Think Tank Leadership: Functions and Challenges of Executive Directors

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Author's Biography

Cristina Ramos is currently On Think Tank's Research and Learning Officer. She holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Florida (USA) and a masters' degree in Political Science from the Universidad de Los Andes (Colombia). She is a social scientist with extensive experience designing and implementing research projects, mostly on issues of migration and gender. She has conducted policy-oriented research as part of a variety of institutions, from academic settings to small local NGOs and larger international organisations. She has served as a consultant for ICRAF and FAO in Kenya on projects examining the impacts of migration from rural areas, including planning and conducting fieldwork in Ethiopia and Tanzania. Cristina currently lives in Mexico City.

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About the On Think Tanks
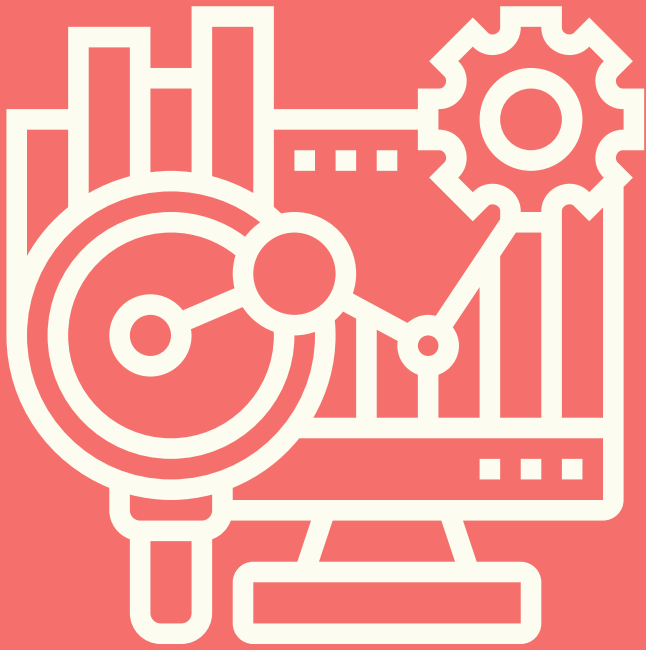## Working Paper Series

Abstract

This paper analyses the experiences of think tank executive directors (EDs). The analysis is based on 45 in-depth interviews with current and former directors combined with the review of 14 job posts advertising for a think tank or policy research centre director. The paper offers insights into what think tank directors do, how they achieved their role and what challenges they face. The main responsibilities of think tank EDs can be summarised as internally facing (providing strategic direction, offering intellectual leadership, and managing operations) and externally facing (ensuring the availability of resources, and establishing partnerships as well as representing the organisation). Most directors in this study followed similar 'researcher to director' trajectories: they became directors of organisations they were closely linked to, moving up the ranks as researchers, which meant that they needed time to learn the skills necessary to lead an organisation. Some of the main challenges they face are obtaining sufficient and sustainable finding, recruiting and retaining qualified staff, and juggling too many tasks (which include combining management issues with research, communications or networking). In addition, some EDs encounter resistance or intense scrutiny of their work because of biases what a think tank leader looks like in terms of age, race or gender. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of these findings and offers recommendations for think tank leaders, boards and funders who can address some of the issues that currently limit the progression y professional development of leaders.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las experiencias de directores ejecutivos de think tanks. El análisis se basa en 45 entrevistas en profundidad con directores y exdirectores, combinadas con la revisión de 14 anuncios de trabajo en busca de un director de centro de investigación o think tank. El documento ofrece información sobre lo que hacen los directores, cómo llegaron al puesto y qué desafíos enfrentan. Las principales responsabilidades de los directores de think tanks se pueden resumir en internas (proporcionar dirección estratégica, ofrecer liderazgo intelectual y administrar operaciones) y externas (garantizar la disponibilidad de recursos y establecer partnerships, así como representar a la organización). La mayoría de los directores de este estudio siguieron trayectorias similares 'de investigador a director': se convirtieron en directores de organizaciones con las que estaban estrechamente vinculados, por lo general subiendo de rango como investigadores, por lo que necesitaron un tiempo para obtener las habilidades necesarias para liderar una organización. Algunos de los principales desafíos a los que se enfrentan son obtener recursos suficientes y sostenibles, conseguir y retener personal calificado y balancear demasiadas tareas al mismo tiempo (que incluyen la gestión, la investigación, las comunicaciones o la creación de alianzas). Además, algunos directores se enfrentan al reto de los estereotipos de edad, raza o género en cuanto a quién se suele identificar como líder de un think tank. Por último, el artículo analiza las implicaciones de los hallazgos y ofrece recomendaciones para líderes, miembros de juntas directivas y donantes que pueden tratar algunos de los problemas que limitan el ascenso de y el desarrollo profesional de los líderes.

