisational crisis. In the revival period, several steps were taken to improve access to resource materials. Linkages to other online libraries were created, and the Centre also facilitated access to international journals. Additionally, IDRC provided the resource with access to its online database of journals. Moreover, the Centre undertook the process of developing its own online library.

3. Monitoring

While all the units were working on and effectively implementing strategic work plans, senior management felt the need for a monitoring mechanism that would trace the progress and lessons learned from each strategic plan. A pivotal monitoring process was the formation of the Retreat Follow-Up Committee (RFC), which was soon turned into a coalition consisting of the Institute’s unit heads, the Research Coordinator and the Executive Director and was chaired by the head of the CCB unit. The coalition met every three months to help track individual units’ progress against the strategic goals they had drafted during the retreat, and to ensure conformity of individual outcomes associated with broader goals. The existing structure of the
CFA provided an opportunity to inform the strategic goals of each unit. The RFC and the CFA worked in close collaboration to facilitate the newly-introduced processes for improving organisational functions and structure. The minutes of these two integral forums were helpful in building the institutional memory of the action research process.

F. Challenges

While the implementation of OCB at the Institute was considered a success, it was not without its challenges. The biggest challenge was ensuring 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 became apparent that previous problems regarding the quality of researchers tended to re-emerge from time to time. Finally, SDPI still struggled to provide its researchers access to the multitude of online archives of peer-reviewed journals due to the prohibitive cost of subscription.

Recovery from the Institute’s financial crises was not in itself sufficient to overcome SDPI’s challenges; a clearly thought out institutional strategy was also needed. The damage that had been caused to the institution had to be dealt with at all levels. The OCB action research process served as the answer to this problem. It helped identify the issues and spark innovation. The mechanisms developed for implementation and knowledge management helped in reflecting on the Institute’s strategy and in revising it in accordance with emerging needs. This also helped in analysing the trajectories of expansion
within the sphere of OCB. Focus was given on retaining the initial goals to get maximum output.

G. Conclusion

SDPI’s recent achievements, which were possible because of the institute’s continued development as a reputable research organisation after 2010, are also attributed to the change in research quality. Going forward, the Institute has internalized and mainstreamed most of the components of the OCB so that the process of assessing and fulfilling capacity needs does not become an occasional endeavour. The most important example of this is the now-annual SDPI retreat, which acts as a tool for the organisation’s staff to gauge the performance of the Institute, to identify gaps that need addressing and to propose methods of addressing them. The retreat also helps the Institute strategize its financial sustainability, reflected in the four-year strategic planning process. The action research methods enabled SDPI to assess, reflect and implement the plan in a more holistic, systematic and centralised manner.
Annexes

Annex A: Organisational 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 organisational vision/goals?
10. What are the most critical organisational capacities you think that SDPI still needs to develop to help it achieve its organisation vision/goals?
11. What obstacles do you see at SDPI, which hinder it in implementing its organisational vision/goals?
12. What three recommendations would you give to SDPI to help it enhance its organisational capacity?
Annex B: Action Marked to Staff at the Retreat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>• Realignment of research themes</td>
<td>CFA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Formal project closure system to be put in place</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Organisational and Impact Assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Core Funding Committee to be formed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provincial presence must be established</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Maximum utilization of existing fellows and consultants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• One proactive policy advocacy campaign should be established</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Monitoring of Deliverables</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>• Formal Project Closure system to be put in place</td>
<td>Finance (in formal closure. MIS is also involved).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Quarterly Financial inflow-outflow report</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>• Project Database and centralized knowledge management system to put in place</td>
<td>MIS (Each unit must maintain their WHO database).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• More virtual space to be created on the intranet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Unit-wise who is who database to be created (WHO data refers to contact details of different stakeholders such as Politicians, Policy-makers, Media, Academia, Civil Society etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>• Realignment of research</td>
<td>All research staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teams/themes against areas identified between SPI and IDRC- energy, fiscal policy, food, adaptation, government, peace.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Forming new partnership at regional international level</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Succession plan for the support units particularly PRAM to be revived on a quarterly basis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 5.  | • Campaigns to be revived  
• There should be at least 2 research based seminars a month  
• Pre and post event follow-ups (invitations, policymakers, thematic sorting out, lists of seminars attended)  
• 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 | Advocacy Unit |
| 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.  | Organisational 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 program should be formalized to encourage interns | CCB |
<p>| 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 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Donor relationship management – building up rapport with donors</td>
<td>Finance, Research CCB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>New system/ technologies for HR, MIS and Finance to make their work run more smoothly e.g. latest templates etc.</td>
<td>HR, MIS, Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Management procedure to be finalized</td>
<td>BOG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Project database, centralized knowledge management system to be put in place so that all projects can tap into them for information etc.</td>
<td>MIS, all units-Heads, Research staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Quiet office space to be made available for staff members</td>
<td>Admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Project Management plan: Comprehensive plan with the help of Project Management software</td>
<td>Director Program Development, All Unit-Heads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Strengthening Resource Centre</td>
<td>ED and Head Resource Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Study Circle</td>
<td>Assistant Research Fellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Writers Circle</td>
<td>Assistant Research Fellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>More liaison with Corporate Sector</td>
<td>All research staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Insufficient number of staff</td>
<td>HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Work load is not evenly distributed. Too few people are doing too many tasks</td>
<td>All research staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Publications need to increase</td>
<td>Publication Unit and EEB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>We need to encourage more researchers to attend international conferences</td>
<td>All researcher staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>A youth development program should be developed</td>
<td>CCB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Incentives mechanisms are needed for staff, to promote fundraising and publishing</td>
<td>HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Would like an exchange program for young professionals amongst TTs internationally</td>
<td>CCB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Need to distinguish between advocacy and activism; ideal is “research-based advocacy”</td>
<td>All research staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Need to generate new ideas for creating new knowledge, coupled with having people who are able to generate these</td>
<td>As Above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Peer group environment is needed to help enhance support to all staff, horizontally within the organisation</td>
<td>HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Research staff need access to journals and database</td>
<td>All research staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Young researchers need technical skills in writing</td>
<td>All research staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Physical space needed for informal interaction</td>
<td>HR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Choose themes for advocacy efforts carefully; may come out of suggestions, interest or based on more political agenda for influence</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>Young staff need to be part of relationship 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</td>
<td>All research staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4
Using Action Research to Build Capacity at the Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR), Rwanda
Pamela Abbott and Antonia Mutoro

A. Introduction: The Organisational Capacity Building Project and Action Research

This chapter looks at the OCB action research project undertaken at the Institute of Policy Analysis Research (IPAR), Rwanda between August 2011 and April 2012. It was undertaken as part of the IDRC action research program piloting ways of building capacity in Southern independent public policy think tanks. However, this project 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 organisational effectiveness program 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.

11 Pamela Abbott was the Director of Research and Antonia Mutoro was the Executive Director of the Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR) when OCB action research was implemented.
Building the capacity of the organisation and developing an effective organisation includes all functions and individuals and not only the research team. However, the element of the broader long term program 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 organisational effectiveness program 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. The long-term objective is for IPAR to be respected in Rwanda and recognised as being an independent public policy think tank managed and staffed by local researchers that influences public policy, and an organisation whose research teams produce policy-relevant reports

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12 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 outputs of publishable quality, with all members of staff making an appropriate contribution.

The action research project and the broader organisational effectiveness program of which it was a part were coordinated and driven by the two authors of this chapter.

**B. 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 aspects 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, Rwanda remains one of the poorest and most aid-dependent countries in the world. Population growth remains high; there is pressure on land, a trade deficit and a shortage of skilled and educated personnel at all levels.

The Rwandan Government is committed to evidence-informed policymaking and proactively asks IPAR, amongst other research institu-
Using Action Research to Build Capacity at the IPAR

tions, to contribute to policy debates. It looks to IPAR to provide independent policy advice based on the findings from rigorous research and policy analysis.

C. IPAR and its Goals

IPAR is a not-for-profit independent Rwandan public policy think tank with core funding from the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) and IDRC. Donors saw the core funding they provided as an investment in building an independent public policy think tank in Rwanda driven by local staff. IPAR’s 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 policy analysis and research capacity amongst practitioners and academics and engendering debate on policy issues. Since becoming fully operational in 2008, IPAR 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) – an Accountant, a Procurement Officer, a Knowledge Manager and IT Technician, a Research
Administrant, a Personal Assistant to the ED, a Communications Officer, and five other support staff. Core funding from ACBF and 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, with the professional support and manual staff reporting to the Executive Director.