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1. Introduction

a. Background

Leadership in the context of think tanks can be understood as the skills and competence that a person shows to lead others in the organisation to complete a task or a broad objective, facilitate a group process, or deliver its mission. The latter is essentially the role of the person who is officially in charge of leading the organisation: the executive director (ED).[2] The focus of this paper is on this leadership role. It examines the main functions and responsibilities of think tank leaders, delves into their trajectories, skills, and experience, analyses the challenges they face, and discusses common leadership styles.

Executive directors are key for think tanks to be successful, to have credibility, and to achieve impact. But who are think tank leaders, and what characterises them? To address this core question, we[3] explore the following:

- What is their role as a leader of their organisation? What responsibilities and functions do they have?
- What professional trajectories led them to become an ED? What skills and experience do they have?
- What challenges – personal and organisational – do they face? How do they address these challenges?

Leadership has been a topic widely studied in the private sector, in civil society, and in public service. But much less is known about the experiences of think tank EDs, whose roles, trajectories, and challenges are arguably different from leadership positions in other types of organisations. This paper identifies what characterises them, how they became directors, and what challenges they face. The purpose is

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2. The ED may also be referred to as CEO, general manager or president. Throughout this paper we use the term 'ED' exclusively.

3. Throughout the paper "we" refers to the author (Cristina Ramos) and Andrea Baertl, who developed the initial idea and content analysis for the paper and offered extensive guidance.

to characterise think tank EDs, understand their different functions, the paths they took to reach their current role, the challenges they face (both at an organisational and at a personal level), and the skills they need to have (or develop) to effectively lead an organisation. The aim is to contribute to improving knowledge about a scarcely discussed topic; for current and future leaders to learn from the experiences of others; to understand the challenges of think tank leaders and help them be better at what they do; and for donors to identify areas where they can further support their grantees.

b. Methodology

To answer the questions outlined above, and considering that this topic has very little existing literature, we devised a methodology composed of the following:

Literature review. We consulted grey literature, opinion articles, and academic literature and uncovered very few sources that discussed think tank leadership specifically (further validating the need for this work). Therefore, we also reviewed literature that examined the experiences of EDs, CEOs, and leaders in civil society organisations, non-profit organisations, and the private sector, with the objective of establishing parallels and comparisons that might transpose well. The results have been integrated and used throughout the paper.

Job advert analysis. Secondly, we compiled and analysed job advertisements for think tank EDs. The objective was to identify the commonly advertised functions and expertise required of think tank directors. We reviewed nine job ads posted on OTT's jobs board and conducted a web search that found five additional profiles. Of these 14 ED positions, two were from African countries, six were from Europe, two were from Latin America, and four were from the United States. The results have been integrated and discussed throughout the paper. All job posts have been coded for ease of reading, and Annex 2 shows a list of the job posts reviewed and the codes assigned to them.

Interview analysis. We carried out a content analysis based on 46 interviews with current or former think tank EDs. Seven of these were conducted for the purpose of this study, and 39 came from OTT's archive. The interviews explored the leaders' trajectories, their work in their think tanks, and the challenges they faced, among other topics.

The seven interviews conducted for this study were undertaken between July and November 2019 and were secured by reaching out to OTT's community.[4] They have all since been published as well. The interviews from OTT's published archive were conducted between 2012 and 2020 by several OTT contributors.[5] The interviews were not anonymous as they were undertaken to be published, but the analysis anonymises them and when they are quoted a code is used instead of the interviewee's name or organisation.

The sample (see Table 1) included current and former think tank executive directors from organisations in: Asia (22), Latin America (12), Africa (10), Europe (1), and the United States

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4. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Natalie Echenique and Founty Fall interviewed one ED each. Andrea Baertl interviewed five EDs within the framework of the OTT Consulting project 'Executive Directors' Retreat (ED Retreat) for OSF and TAI'. Interviewees were briefed as to the double purpose of the interview (the project and this paper) and gave their consent.