Two major tasks confronted IPAR when it was founded. The first was to build the capacity of local research and professional support staff so that they could lead the Institute. The second was to develop a strategy so that over time, IPAR could diversify its funding sources to reduce reliance on development assistance, ensuring independence and sustainability. The two goals are interrelated: core funding is seen as an investment in capacity building, ensuring in turn that staff have the technical skills and experience necessary 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 the strong competition for those that did exist, 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 sets. IPAR, therefore, decided to recruit bright, enthusiastic Masters graduates and build their capacity in-house with the support of the highly experienced expatriate DoR. Core funding covered the costs of running IPAR and provided funding...
for carrying out research projects, policy engagement and capacity building. The DoR 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 program and was scheduled to take place in 2011.

However, IPAR was confronted with funding challenges in 2011, threatening 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 to raise about 30% of its income from other sources.\(^{13}\) 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 was that the ratio of non-research staff to research staff (4:3) was well above the level generally seen as viable in a research institute. This was 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 could cover all the necessary functions.

\(^{13}\) 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 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 their research to building their capacity, especially in areas such as proposal and report writing, fund raising and directing commissioned research projects. This meant 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 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 by carrying out commissioned research.

D. Challenges and Opportunities Confronting IPAR

After the appointment of IPAR’s DoR, a series of participatory workshops were held in 2010 and 2011 to identify the challenges and opportunities confronting the organisation. The main challenges related to various aspects of institutional capacity, for example, inexperienced researchers, a lack of organisational 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 4.1).
Table 4.1: Main Challenges and Opportunities Facing IPAR Identified in 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need to raise funding to cover operational costs in the short term</td>
<td>Government, development partners and INGOs committed to evidence-informed policy-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to develop and implement a strategic plan for long term sustainability</td>
<td>Opportunities to tender for research consultancies and bid for research grants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation not focused sufficiently on outcomes</td>
<td>A keen and enthusiastic staff willing to build their capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research staff spending time on bureaucratic administrative work</td>
<td>Core funding providing for staff development as well as enabling researchers to develop their capacity by leading research projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate number of research staff and difficulty in recruiting more at the right level</td>
<td>Purchasing own premises</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor physical working environment</td>
<td>Proactively engaging with users and attending consultation and other meetings and workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research staff needing capacity building</td>
<td>Building on the success of the e-Update – a monthly newsletter sent to a database of stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low productivity</td>
<td>Engagement with the media for the publication of research findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No systematic staff development strategy or incentives for improvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges in disseminating policy recommendations to potential users so they have an impact</td>
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The main outcome from the workshops was a Capacity Building Action Plan (Table 4.2):
### Table 4.2: Capacity Building Action Plan 2011-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Progress/Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raise funds to cover operational costs</td>
<td>Tender for consultancies, apply for research grants</td>
<td>Income generated to more than cover the shortfalls from the withdrawal of funding from the Government of Rwanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a strategy for medium/long-term sustainability</td>
<td>Reduce the ratio of non-research staff to research staff</td>
<td>Reduction in one non-research posts, but all the remaining posts deemed necessary by the review; review concluded that the number of researchers needed to be increased</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Recruit qualified research and other staff | Aggressively recruit qualified, experienced researchers and bright masters graduates, training them and offering opportunities for promotion and for work-based PhDs | • Has proven impossible to recruit sufficiently competent senior researchers  
• Has not yet proven viable to appoint researchers who can generate income to cover the full costs of employing them  
• Significant improvements in researchers’ quality of work, even if they are not all yet able to work without significant supervision |
| Improve staff performance | • Implement Staff Development and Performance Review (SDPR)  
• Create mentoring and training program  
• Research staff development program  
• Put in place financial incentives | • SDPR and development program for research staff approved by Board of Directors  
• Research staff development program in place  
• Financial incentives in place: research staff awarded additional increments and promoted if they fully meet the criteria for their post, including delivering high-quality research outputs |
Using Action Research to Build Capacity at the IPAR

### Goals, Actions, Progress/Outcome Table

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Progress/Outcome</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Reduce bureaucratic demands on researchers | Review bureaucratic and administrative demands | • Review deemed bureaucratic requirements necessary, but overly burdensome to research staff  
• Research administrator appointed and improvement noticed |
| Improve links with potential users of research and improve dissemination strategies | • Senior person in each ministry to be identified as contact point  
• Annual research conference to be put in place.  
• Dissemination of regular policy briefs, newspaper articles and radio interviews | • IPAR widely recognised in Rwanda as having expertise on a range of public policy issues  
• IPAR asked by government on several occasions to make presentations and provide recommendations on policy issues  
• Commissioned research carried out for the Senate, a number of DPs and INGOs  
• Research conferences held in December 2011 and 2012  
• Newspaper articles published |

### E. The Organisational Capacity Building Project

**Method and Approach to Organisational Capacity Building (OCB) and Action Research**

The capacity building project reported on in this chapter was undertaken with the research team. The IDRC project was initially to last six months, and IPAR 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 overall organisational effectiveness program, which is on-going.
Organisational Capacity Building

Our approach to capacity building is inclusive and participatory. All staff are aware of the capacity-building program, 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 outset 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 employed action research to bring about organisational transformation by improving the performance of the research team (Koshy 2005), while also encouraging the researchers to become self-reflecting practitioners (Schon 1991). Staff Development and Performance Review (SDPR), which were integral to our organisational effectiveness program, used action research in this second sense: it enabled staff to review their performance against their job descriptions and targets, to reflect on the reasons for their performance outcomes and to determine 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 upon and implement an action plan. The monitoring and evaluation of implementation was undertaken on a regular basis and modifications made as necessary. Central to the process was the DoR, a social scientist with more than thirty years of experience 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 was based on demonstrating the ability to work at a higher grade. A structured program of staff development was in place and the DoR monitored the researchers’ work and reviewed all outputs before publication. Research staff was expected to gain higher education qualifications on a part-time basis, attend short training courses and speak at conferences where they presented peer-reviewed papers.

**Organisational Capacity-Building Needs Assessment**

The needs assessment concluded that the main problem was not the need for IPAR to produce higher quality research and better influence public policy, but rather the need for more members of the research team to be fit to fully contribute to the Institute’s research and policy influence activities. In practice, the ability of the research team 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 qualifications 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 presentations. Researchers’ main strength was in carrying out fieldwork: most, but not all, of the team members had experience delivering high quality data. None of the researchers apart from the DoR had been awarded research or consultancy funding in the past or
Organisational Capacity Building

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 (Box 4.1).

**Box 4.1: Capacity Gap Assessment of Research Team, August 2011**

- Under-qualified and with too little experience for their post
- Weak lifelong learning skills
- Limited experience leading research projects and working in a team
- Poor reading skills and therefore a general lack of detailed knowledge of laws and policies and wider literature
- No experience writing proposals for consultancy and research funding
- Little experience designing research and training data collectors, etc.
- Limited experience managing and supervising fieldwork
- Generally trained to do only quantitative or only qualitative research
- Limited experience managing data entry and cleaning and quality-assuring quantitative data
- Very limited experience analysing qualitative data
- Limited experience analysing quantitative data
- No experience writing research reports, policy briefs, newspaper articles, etc.
- No experience writing papers for peer-reviewed outlets
- Limited experience presenting research finding to users, peers or beneficiaries
- Poor time management skills, reluctance to plan and report on time use
Levels of enthusiasm and commitment to IPAR by the local research team members were 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 Organisational Capacity Building**

The capacity assessment showed that the top priority was to build the competency of the research team so that more members could take independent responsibility for managing small research projects under guidance. This required building individual confidence as well as ensuring that researchers had the necessary skills and competencies 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, IPAR wanted to build researchers’ capacity so that the SRF and RFs could produce research reports of publishable quality and generate sufficient income to make up the shortfall from core research grants. To facilitate this, the Institute wanted to reduce the administrative burden on the research team and ensure that the organisation became focused on its core work of delivering research to inform public policy, building capacity and en-gendering debate on public policy issues.

Two main theories of how to bring about change underpinned this project. The first was based on IPAR’s experiences working with the research team, and the second on behaviour change. First, it was ini-
tially 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 motivating to 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 being offered 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:
Using Action Research to Build Capacity at the IPAR

• Appointing a research administrator and reviewing the support provided by non-research staff to reduce the time researchers spent on routine administrative tasks
• Providing on-the-job training and mentoring by external trainers in addition to that provided by the DoR
• Implementing SDPR fully for all staff so that they all agreed upon their own performance targets and the support they needed to achieve them
• Supporting researchers in taking responsibility for the delivery of their own research projects, meeting a high standard of quality and 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 to writing a literature review, formulating research questions, identifying appropriate research methods, managing the fieldwork and data entry, analysing the data and writing the report.
• 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 also continued to provide on-the-job training and mentoring.