5. Annex 1 shows a list of all the published interviews included in the analysis and who led the interview.

(1). This does not reflect the global distribution of think tanks by region, but rather gives more voice to think tanks in usually less studied regions. Around a third of the interviewees were women, 16 out of 46, which roughly coincides with the percentage of female think tank leaders worldwide (22% in 2019 according to the Open Think Tank Directory) and again gives more voice to women leaders. The interviewees led both long-established organisations and more recently established ones, with the distribution roughly following that which can be seen in the age of think tanks worldwide.[6]

Table 1. Interviewee sample

Gender	Male	30
	Female	16
Location	Asia	22
	Africa	10
	Latin America	12
	USA	1
	Europe	1
Think tank foundation date	1960s	2
	1970s	5
	1980s	6
	1990s	10
	2000s	17
	2010s	6

n: 46

The interview transcripts were analysed through thematic content analysis for each of the questions that guided the research. This enabled us to identify common concepts, and to quantify and analyse them for the whole sample. For example, for the question *'What is their role as a leader of their organisations? What responsibilities and functions do they have?'* we began by registering in an excel sheet all answers to this question (keeping an interviewee code for each), then we started to identify common broad themes (e.g. people management, fundraising, financial supervision, etc.), and then coded the data to identify further subcategories. In the end we had, for each question, categories that grouped interviewees' answers and let us identify the categories mentioned by the most interviewees. The analysis and structure of the paper was built on this.

An important point to make here is that most of the literature and the job posts found were from Europe and North America, while most of the interviews analysed were conducted with EDs from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In terms of the job adverts, given the higher number of think tanks in Europe and North America (as well as probably their hiring practices) there was expected to be a higher prevalence of adverts from these regions. And in terms of the interviews, our sample was a convenience sample, based on the existing archive of OTT interviews, which holds a stronger presence of EDs from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Nonetheless, we believe that the over representation of these regions is a strength, as they tend to be understudied and the findings shed light onto their experiences.

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6.   According to data from the Open Think Tank Directory.

Throughout the paper we include quotes from the interviews with directors and from the job posts. Although the interviews are published, we wanted to keep the analysis anonymous, and the quotes are followed by the code (two letters and a number) we use in the analysis rather than by the name of the director or the organisation.[7]

c. Overview of the paper

The next chapter describes the importance of executive directors for organisations and present some of the main responsibilities and functions of think tank directors. The third section examines some common trajectories among our interviewees, showing that they often build their careers within the think tanks they become directors of, and details some of the skills and qualifications that think tanks leaders have. The fourth chapter explores the personal and organisational challenges think tank directors face and how they address them. Finally, we offer some recommendations for think tank leaders, as well as lessons and implications of the findings.

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7. These codes offer the reader some information about the broad region of the interview: AF refers to Africa, AS to Asia, LA to Latin America, NA to North America, and EU to Europe
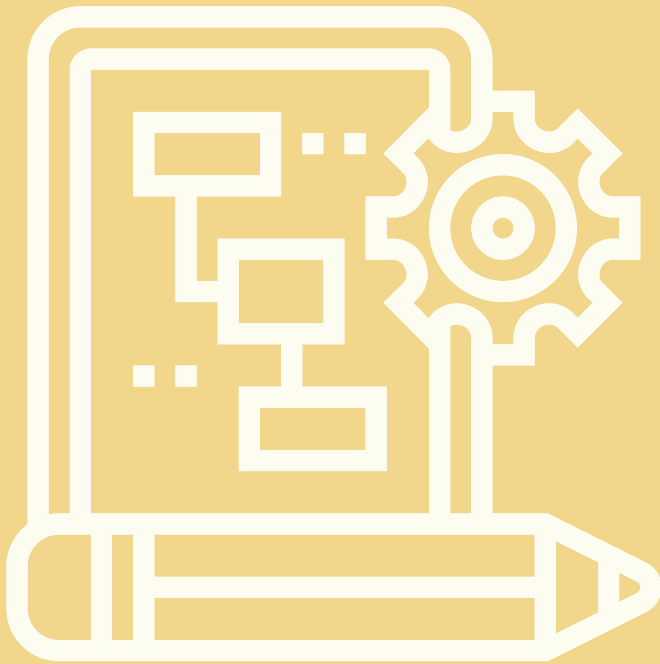
2. Role definition and importance