We found that building organisational capacity was possible but challenging under these circumstances. 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 organisation viable. Given the circumstances, the DoR focused on income generation and writing research reports, and the rest of the team took responsibility for managing 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 felt that they benefitted from the training delivered by external trainers as well as the on-the-job training delivered by the DoR. They also 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 research outputs. This led the Institute to realise that organisational capacity building is not just about the capacity of individuals, but that the focus should be on building a team that can 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, and individuals should be enabled to develop areas they are weaker in. The outcomes achieved by the research team are the product of their 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 collect high-quality data. The DoR can ensure that the organisation delivers quality research, using the strengths of each member of the team.

Identification with the organisation 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 developed some capacities more easily than others and that researchers made progress at different rates. In particular, we found it difficult to develop report-writing skills, because there was insufficient time for inexperienced researchers to be supervised and draft reports that would meet the expectations of external funders. This challenge also related to researchers’ lack of experience in independent writing, which was mainly limited to writing up a Masters dissertation.
In common with other organisations in the OCB process, IPAR found it challenging to ensure that professional support staff fully complemented the research team. This was partly due to the fact that the Institute had to focus on building the capacity of research and administrative staff, and partly because it was difficult for the professional support staff to focus on the main work of IPAR: customer service delivery. There was clearly a need for more communication between the two teams, so that each understood the work of the other, and so they could agree on how to work together to ensure that the organisation remained focused on delivering high-quality research.

**Outcomes**

The first point to note is that we have partially achieved the main objective of the program: We wanted to build the capacity of the SRF and RFs to generate income and to take responsibility for a project from receiving the funding to delivering a publishable report. There were a number of reasons for this partial success, which shall be discussed below. We managed (and continue to manage) to generate sufficient income to remain operational, and it laid the foundations for moving towards sustainability in the longer term. Although we had planned to appoint additional SRFs this proved impossible as we failed to attract 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 was achieved, and the capacity of all the team members was developed through the specific training they
engaged in and through on-the-job mentoring by the DoR. Progress was also made in building IPAR’s reputation and influence. There is evidence that IPAR research influenced Government policy, and IPAR is increasingly being asked to contribute to policy debates; it gained recognition as an established independent public policy think tank that can make an informed contribution. The government now looks to IPAR for support and there is a general belief that the Institute has competent staff. Indeed, IPAR has been commissioned by a number of government ministries and the Senate to carry out research. IPAR has also been asked to partner with international research teams and to 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 are engaged in an evaluation of the Results Based Aid project in Rwanda with a consultancy firm from the UK. There was also a reduced reliance on the DoR to engage in all of the Institute’s income generation and report writing. In particular, the SRF 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 was 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, feel that there has been significant development of capacity in this area, and 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 therefore hesitant to use 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 use 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 learned 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. What 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 requires off-the-job training as they need to be trained in statistical analysis as well as using software programs 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 who already had expertise in qualitative research have been developed further so that they can handle data management as well as analysis:

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

I have done this prior to coming to 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 sub-
stantial 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.

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 Learned
We have learned a lot about organisational capacity building by engaging in this project. The main lesson is that OCB is only possible if the staff want to learn and 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 also essential to success: without it, it would not have been possible to build capacity while simultaneously raising the funding necessary to keep IPAR going. An experienced DoR was also essential, as it would not have been possible to provide the level of on-going mentoring and training if external trainers had had to be
relied upon. Finally, initial success sparked further effort, demonstrating the importance of intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards motivating effort.

We have also learned 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 learned 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 organisations 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 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 organisations or organisations focused on delivering research.

The main lessons we have learned 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 organisation so that it focuses on its core business requires capacity building of the professional support staff and a change in organisational 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

F. Conclusion
The analysis of the outcomes shows that significant progress has been made in building organisational 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 for IPAR to become a self-sustaining, independent think tank. The balance of staffing between research and 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 the loss of any researcher would have a negative impact.
Organisational Capacity Building

References


Chapter 5

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

Andrea Ordóñez

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A. Introduction

This chapter summarises the main reflections and lessons from implementing the OCB initiative in Grupo FARO (GF), an eight-year-old Ecuadorian think tank. The case focuses on the efforts carried out by the organisation to improve its research capacity, which 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 research quality, and iii) implementing the policies and procedures previously designed. To reflect on over two years of reform, the chapter takes stock of the actions that were implemented and the reflections of those participating in the processes. Ultimately, the process brought

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14 The author, Andrea Ordóñez Llanos, was with the Grupo FARO, Ecuador, in the capacity of Director of Research until 2013.
into question the concepts of quality and relevance, as well as other dimensions of organisational capacity building that were not considered in the beginning of the project. After all, improvements in research outputs were improbable without considering the researchers in charge of producing these 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.

B. Grupo FARO

Grupo FARO (GF) is a not-for-profit organisation established in 2004. Its brief history can be summarized in two phases: the initial phase and a consolidation phase. In the initial phase, the centre was established. On the spectrum ranging from research on the one end to advocacy on the other, GF was originally more involved in advocacy. This is explained in part by the nature of the organisation’s main funders (international foundations and multilaterals), the initial staff and the projects that the centre launched. This is a key aspect of the organisation’s identity, not only externally, but also internally.

GF has always seen its role in the policy arena 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 analysing 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 organisation could bring together fragmented actors to discuss possible solutions. This strategy, however, had its limits, since GF had not developed the ca-
pacity to produce its own policy proposals and recommendations. To do so, the organisation required stronger analytical skills.

GF’s 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 a different internal perception of GF’s identity and niche, as well as a different external political context. Internally, staff members had started discussing the limits of the organisation’s original strategy, critiquing what could be seen as the overly-simplistic view of what research meant and how it influenced and informed policy. Externally, the situation was more complex. When GF was founded, Ecuador had a history of acute instability, with seven presidents ruling in a period of ten years. The political scenario has since 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 analysed 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 seeks changes and wants to remain dynamic. GF has three strategies: to engage in research, to improve communication and to
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engender debate and discussion with various stakeholders so that collective action can be taken to influence policies. While in the initial phase, the focus was on the state, in the consolidation phase, the policy arena was broadened to include the state, the private sector and civil society.

This led to a change in the organisation’s structure. In the initial phase, the centre was only organised thematically, meaning that each staff member was part of a theme-based team, such as public finance, education, transparency, and so on. In the consolidation phase, a new structure was developed where three new areas were created: the Research Area, the Communications Area and the Capacity Development Area. These were further structured along four core thematic lines: Social Policy, Environment, Governance and Technology. The new structure promotes multi-thematic work and ensures that interventions and projects are well integrated. Through all of this, the centre has maintained its culture, which can be described as participatory, inclusive and deliberative.

C. Capacity Building (OCB) Strategy

Although the changes in the consolidation stage of the organisation were conceived of 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 focuses on strengthening organisational capacities, supported the centre with resources to implement these reforms
much more rapidly and solidly. These changes coincided with the creation of the OCB group\textsuperscript{15} – formed by the five think tanks participating in the 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 organisational belief that an institution should understand itself and its context critically in order to succeed.

As mentioned previously, think tanks are not pre-established organisations, 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 there are limited quantities of resources available exploring how think tanks work. As such, 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 GF’s Research Area and allowed the centre to reflect on and learn about its vision, strategy and actions. This aspect, however, was just one part of the efforts to strengthen the capacity of the organisation, which 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 about more sustainable change. In practice, the different

\textsuperscript{15} See the Introduction to this Book.
efforts to strengthen the organisation sometimes overlapped and required additional attention and dedication from staff members.

GF’s OCB project began with the objective of strengthening the quality and relevance of its research, 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 organisation 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. To achieve this, GF put forward new research processes and tested how these efforts could support researchers enhance their outputs.

**D. Methods and Approaches of OCB and Action Research**

For GF, the OCB process accompanied the different existing reforms on research capacity within the institution. The overarching reform that will be analysed in this chapter is the change in the organisational structure and the creation of the Research Area, and specifically the actions taken by the Research Area to aid researchers in improving their outputs. The activities were carried out by the researchers in three stages: structure and process design, awareness, and implementation. *Structure* refers to the changes in the organisation, specifically, the creation of the Research Area, while *process design* refers to the activities that delineated what the new area did. *Awareness* encompasses those activities carried out with the staff to evaluate research and recognize the relevance of improving it. *Implementation* groups those activities related to improving the quality of the different research projects. These processes were 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 5.1. Summary of Approaches, Actions and Research Methods**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Approach</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Research Method</th>
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| **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 initial diagnosis  
• 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 was the files compiled for each publication, comprising 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, written and recorded notes were maintained on meetings that were carried out with researchers in the processes of discussing their research and their evaluations. The documentation that summarized 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, such as surveys, to evaluate 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 analyse the information gathered, the activities were categorised according to the three previously mentioned approaches. Within those categories, an analysis of the key aspects and the enabling and hindering factors was carried out (see Annex 1). Consequently, an analysis within these categories led to the identification of the key overarching topics that are discussed in the conclusions.

E. 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
A New Face and Character for Research in Grupo FARO

concept of rigour 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. The following section summarises the main findings and reflections from the three approaches: structure and design, awareness and implementation.

1. Creating a New Structure and Designing Policies and Procedures

The first approach taken to improve research capacity in GF was a change in the organisation’s structure, specifically, the creation of the Research Area. The centre changed to a matrix structure, with three strategic areas cutting across the four thematic teams (Figure 5.1). For the Research Area, this entailed interaction in accompanying and overseeing research teams from the different topics that the centre worked on. Although it holds power over the research processes and outputs, the teams are decentralized: they are not under the 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
organisation, it required a change in the teams’ priorities and behaviour. This was formally established through policies and processes for research outputs.

**Figure 5.1. 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, for example, would it change national policies or would 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 tack-
led? These discussions were organised 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 established who was 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 the Research Area brought about positive impacts to the organisation. There was a shift in organisational culture 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 comments made during the review and turn revisions into actionable modifications.
Since research in a think tank is closely related to the policy cycle and to politics, creating the Research Area increased the organisation’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 were also incorporated in the new research protocol developed at the beginning of each research project.

The existence of the 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, GF representatives participated in five such conferences, in addition to a wider presence in other national and international policy spaces. These efforts for visibility may be what caused GF’s higher ranking 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 the Research Area were gradualism, simplicity and checks and balances. The changes were implemented slowly. Researchers were introduced progressively to 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. Sim-
Plicity 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 new processes easy to adopt for 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. For example, the Director of Research, despite having the power to veto a research output, could not do so based only on his or her evaluation, but would have to consider other internal and external revisions as well.

Three key enabling factors that supported this process were the support from the Executive Director (ED), the involvement of the Board and the fact that the Director of Research was hired internally. Having explicit support from the ED was crucial to motivate and align efforts among different teams. This was also reinforced by setting realistic expectations of changes that could take place given limited resources and with the other reforms being implemented simultaneously, such as introducing a monitoring and evaluation system and performance appraisals for staff members. These additional initiatives also required time and effort from the researchers. The ED was also supported by the Board, which discusses the strategic vision of GF’s research. The active involvement of different leadership levels meant that research became relevant throughout the organisation. Furthermore, strengthening the strategic areas gave relevance to the organisation as a whole, instead of to a specific project. Previously,
the quality of research outputs was usually assessed by donors and external partners, rather than through an internal process; this change increased the organisation’s independence. Hiring the Director of Research internally also supported the reform, since the new position and its role within the organisation maintained GF’s essential identity and culture.

Factors that hindered the strategy related to internal and external weaknesses. For instance, the OCB process occurred while the organisation grappled with the issue of whether or not to introduce monetary incentives 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 organisation as a whole formalized a performance scheme that included a monetary incentive.

2. Relevance of Research Quality
As mentioned in the previous section, the OCB process was carried out gradually. A key element of this change was generating awareness on the importance of improving research outputs, which required encouraging researchers to internalise the goal of quality in their 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 second, 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, which compiled infor-
mation 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 by GF, with questions relating to the quality of the centre’s researchers, research outputs, events and outreach. The goal of this survey was to confront the external view with the internal perception of the centre’s work. The results showed a divergence between these two points of view: internally, there was a higher appraisal of the researchers and research outputs than externally. 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 organisation’s communication capacities than the external public had.

The second activity aimed at comparing internal and external perceptions of research quality was the annual evaluation of research outputs. Each research output was evaluated through an in-depth interview with experts in the output’s subject area. Afterwards, the reviewers’ insights were shared and discussed with each of the 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 fur-
ther discussion. Researchers discussed how their youth and professional reputation could have an effect on external perceptions of their work. They started to realize that putting a stronger emphasis on methodological expertise and developing processes that certified the quality of their work could help their professional credentials. As a result, these activities eased the alignment of institutional goals with researchers’ personal and professional goals.

A second relevant aspect of these activities was that they created a sense of discomfort that generated awareness of the need to change. As noted previously by Heifetz (1998) and Wiseman (2012), a certain level of tension and intensity is required for change to take place. On the other hand, provoking excessive discomfort may demotivate and create fear of change. The results of the diagnosis and the evaluation were communicated in a supportive environment with the objective of growing and learning, rather than punishing, and 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 that some researchers might disregard the findings on the grounds that they lacked objectivity. Researchers sometimes tended to rationalize the negative aspects of evaluations as a reflection on the evaluator, and not on the output. Therefore it was 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 process could have helped to minimize this effect, but this was hard
to do, simply because not enough local experts had been identified to make this option viable.

3. Implementation of Research Quality Processes
The implementation of the policies and practices designed as part of the OCB process faced complications as well. As mentioned initially, part of the Research Area’s objective was to establish an internal order. The aspects of the implementation of the processes were particularly 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 who 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 Box 5.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 5.1: Incentives for Research Quality</th>
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<tr>
<td>During the two years of the OCB process, GF did not include a specific monetary incentive tied to 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 – with international journals and conferences. As a starting point, GF has created a fund to support researchers attending international conferences where they are presenting an original manuscript. The fund seeks to increase GF’s presence in academic circles as well as to expand the researchers’ knowledge of cutting-edge topics in their fields (it should be noted that...</td>
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119
this investment by the organisation is not a direct monetary benefit for the researcher). After speaking at a conference, the researcher is also required to share what he or she learned from the conference with the rest of the staff.

At the end of the action research process, GF’s internal research process involved constant oversight from the Research Area. This included an initial meeting to discuss the research plan, support meetings throughout the research process, an external peer review and a final verdict on whether the document would be published or not. Some of the key aspects of the implementation of these activities included a shift in power and responsibility toward 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 consultancy reports than academic papers. As a consequence, researchers were not accountable for the quality and relevance of individual outputs. By explicitly stating the authors of reports from the outset, researchers gained responsibility for the output. The Research Area, meanwhile, gained the power to veto an output, which seems to be beneficial to keeping an organised internal process.

The implementation of these processes also revealed other issues, such as authorship disputes. In some cases, a significant contributor could be omitted from the list of authors, while in other cases people who had not contributed significantly wanted their name included. These cases exemplify the need to encourage an ethical research cul-
ture, as well as the importance of clear guidelines on how to solve such disputes (Box 5.2).

**Box 5.2: Authorship and Research Quality**

Promoting an ethical research culture has been identified as a key aspect of organisational capacity development. Within this broad concept, ethical authorship practices are essential for external recognition and 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, the team discusses how each member contributes to the project and how this will be reflected in the authorship of the final document. For this, GF follows the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) guidelines, which 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 and 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 could fill out, the Research Area did not establish these 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 use 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 organisation 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. 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 of implementation. On the positive side, having full-time staff carrying out these processes allowed the relatively detailed follow-up of each team. An accompanying positive process that occurred was the reform of human resource management, which included defining positions in the organisation (their roles and responsibilities) as well as performance agreements and indicators. This process was not only carried out to increase research capacity, but also to improve per-
formance in general; it also clarified the expectation that the organisation had for each staff member.

On the negative side, the organisation 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, staff turnover slowed down the research process, as did weak knowledge management in general. This meant that when researchers changed or left their positions, it was difficult for those replacing them to gain the knowledge of the previous researchers. 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 toward research, which means that graduates do not necessarily have the skills to succeed in their research endeavours. This contextual weakness 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 was difficult to maintain double-blinded peer reviews. As a result, GF now has an open review system.

**F. 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 that affects research quality is the lack of a vibrant research environment in Ecuadorian universities among students and even professors. As a result, researchers that have joined GF have had – for the most part – limited experience with rigorous research and even less experience with engaging in policy debates. The efforts carried out within the organisation can tackle some of these aspects implicitly, but cannot replace formal training and education. In this context, hiring researchers with stronger capacities and more experience 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 remain relevant to strengthen the organisation’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 points: i) people, ii) leadership, iii) ethics and iv) a constant reflection on the impact of research in policy.

In 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 organisation 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 organisation, 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, awareness-raising activities were meant not only to inform researchers but also to touch on emotional aspects and to change behaviour 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 overcoming the problems of a young organisation, 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 change in the culture of the organisation has been gradually taking place. So far, 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 im-
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 also 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 organisation should balance the improvements made in the two phases of development in order to fulfil its mission. From the first phase described in this chapter, the organisation should maintain its connection with the policy debates through research focused on monitoring and evaluating policies and programs. From the second phase, when stronger research processes were developed, it should continue to evolve policy ideas and proposals that would enrich current policies.