This chapter discusses the key responsibilities of think tank executive directors as revealed by the research, and concludes with a reflection of the importance of the role. It is highlighted, however, that EDs do not work in isolation and their effectiveness and ability to fulfil their functions also depends on the team that they work with.

a. Responsibilities

Think tank executive directors are responsible for key roles and functions that range from day-to-day management to more strategic tasks. Through a content analysis of interviews and job posts (described in the methodology) we identified five key responsibilities. These can be categorised into *externally facing* and *internally facing* roles. Internally facing roles are: 1) providing strategic direction; 2) management of operations; and 3) providing intellectual leadership and ensuring research quality. The externally facing roles are: 4) fundraising ensuring the availability of resources; and 5) representing the organisation, establishing partnerships, and building networks. It is important for directors to be able to balance these two categories of role: for instance, too strong a focus on the internal may limit success at obtaining the resources and external validation that staff need to function.

BOX 1:
KEY FUNCTIONS

In general, executive directors highlighted functions that fall into the five identified categories, but these do not include all their responsibilities, and within each category there are many specific functions and tasks that need to be addressed. One ED summarised his main functions thus:

'*I can mention five key areas that I focus on. One is* strategy*, which is basically providing the overall strategic direction of where the organisation is going. The second is* fundraising*, connecting, and ensuring that the organisation has the resources that it needs to operate. The third is* communications*, which is also linked to the first one, but in terms of canalising the message of who the organisation is, so it is strategic communication. The fourth* is human resource*. This is not day-to-day human resource management, because we have someone responsible for that, but it is ensuring that you have the right team for your agenda, the strategy of constituting the human resource. And the last part is* partnerships*, which is ensuring that we establish the necessary partnerships and coalitions for change.*' (AF-1)

It is worth reflecting on how these functions are prioritised, or how much time they take. According to a survey of non-profit executive directors conducted by Cornelius et al. (2011), directors felt more energised while doing programmatic work, work that meant engaging externally with collaborators and partners, communications and policy. On the other hand, internal operational aspects, especially human resource management and technology, were found to be depleting. Similarly, some interviewees in our sample explained that they spent more time than they would like to on managerial issues. One ED, for instance, explained that colleagues would not take the director position because '*they do not want all the administrative work or the responsibility of thinking about getting the institution ahead*' (LA-2). This comment was echoed in other interviews, and several reflected that the role takes them away from research, which they'd rather be doing – as for many undertaking research was the core motivation to work in a think tank in the first place.

i.   **Providing strategic direction**

One of the main responsibilities of leaders is to provide strategic direction for the think tank. This refers to delineating what the organisation's mission is and drawing up a strategy for how to achieve that mission.

This is not a task that is undertaken alone, but rather in collaboration with senior staff and with the board. Several job posts described the strategy being led by the executive director '*together with the board*' (JP-EU-3) or '*in collaboration with staff, Board and key stakeholders*' (JP-US-1).

> ### 'In my role as director, I provide strategic leadership to a talented young team engaged in action research.' (AS-6)

Ultimately, though, it is the ED who has to ensure that daily activities are aligned with the organisation's strategy, and guiding the team towards that strategy. '*We have an organisational strategy that translates into our annual workplan. My role is to ensure that the day-to-day activities of the organisation are aligned with the organisation's strategy. What that means is that I ensure that on the day-to-day our insights, our communication, our advocacy, our training, are all aligned to what the organisation has agreed on*' (AF-1).

Strategic vision featured prominently in the job posts. As part of the main tasks of the executive director, the posts described this in terms of leading towards *strategic goals*, ensuring that the think tank's *mission and vision* are delivered, formulating and *executing a vision* for the organisation, and being in charge of designing and implementing *all strategic plans*, programmes and activities.

Strategic direction also entails being able to ideally anticipate, but most importantly being able to identify and react to, changes external or internal to the organisation (e.g. new parties in power, COVID-19, shrinking funding) that mean that the organisation and its strategy also need to change. EDs need to be able to lead their team when the plan gets pulled apart by (usually external) forces and re-set the strategy of the organisation so that it can survive, and thrive, considering the changes.

ii.   Management of operations

Executive directors manage day-to-day operations. According to the interviews and job posts this function includes general administrative issues, human resource management (strategy, hiring and line management of senior staff), managing and overseeing finances, engagement with the board, and project management and/or monitoring. Thus, the director is ultimately responsible for a variety of supervisory tasks to ensure that the organisation runs smoothly.