Finally, the OCB processes in GF shows 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 was the day-to-day experience of strengthening internal processes that inspired a strategic change in the organisation. Ultimately, it is the process of reflection on internal transfor-
information that probably had the most significant impact, leading to broader institutional change.
References


Annex

Approaches, Actions and Research Method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Key aspects</th>
<th>Enablers</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Support from Executive Director</td>
<td>Lack of structure in other areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create research department</td>
<td>Gradual approach</td>
<td>Active participation and involvement of Board</td>
<td>Rotation of staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go beyond paperwork to action and relevance</td>
<td>Simplicity</td>
<td>Realistic expectations</td>
<td>Lack of researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agenda of participation</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Leadership – hiring internally</td>
<td>Difficulty collaborating with universities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Checks and balances</td>
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<td>No clear incentive structure</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Risk: lack of funds for long term research goals</td>
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**Approach: Structure and New Processes**

- Initial diagnostic
- Share evaluation results
- Compare perceptions internally and externally
- Objective: change in goals and objectives
- General overview of individual evaluations and reviews reveals spaces to develop
- Realizing the personal and institutional dimension of research
- Align personal with institutional efforts
- Create a space of certain tension and discomfort
- Different types of researchers: some more activist, other more academic
- Difficult to objectively evaluate publications
- Limited pool of experts for revisions
## Organisational Capacity Building

<table>
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<th>Actions</th>
<th>Key aspects</th>
<th>Enablers</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up process to research outputs</td>
<td>Power and responsibility shift</td>
<td>Full-time staff in new area; staff familiar with projects and topics</td>
<td>Weak project management</td>
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<td>Peer review process</td>
<td>Flexibility to learn how to make meaningful research in the process</td>
<td>Implementation of Committee to approve projects</td>
<td>Weak data/knowledge management</td>
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<td>Support to write in peer reviewed journals</td>
<td>Little research culture in college and university education</td>
<td>Parallel process of human resource organisation, distribution of research responsibilities</td>
<td>Divergent skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link external researchers</td>
<td>Parallel process of human resource organisation, distribution of research responsibilities</td>
<td>Little research culture in college and university education</td>
<td>Lack of practical connection between research and policy</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>No clear standards for research</td>
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<td>Difficulty finding reviewers</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>External politics</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Researchers tend to forget about the ultimate goal of policy influence</td>
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Chapter 6
Change from Within: A Self-Reflection of Action Research for Organisational Capacity Building at the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Sri Lanka

Nilakshi De Silva and Priyanthi Fernando

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A. 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 organisational capacity building to improve research quality. Set up in 2001 as a non-affiliated, not-for-profit organisation, CEPA aims to balance independent research grounded in the living experiences of vulnerable women, men and children, with bringing about policy influence and responding to the

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16 The authors are with the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Sri Lanka, in the following capacities; Nilakshi De Silva is a Senior Research Professional, Poverty Impact Monitoring Program and Priyanthi Fernando is the Executive Director.
information needs of the development sector in Sri Lanka and the
region. To this end, the organisation carries out research for client-
based consultancies as well as work dedicated toward its independ-
ent research agenda, and it 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 contin-
ued relevance and independence as a Southern think tank.

CEPA has had an interest in improving its research quality 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 before this project began. How-
ever, many researchers felt that a period of financial difficulties with-
in CEPA had resulted in a shift away from a focus on research quality
and toward short-term client-driven consultancies. As the financial
crisis increased 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 organisational capacity to generate quality
research.

The OCB action research focused on improving CEPA’s capacity in a
holistic way. Multiple activities were designed to address what had
been identified by the staff as gap areas, including revisiting and re-
vising existing research quality standards, setting up peer review
mechanisms and improving staff incentives for methodological inno-
vation. The OCB action research was also specifically designed to ad-
dress 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: section B provides a brief background to CEPA as an organisation and the context within which it functions; sections C and D focus on the OCB action research, providing CEPA’s rationale and expectations for participating in this activity as well as the methodology adopted. Section E discusses the findings from the action research on organisational capacity and a reflection about how change may be happening within CEPA, and section F concludes by drawing out some possible lessons from CEPA’s OCB experience.

B. 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 organisational 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.” \(^{17}\) 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 when a vibrant development sector was receiving considerable assistance from bilateral

\(^{17}\) CEPA strategy document, 2010.
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 to a middle-income country, are milestones in the country context that 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 organisational and financial concepts behind CEPA emphasised the idea of diversity and balance. Inasmuch as the organisational structure and way of working emphasised a balance between CEPA’s own research, a 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 its 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 organisation 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 organisation. Many of the client assignments available during this period tended to be advisory in orientation and had very short timelines, limited budgets and a lack of emphasis on adequate literature reviews and theoretical frameworks. Lean budgets and unrealistic deadlines for deliverables meant severe pressure on resources and time. Organisational 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 provided through TTI since 2010 marked an end to this period and a welcome return to the original concept of organisational and financial balance for CEPA. After the crisis period, there was an increased interest in improving research quality through organisational capacity.

CEPA is organised in a matrix structure, with staff mapped to certain competency areas Poverty Impact Monitoring (PIM), Poverty Assessment and Measurement (PAM), Communications and Policy (CAP) and Finance and Administration (FAA); and second, to 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 6.1). Research programs are developed along thematic lines or are undertaken to improve CEPA’s competency areas, with a view to achieving a balance between long-term research programs and short-term client assignments.
Example: CEPA is a consortium partner for a global assignment on post conflict livelihood research, the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC). This assignment involves staff drawn from the PAM, PIM and CAP skill teams, as well as the Post Conflict, Infrastructure and Vulnerability themes.

In many ways, CEPA is unusual in its organisational culture. CEPA has the characteristics of what is called an “organic organisation”, 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 Enotes, 2006). At CEPA, decision-making is relatively decentralised. Project Team Leaders,
drawn from among senior and mid-level staff, together with other members of the project research team, have the authority to decide on the research design and on all implementation aspects. The full CEPA 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 organisation emphasises teamwork. 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.

C. 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 organisation’s work. Ensuring quality meant taking a non-partisan and independent approach, using robust research methodologies, and being relevant and focused on change in policy and practice. The discussions on quality within CEPA have also been influenced by the expo-

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18 CEPA researchers are categorised as Senior Professionals, Professionals, and Junior Professionals according to education and experience.
sure staff has had through new international partnerships to quality practices and standards of other research organisations – e.g. the Overseas Development Institute, the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, COMPAS at the University of Oxford, CIPPEC in Latin America, the 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 organisation’s annual staff retreats since its inception. In 2010, when the organisational retreat was held after a lapse of two years, the emphasis was on maintaining and improving quality, and staff members identified a series of issue areas that needed attention. The OCB initiative provided a useful space to formulate and carry out the activities identified at this 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 organisational vision of providing non-partisan, robust evidence. It was felt that there was a need for clear quality markers to ensure that the robustness of the evidence produced and of research quality would not be jeopardised by the restructured research agenda following the financial crisis, the expanding workload, the recruitment of new research staff and the continued provision of client services.

A second push came from the need not just to carry out high-quality research, but also to prove that research was of a high standard. There were several factors that influenced this need. The predomi-
nantly qualitative researchers at CEPA were initially faced with having to prove the robustness of their evidence 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. Moreover, securing a grant from TTI, which has research quality improvement as one of its organisational 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, along with 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 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 require a thorough review of the literature. This kind of conflict has been reflected in this response to a staff survey:

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 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 organisation can prove whether its research is of 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.

**D. Method and Approach of OCB and Action Research**

As an ‘organic organisation’ with a participatory orientation, CEPA undertook the OCB project in this same spirit. The initial objectives and activities identified at the Staff Retreat in 2010 were refined in discussions between the Poverty Impact Monitoring (PIM) program and CEPA management and developed into a draft plan, but the objectives and activities of the OCB were shared with the staff from an early stage. From the beginning, awareness and buy-in from staff, especially 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 in which 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 research staff members joined one of these task groups.

For administrative purposes, the OCB project was located within the PIM program team at CEPA. PIM is not responsible for CEPA’s research agenda, or for ‘the organisation,’ and as such, it may not appear to have been 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 put 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,\(^\text{19}\) to strengthen the implementation and monitoring processes.

In CEPA’s theory of change, the problem that the OCB was to address was broken down to a set of interrelated problems:

1. There was no overall definition of rigour and quality of research that was understood and communicated to stakeholders by CEPA. Terms such as ‘rigorous’ and ‘robust’ were used, but it was felt that many people used these terms, within and

\(^{19}\) See Annex B.
outside CEPA, without a clear and specific understanding of what they meant in a given context

2. CEPA’s existing standards and procedures for ensuring research quality did 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, were concentrated at the data collection and analysis stages of the research cycle.

3. Existing research quality standards were not formalised and were not strictly enforced. There was also no formalised mechanism to introduce these to newly-recruited staff.

4. Mechanisms for research quality validation, such as the peer review, were not mainstreamed and had not been consistently applied.

5. Staff were not sufficiently proactive to search for new methods and methodologies that may have expanded existing knowledge on poverty issues.