Operational management includes a variety of daily activities: '*I do a lot of administrative management, such as signing cheques, overseeing personnel issues, ensuring the building's maintenance or authorising budget uses*' (LA-2). Being involved in so many daily tasks means that they become, in the words of one ED, '*a jack of all trades*' (AF-2). Managing so many different responsibilities may make it seem like they need to be 'superhuman'. But facilitating all this is the support and work of all members of the organisation (board included) '*The first piece of advice I would give is that they have to work in a team: none of the issues we've discussed can be done alone*' (LA-8). Working with and relying on the organisation's staff enables EDs to fulfil their functions and responsibilities.

> **BOX 2:**
> **LEARNING WHILE DOING**
>
> The interviews evidenced that most think tank EDs arrived at their job without being prepared or formally trained for the responsibilities that the role entails, and particularly the management responsibilities. The majority had an academic and research background and struggled to adjust and to learn organisational management. The section Personal challenges: Learning to manage a think tank in Chapter 4 discusses this in more depth.

Vieira (2017) points out that leadership and management skills are two sets of skills that the leader can and should possess: the leader sets the new direction and develops the strategy, and the manager implements the vision by setting up budgets and timelines, developing processes, and creating the work plan. So, providing strategic direction (first responsibility) and management of operations are in essence the foundations of the ED role.

But so far, these responsibilities are the same that any CEO, general manager or executive director of any organisation might have. So, what sets think tank EDs apart? Think tank EDs combine strong academic skills with management skills that they sometimes acquire once they become directors: '*I would say that in ASIES the executive secretary should be academic in 60% and manager in 40%*' (LA-8).

iii.   Providing intellectual leadership and ensuring research quality

A responsibility that sets think tank directors apart is that they provide intellectual leadership to ensure that the organisation produces high quality research that is credible and relevant to the public and to policymakers. This involves functions that range from establishing and maintaining the relevance and credibility of the organisation, to research management and quality assurance, mentoring others, and undertaking their own research.

To guarantee the quality of the products and the services offered by the think tank, EDs ensure the think tank's output has academic rigour, contextual relevance, and clarity of recommendations, combined with appropriate engagement with stakeholders. Additionally, some are responsible

for setting up (or facilitating the set up of) internal and external quality review mechanisms. An ED explained that: '*executive directors need to ensure that the organisation maintains a certain level of objectivity and professionalism so that the work can have credibility. It's important that your work is not dismissed as biased or for not being rigorous enough*' (LA-4).

According to the job post analysis, the ED is expected to have published widely on the issues concerning the organisation and to be a trusted commentator. They should be aware of current and emerging issues nationally and globally, and be a leader in national debates where political reforms are being discussed.

Additionally, some of the interviewees also mentioned that they undertake their own research '*At the same time, I pursue an individual research agenda closely related to the Institute's work*' (EU-1), but this might be more the case in smaller organisations in which the ED can have the bandwidth to do this. In any case, though, executive directors provide intellectual guidance on how research topics are addressed and policy recommendations are made. One ED put it this way: '*In my role as researcher, I must ensure that research activities run smoothly, participate in research programmes, motivate the team and make sure that the work we are doing is quality work. This is really essential to the success of our programme and therefore to the success of the institution*' (AF-7).

iv.   Fundraising and ensuring the availability of financial resources

The analysis of job posts and interviews shows that a key responsibility of the ED is to ensure the availability of funding to carry out the organisation's mission. This is a key responsibility as well one of the biggest challenges they face.[8] All interviewees and job posts mentioned this as a key responsibility.

The specific tasks related to this overall responsibility were: '*ensuring a sound financial base for the organisation*' (JP-EU-1); '*develop and implement short- and long-term fundraising plans, research funding sources and establish strategies to approach new funders*' (JP-NA-3); '*play a significant fundraising role, including leadership of major funding bids*' (JP-EU-6); and '*ensuring that the organisation has the resources that it needs to operate*' (JP-AF-1).