None of these issues fell within the job description or mandate of any one position or team within CEPA at the time, and 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, it was decided to establish the five task groups mentioned above, which would delegate work among a number of staff and foster consultation and participation to tackle the problems identified above. The groups, each with between two and four staff members, were tasked with addressing one of the fol-
lowing objectives: (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 internal and external peer review mechanisms; (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 of 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 their workload, almost all research staff showed enthusiasm for engaging with these activities and volunteered to join a group based on their interests.

In addition, it was felt that there was need for an M&E system to track research quality that was in line with CEPA’s understanding of what research quality is. Unlike the five above mentioned objectives, which necessitated creating new task groups, designing an M&E framework fitted within the skills and competencies of the PIM team, and so they were called upon 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 to establish a 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 organisation.20

20See Annex C for the format of the staff survey questionnaire.
Three main outputs were expected from these activities: (i) a statement of research quality at CEPA that would guide the staff and 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 through each stage of the research cycle with attention to research quality; and (iii) an M&E framework for research quality, with appropriate indicators identified and sustainable systems and mechanisms in place to ensure proper implementation. These outputs reflected CEPA’s initial understanding of the avenues through which individual and group knowledge and efforts could translate into organisational 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 in addition to their group activities to promote capacity for carrying out quality research, they were expected to reflect on what these experiences meant. Reflection was encouraged at three levels: at the organisational level, regular structured meetings were held where information related to research quality was presented followed by an open discussion to promote reflection; at the research quality group level, regular progress meetings were held where groups working on some element of research quality reflected on progress, challenges etc.; and at the individual
level, through the annual staff survey, research staff were encouraged to reflect 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. More informal tools such as diaries containing personal reflections, emails and other exchanges among staff related to the research quality conversation at CEPA, also provided useful information. The data was analysed using Nvivo software to identify what factors contributed to organisational capacity building and what factors hindered positive change. The main findings from this analysis are discussed below.

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

1. 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

21 See Annex C.
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 has contributed to or detracted from CEPA’s overall research quality, be it in research design, data collection, analysis or reporting. This is linked to some internalisation of CEPA’s core belief that research quality comes from maintaining research quality at every stage of the research cycle, and not just from the quality of the final report or communication output. This internalisation further encourages 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 group work.
2. 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 longstanding 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 TTI, as well as the shift towards longer-terms assignments that require literature reviews as part of the deliverables. Secondly, 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 TTI funds to support travel and conference participation. Increasingly, more professional-level staff (non-senior staff) are presenting at conferences (Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2: Presentations at Conferences by CEPA staff, 2010 – 2013

![Diagram showing presentations by CEPA staff, 2010-2013](image-url)
Thirdly, there are also more opportunities for professional level staff to be exposed to researchers from outside the organisation, as CEPA has recently adopted a policy of encouraging individual consultancies. At the same time, long-term programs 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 the wider use of Nvivo Software to analyse qualitative data.

3. 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 organisation 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. They identify quality criteria for each stage of the cycle; for example the analysis stage for qualitative methods identifies three criteria as follows:

________________________________________

22 See Annex D.
i. **Procedural rigour**: transparency or “explicitness” of the way the analysis was conducted

ii. **Interpretative rigour**: validating the interpretation through triangulation of the analysis

iii. **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 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 organisational 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 organisational capacity and back again, as individual concepts of quality are consolidated into organisational-level statements that then reflect back on the work of each staff member.

**4. Improvements in Procedures and Guidelines**

CEPA has a series of guidelines that were developed by 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 con-
duct in the field, guidelines for planning field research, CEPA reporting format, referencing guidelines and a policy on translation. An obstacle to the use of these guidelines, 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, the 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 aided in identifying 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.

5. Organisational 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 organisation’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 re-
search processes; (ii) monitoring the quality of research outputs; and (iii) systematic reflection and learning.²³

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

²³ See Annex E.
a space to discuss quality relating to ongoing research. At this ‘Tuesday Meeting’, researchers volunteer to present their work to peers within CEPA, 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 were 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 the organisation, the orientation of the M&E system too is largely geared 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 organisational 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.

6. Discussion and Reflection: Pathways to OCB

Looking back over the last two years, it is clear 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, with members volunteering 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 constraints from other more pressing assignments were 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 indi-
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 progressed outside the OCB project provides further credence to CEPA’s organisational culture as ‘organic’ and based on ‘bottom-up’ processes. Change happens through individual buy-in rather than through hierarchical rule-based enforcement. The introduction of new structures (groups with specific allocated tasks) helped stimulate and foster group and individual reflection. Although these structures proved temporary, they engendered a vibrant discourse on research quality throughout the organisation. 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 conversations on research quality within CEPA. In this culture, therefore, it appears that organisational capacity for quality research is being built through an organisational form of osmosis than in a more linear, directional manner, which further reinforces the need for sharing of information and ideas across traditional organisational 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\(^{24}\) felt that there may be some resistance when activities come as ‘OCB’ as opposed to CEPA ... AB 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 is 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 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 process. 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

\(^{24}\)Initials used in quotation refer to staff members who contributed to the discussion.
more formal, organisational-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 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.

F. Conclusion

Understanding what research quality is for a think tank is a challenging task, not least because of the wide variation between such organisations 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 the indicators and data to demonstrate the quality of its research and to maintain the organisation’s 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 and their enthusiasm to ensure research quality in their own work. What remains to be done is consolidating the progress of the past two years into systems and structures that are in line with the organisational culture and that will, in fact, promote quality research. It is hoped that the research quality M&E system will help to guide this process.

At the end of two years, progress has been made towards developing a better understanding of how to build organisational capacity within CEPA. Firstly, CEPA’s strategy was strongly focused on the individual – not 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 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 organisation on individual researchers for failure to follow these guidelines. Instead, staff mem-
bers 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 organisational capacity building. Yet, in an organisation 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 come up with customised solutions together.

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

This is a process that can be led internally. In the case of CEPA, the OCB action research was led by research staff, and not by management. The participatory nature of CEPA’s culture led to a re-assessment of PIM’s role partway 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
organisation to provide leadership and structure, at least until the initiative has taken hold.

Overall, participating in the OCB action research has helped CEPA to become more organisationally self-aware. It has generated momentum to engage with the issue of identifying and improving the organisation’s research quality and provided insights on how to set about doing this in a way that could result in sustainable, stable organisational capacity building. The most satisfying achievement is that while CEPA changed for the better through this process, these changes were achieved while maintaining CEPA’s participatory, supportive and organically-oriented organisational culture.
Organisational Capacity Building

References
Annexes

Annex A: Snapshot of the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA)

The Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) is located in Colombo, Sri Lanka. For 30 years, Sri Lanka was ravaged by a violent internal conflict based on ethnic divisions. With the end of the war in 2009, Sri Lanka has embarked on a rapid development trajectory and was recently declared a Middle Income Country. However, rapid increases in GDP per capita and reductions in income poverty hide growing inequalities within the population of 20 million, which have become the underbelly of national prosperity.

CEPA was founded in May 2001 as an independent, Sri Lankan research organisation to fulfill a need that was felt by it for policy relevant advice on poverty and development that was grounded in sound empirical research. Registered as a non-profit company, CEPA was initially supported by core grants from GTZ and DFID. At present, funds are mainly sourced through undertaking long term research programs as well as short term assignments for clients who are typically donors and international NGOs, as well as a growing clientele of local NGOs, the government, private sector and other independent research organisations.

CEPA has a total staff of 33, which includes 20 researchers. Among the research staff, 11 are Senior, 5 are Mid-level and 4 are Junior Researchers. CEPA’s entire staff is Sri Lankan with a gender bias towards more females than males. All senior and most mid-level research staff hold at least a Master’s Degree, while 3 senior research-
Organisational Capacity Building

[Text continues in the document]
Annex B: 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

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 – R1rev and KPI
Group 4: establish mechanism for (internal and external) peer review
Group 5: identify staff capacity needs and plan for CB

Periodic Reflection
Group reflection – minutes (every meeting, monthly?)
CEPA-wide reflection
1. Group Feedback Meetings - reflexive documentation tool 1 (quarterly?)
2. Retreat – documentation

Individual reflection – reflexive documentation tool 1 (Quarterly)

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 C: Staff Survey Questionnaire on Research Quality

The Staff Survey is an open-ended questionnaire administered to all staff through Google Documents. 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 D: 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.

1. Methodologically sound, scientifically rigorous, conforming to the quality standards set out within the methods
2. Clear, relevant research questions and appropriate methodology that would provide accurate, non-partisan evidence
3. Situated within the available literature and using a sound theoretical frame
4. Fit for purpose (fit between research and the way the findings are likely to be used)
5. Relevant
6. Timely
7. Ethical treatment of respondents, participants
8. Analysis disaggregated for various groups, such as women, ethnic groups
9. 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 on-going and substantial aspects, such as research conceptualisation is still under development, the following are some of the ideas that are emerging:
### Emerging Criteria for Research Quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Design:</td>
<td><em>Strong</em> Research question: relevant, new, focused, researchable, clear and justified in terms of a background and previous work (e.g. literature review/contextual analysis)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conceptualisation Step</td>
<td><em>Explanatory Analytical Framework</em>: fit for purpose, grounded in theory, internally coherent and consistent</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Robust Methodological Framework</em>: operationalises the analytical framework, provides rationale for choice of methods, opportunities for triangulation, and draws on what we know works</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Validated by Peer review</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Literature Review Step</td>
<td><strong>Coverage</strong>: how decisions about suitability and quality of materials to be included, are made</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Synthesis</strong>: How well the literature is summarised, analysed and synthesised</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Significance</strong>: rationalisation of the practical and / or scholarly significance of the research</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Methodology</strong>: analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the methodologies and research techniques used</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Rhetoric</strong>: coherency of the arguments and clear structure of the review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td><strong>Validity</strong>: correspondence between the data and conceptualisation, including sampling frame</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Reliability</strong>: consistency of instruments to gather the information on more than one occasion</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Adequacy</strong>: coverage and completeness of the data</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Ethical</strong>: informed consent, privacy and security of respondents, treatment, conditions and safety of the field team</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Additionally, for qualitative data collection:</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Richness</strong>: data is rich in detail about the living experiences, events and situations of respondents, ex-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steps</td>
<td>Criteria</td>
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<tr>
<td>pressed in their everyday language and containing meaning and emotions</td>
<td><strong>Reflexivity:</strong> 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</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Accuracy:</strong> data collected is reflective of and records the views and ideas of the respondents</td>
<td><strong>Interpretative rigour:</strong> validating the interpretation, through triangulation of the analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Procedural rigour:</strong> transparency or “explicitness” of the way the analysis was conducted</td>
<td><strong>Reflexivity:</strong> 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</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Addressing of objectives:</strong> the aim of the research as set out in its terms of reference are clearly defined and addressed through the report</td>
<td><strong>Clarity of Message:</strong> report follows a clear structure, is methodologically sound and presents the findings or conclusions in an objective manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Editorial accuracy:</strong> report or assignment follows CEPA’s guidelines for writers and editors, uses the Harvard referencing guidelines and is written in clear, grammatically correct language</td>
<td><strong>Timeliness:</strong> appropriate timing when the subject is topical and talked about externally</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Clarity and integrity of the message:</strong> coherence of the research</td>
<td><strong>Relevant audience</strong> (includes the findings being shared with the respondents)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Appropriate communication output for customised audience</strong></td>
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Source: Presentation made to CEPA Members, AGM, 2013
Annex E: Outline of CEPA’s Research Quality M&E Framework

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

**MONITOR THE OUTPUTS**
- Client feedback
- Book sales/dissemintation
- Downloads
- Citations, etc.

**PERIODIC REFLECTION**
- CEPA-wide reflection
  - Retreat
  - BI-monthly team meetings
  - Other meetings as needed

- 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 organisational capacity, and in particular, how does it use its enhanced organisational performance to strengthen its capacity for research? Each of the five organisations 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 their organisations with a view to improvement, the authors have presented their findings through a series of self-reflective and deeply informative cases. Each case has presented the challenges and opportunities experienced by the organisation and a wide range of insights into how these were addressed. The authors identified four sets of cross-cutting themes around which key insights were generated:

1. Perceptions of change moving from the individual to the organisation
2. The importance of organisational culture
3. Understandings of resilience and sustainability
4. The potential for policy research organisations to shape their external environment through the changes they themselves experience
A. Insights

1. Capacity Building from the Individual to the Organisation

Building the capacity of individual researchers is an integral aspect of OCB in policy research organisations. This often takes the form of direct approaches, such as staff attending external and internal training programs. SDPI, for example, has a strong in-house training program which responds to the needs identified by staff, and which 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 organisations profiled in this study have moved beyond that traditional capacity building approach and have 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; the most common example involves less experienced researchers learning from more experienced and knowledgeable senior researchers. Given the limitations of individual training, which too often is carried out in a relatively sterile classroom environment, the experiences of these organisations point to the effectiveness of on-the-job mentoring to build capacity for quality research. These efforts require dedication and commitment from senior researchers, who must devote time and energy to developing the skills of junior researchers; fortunately, there are many cases where this has indeed happened.
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Peer review methods described in the cases in this book have included the traditional form, in which researchers submit their written outputs to their peers for review, as well as other approaches, such as customised meetings where researchers present their work to their colleagues for review and feedback. Peer review helps guarantee high quality of research outputs and is also useful as a means of developing the research capacity of staff.

Mentoring and peer review often target and support individual capacity building. However, by institutionalising these processes within the organisation, there may be a shift towards organisational capacity building. For example, the case studies highlight a number of ways in which organisational systems and structures have enhanced the process of researcher capacity building. Supportive organisational systems can relate to processes for performance recognition, staff assessments and staff incentives, including monetary incentives in certain cases, although financial rewards remain a rather controversial issue. For example, in order to keep up the momentum of good work by individual researchers, IEA Ghana felt that recognition and celebration were necessary at the organisational level. Incentives included acknowledging professional prowess and contributions of individual researchers, opportunities for staff to participate in and present at prestigious forums nationally and internationally and 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 led to over-
all 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 an individual’s performance and an associated needs 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 prevailing organisational culture. 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 critically, an expanding pool of more experienced researchers which is necessary for sustaining change in the long term.

The cases in this book have demonstrated a variety of strategies used to promote individual and organisational 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 organisation on the preferred balance between individual capacity and what can be seen as organisational capacity. Although separating personal ca-
capacity and organisational 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 organisational level.

2. Organisational Culture
In all five case studies in this book, organisational culture has been a crucial influencing factor when deciding on the best capacity building strategies for an organisation. It also acts as a lens through which individual staff, or the organisation as a whole, 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 organisational culture as an informal social system and shared assumptions, beliefs and values among the different members of an organisation is not new. The link between organisational culture and organisational performance has also been the subject of much research, most of it focused on the performance of private sector organisations in developed countries. Still, there has been relatively little attention given to the organisational culture of policy research organisations, particularly those based in the Global South.

Although the action research processes described in this book did not explicitly seek to examine organisational culture, the authors have identified several “bright spots” through documenting their experiences. The descriptions of organisational structure and of ways of working among team members presented in the case studies help to show how aspects of organisational culture influence the nature and
pace of change as well as the organisation’s perception of, and striving for, improved research quality. The variance in organisational culture within an organisation appears to be determined by a number of factors: the distribution of power, the nature of interactions, 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 the case studies show, engagement in an organisational capacity building process and focus on research quality has a reciprocal impact on the culture of the organisation.

Policy research organisations that have an “organic” culture (CEPA), or that are “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. Organisations with a stronger sense of hierarchy may require a project 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 leading to greater motivation and a greater commitment to the larger group and to the organisation’s goals. Meanwhile, a participatory culture may require organisational change to be introduced more gradually, as experienced by CEPA, and may need to be balanced with a more intense and challenging organisational environment that takes staff
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out of their comfort zones. In turn, this may help to stimulate creativity and innovation in research.

Organisational culture also influences what incentivises researchers to perform better. 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 other 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 organisation. For example in IPAR Rwanda, mentoring of junior researchers by senior staff to assist them in publishing their research outputs helped to build a sense of self-confidence and prestige, which reinforced further quality research.

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

While much can be learned about the influence of organisational culture from the cases described in the book, critical consideration is needed before applying these lessons in other contexts. Policy research organisations come from very different traditions and have distinct missions, and they have, as a result, myriad organisational cultures. Given that organisational 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 organisations – even tacitly – was a crucial element for success.

3. Resilience and Sustainability

Sustainability is one of the major struggles highlighted in the case studies. While the immediate goal of the OCB action research process was to improve research quality and thereby clarify the participating organisations’ identity and reputation as high-performing policy research institutions, the think tanks 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 also shaped by different factors: for example 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
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Focus was to increase the diversity of thematic work and bring about a sound mix of short-term, medium-term and long-term work, in order to ensure 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 organisation 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, the organisation introduced a participative mechanism where the entire research staff were involved in the process of organisational capacity building.

Although there are clearly differences in their drivers, the common theme across the five organisations was the idea that improved research quality would represent, among other things, an increase in the organisation’s sustainability. While this was more clearly indicated in some cases than in others, the theme of organisational 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 a determinant of its sustainability. Indeed, the impact of a financial crunch acted as the impetus for some organisations to engage in a process of organisational change. The question of funding and its relevance and importance to research

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quality in think tanks is an essential one to address. The development of 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) supported by IDRC, the work of the Open Society Institute (OSI) supported by the Open Society Institute (OSI) through the Think Tank Fund 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 the ACBF support to policy research think tanks, for example, provided over many years, reveals that major improvements in organisational performance and financial sustainability often take considerable time. 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 organisational development are typically scarce. A second key lesson is that long-term core support, while critical, is often insufficient on its own to engender the changes in organisational performance envisioned by the funder.

The five organisations presented in this book generally depend on two major sources of funding – project-based 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 provid-
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ed by TTI) offers a wider range of options on how the money is spent. The availability of flexible funds was important for the organisations that were part of the action research process when deciding to embark upon and carry out an OCB initiative. Core funding provided the opportunity for each organisation to create time and space for OCB-related work, and it contributed to the salary costs of the staff members undertaking the work. It also served a means of enhancing organisational capacity since it helped to attract, recruit and retain researchers who could become involved in OCB activities. All the organisations featured in this book were also able to utilize the flexibility created through core funding to invest in the 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:

1. 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, organisations can address global policy matters effectively

2. Opportunities for policy research may change over time depending on the political environment or new ideas, and policy research organisations can be more prepared for these kinds of opportunities if financially strong

3. An institution’s ability to impact policy changes increases over time, as the credibility of the organisation with policymakers
increases. It is therefore essential to maintain high quality research.

4. Often policies need to be modified or adapted due to external and internal influences or changes. Policy research organisations need to have a strong financial foundation to ensure that they have an infrastructure to support those changes, for example through on-going data collection or tracking of indicators.

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

The policy research organisations 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 period when core funding was absent, these organisations 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
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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 necessary 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 the TTI grant, this organisation was receiving core funds from the ACBF and the Government of Rwanda, which covered the salaries of all but four of the institution’s researchers. The withdrawal of core funding from the Government of Rwanda in 2011 left them devoid of 30% of their income. If funding is not actively channelled 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 organisations the space to carry out innovative research and hire better researchers, but also because it allows room for reflective approaches, including action research for organisational change to occur.
4. Shaping the External Environment

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

The OCB process encouraged the organisations 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 organisations, 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 the relevance and visibility of these five organisations. However, the cases reveal that while implementing the OCB process, all five organisations have been invited either to participate in new international research projects or to engage in governmental task forces. Although these are not final markers of their influence, a working hypothesis could be formed that, in the middle and long term, improving research quality also builds organisational capacity to influence policymakers and helps generate more opportunities to inform policy.

B. Lessons learned

It would be oversimplifying to suggest that these insights are applicable to any policy research organisation 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 strongly signal that a structured, long-term process of reflection and action, combined with a high degree of organisational commitment involving both individual engagement and organisational reform, can bring about real, positive transformation in overall performance, and specifically in the quality of research. From the experience and processes described in this book, some very concrete, tangible lessons were learned.

A summary of key lessons regarding goals, drivers, benefits and challenges is provided in Figure 7.1:
# Figure 7.1: Key Lessons of OCB

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<th>Goals of Change</th>
<th>Drivers of Change</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Improved research quality</td>
<td>• Technical needs for quality improvement</td>
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<td>• Shared understandings and ownership of organisational needs</td>
<td>• Desire for relevance</td>
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<td>• Reflexive culture within the organisation</td>
<td>• Financial constraints/crises</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Established community of practice on OCB</td>
<td>• Policy windows open for engagement with data and analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Strong, sustainable organisation</td>
<td>• Need to incentivise performance of staff</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Gaps in information and knowledge management</td>
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<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Research quality strengthened and quality assurance mechanisms</td>
<td>• Time and staffing constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Improved organisational processes, structures</td>
<td>• Difficulties in assessing causes of change and extent to which change is institutionalised</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Improved organisational M&amp;E</td>
<td>• Competing organisational priorities (fund raising, public debate, publishing vs. managing OCB)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Enhanced relationships within and between institutions</td>
<td>• Sustaining the change</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Increased incentivisation of staff</td>
<td>• Documenting and managing information over time</td>
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<tr>
<td>• More conducive organisational culture</td>
<td>• Maintaining participatory, reflective, learning-oriented culture under resource constraints</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Linking individual and organisational capacity building</td>
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Several conclusions may be drawn about what is needed to support a successful OCB process, which hopefully will encourage further reflection and even experimentation by other organisations interested in capacity building and change. First, increased capacity at the individual level feeds into organisational capacity for quality research. In terms of the approaches used in the cases explored in this book, three elements seem to have been particularly useful:

1. Encouraging and rewarding coordination and teamwork
2. Putting in place mentorship programs for the development of young researchers
3. Ensuring that the goals of the organisation are aligned with those of the researchers

Second, there is great value in finding the bright spots in an organisation’s culture, and organisational reflexivity can support the building of organisational capacity for quality research. Systematic documentation of that reflection can also help retain and strengthen institutional memory as a way of reinforcing positive change.

Third, flexible financial support facilitates OCB in policy research organisations. Core funding in particular appears to create space and allow innovation at the organisational level that might be difficult without this type of resource. This reinforces the belief of TTI and its donor partnership that core funding is a crucial element in the building of organisational capacity building. There is no doubt, however, that unless policy research organisations 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 organisation may face serious challenges in terms of performance and even survival.

Fourth, deliberately creating a space for organisational learning and reflection is highly valuable as a promoter of change. The organisations 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 only because the organisations themselves had already identified research capacity as a key aspect of their development. At the same time, all the organisations 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 (e.g. monthly conference calls, periodic face to face meetings), the participants in the action research entered into a very rich dialogue about what worked, what did not and why. This was both informative and an important source of collegial reflection, and it stimulated individuals to consider questions that they might not otherwise have thought of themselves.

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

The sixth and final conclusion to be drawn about what makes a successful OCB process is that 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 in this project, change happened through the 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 organisation “brought the elephant back in” to their collective efforts to promote positive organisational change as noted in the opening chapter.

“Making it stick”: The Quest for Sustainability

The long-term impact of the OCB process in each of the organisations of course has still to be seen. How can the gains and advances achieved through OCB be made to “stick” (Heath and Heath, 2007)? Are these changes that set the organisation firmly along a road towards sustainability, or are they temporary fixes that will fall away without significantly changing the nature of the organisation? 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 organisation and 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 organisational 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, 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 not only provided innovative ideas to tackling problems, it also represented an exercise of learning from each other’s experiences. Explaining and sharing the process through an on-going dialogue constantly allowed each organisation to elaborate a better understanding of its own experience.

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

1. Ensuring clarity and inclusiveness at the planning stage: The likelihood of sustainability of the organisational 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 the process. This was essential since the change needed was required not only in one-off behaviours, but also in the mindset and habits of researchers. All the organisations followed an inclusive approach, allowing various stakeholders within the organisation 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 organisation. This allowed the staff to recognize the need for change, own the activities and become custodians and implementers of the plan.

2. **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 about the required change. To implement the OCB process, it was crucial to identify and support the core team or unit responsible for ensuring implementation, follow-up and assistance. Depending on the structure of the organisation, 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 maintain contact with the rest of the members of the organisation.

3. **Strengthening knowledge management:** At times, all five organisations faced the challenge of incorporating the OCB processes into their day-to-day operations. In some cases, changes were made on an organisation-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 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 (by implementing the plan) and
then took a step back to reflect on what was taking place. This allowed the organisation to fix any glitches that were 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.

4. **Maintaining on-going organisational reflection:** documenting the knowledge produced as part of the OCB process supported reflection and was also a means of producing evidence to feed into valuable organisational discussions. This helped prevent 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 (if sometimes tedious) to maintain systematic documentation of key processes. On-going reflection allowed approaches that might be perceived as relatively risky to be continuously reviewed and adapted, such as the use of incentives.

5. **Ensuring financial sustainability:** Due to an earlier lack of core funding, several of the organisations in this book had been forced to engage in “responsive research,” for example by undertaking frequent, short-term consultancies. This works well in the short term, responding to immediate needs, though often these needs are determined by external factors. However, in order to respond effectively to the demands of local policymaking, long-term sustainability is required, including building a strong infrastructure and retaining qualified research staff, developing their careers and allowing them to grow within the organisation. 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 organisations’ long-term sustainability.

C. 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 TTI, which, as noted in the Foreword to this book, seeks to support think tanks in strengthening their organisational performance, research quality and policy engagement and communications. There is no doubt that questions over how best to help think tanks build their organisational 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 TTI can provide support most usefully. Sometimes this is simply a question of providing the financial resources, to give the space for organisations 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 organisation 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 organisation and its staff that seems to lead to the most significant transformation. The action research described in this book promoted 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 organisations. Hopefully these experiences will help to lead them, and others, on a path towards long-term sustainability.
References


Policy research organisations, 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 organisational capacity building. Using action research as their navigational and motivational tool, they shared a common vision – to strengthen their organisations, and the quality of their research efforts. This book tells the stories, in their own words, of the organisational processes and changes that took place, the challenges and successes encountered, and the lessons learned by think tanks along the way.