Hence, think tank EDs are expected to continue managing existing funding sources, to actively work to attract new ones, and to ensure that the organisation has the funds that it requires to operate. This is not to say that EDs are the only ones undertaking fundraising activities, as researchers in many organisations actively and successfully fundraise, but it is the responsibility of the executive director to ensure the coordination of fundraising activities so that there are enough funds to take the organisation towards its goals. And this involves engagement with external actors.

v.   Representing the organisation, establishing partnerships, and building networks

Executive directors regularly interact with a wide range of stakeholders, such as funders, policymakers, their own staff, the board of directors, external partners or the media. They engage with them for different purposes: establishing alliances, advocacy, advice giving (and receiving), dissemination and outreach, negotiating, discussing proposals, exploring funding

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8.   See Chapter 4 for a discussion on challenges.

opportunities, examining key issues, informal conversation, and more. They do all of this because it is the responsibility of the ED to represent the organisation, establish partnerships and build networks. The executive director is in essence the main representative of the think tank; they serve as a spokesperson; are in charge of establishing and maintaining partnerships; enhance the profile of the organisation; and engage with policymakers, media and other key stakeholders. One interviewee explains this function thus: '*I represent the institute at national, regional and European events and in the media. I communicate to the media not only in the capacity of an expert, but also in reaching out to non-academic audiences, thus informing the broader public about key issues of democratic governance. I am the key contact for stakeholder dialogue with national institutions and international organisations, as well as relevant EU member states and their think tank communities. This includes fundraising and communication with the diverse set of national and international donors as well as a constant engagement in the promotion of democratic values in the region*' (EU-1).

The executive director, particularly in smaller think tanks, is the main contact person and maintains working relationships with a variety of actors, such as partners, donors, the media, policymakers and other organisations. They have to promote the findings and policy recommendations deriving from the think tank's research. This is why several interviewees reported that executive directors need to be respected and recognised in their area of expertise and need to have broad knowledge of the country's social and political context, so that they are highly credible sources (see the section about <u>providing intellectual leadership</u>).

BOX 3: IMPACT

Through the interviews and job posts we found little mention of impact, which is something that we had thought would feature prominently. But only three interviews, and one job post mentioned functions or responsibilities that relate to impact and influencing policies or practice.

We are not sure why this is so, but we have three (opposing) hypotheses: 1) Because policy influence and impact are so engrained in a think tank's work that they are assumed and not highlighted; 2) Ensuring impact is the role of others in the organisation; or 3) Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) on policy influence and impact is so difficult to measure that it is not included in job descriptions.

In any case, we think that evidencing and discussing the role of EDs in ensuring, guiding or promoting the impact of the organisation is an important action that should be considered by think tanks.

'I also represent the centre in different circles and events both national and internationally to make sure that we are engaged in the debate on economic development issues.' (AF-2)

According to Mason (2015), the leader's own preferences will affect the choices of who he or she engages with, for instance, in deciding whether to prioritise the requirements and advice of the board or the donors, or what policy-oriented strategies are deemed more appropriate. In think tanks, EDs have their own networks and ways to approach policy research, which will inevitably affect the institution's strategy. For instance, one Latin American interviewee explained: '*I am very good at making the organisation visible in the global context and that really helped us bring in funds. But I also have important relations with key social actors in social movements in the country*' (LA-1).

b. The importance of a think tank´s leader

There is a vast body of literature that deals with the characteristics and effectiveness of leaders. This line of study started with a focus on the private sector, and although the literature on non-profit or civic organisations is growing, there are still very few sources that focus on the distinctive experiences of think tank leaders, and more specifically think tank executive directors. This section explores why EDs are important, drawing from literature in contexts and sectors from which parallels can be extended to think tank directors, and complements this with the findings of our own research.

Studies in different contexts and of different types of organisations have come to similar conclusions: the success of projects and organisations is in part related to the qualities of their leaders (at different organisational levels). Leaders shape organisational climates and cultures, they create ethical norms that guide their teams, and they 'structure the way the inputs of others are combined to produce organisational outputs' (Dinh et al. 2014, p. 6). For instance, focusing on leaders in research and development organisations, Elkins and Keller (2003) find that project leaders capable of communicating 'an inspirational' vision, of providing intellectual stimulation, and of developing a high-quality exchange relationship with project members are associated with successful projects. But, as Nohria and Khurana (2010) explain in the *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice*, while leaders can and do affect what happens in an organisation because of their power and influence, this is not the only factor determining what happens.

Studies in the non-profit sector often highlight that the executive director is key in shaping the organisation's vision, identity and outcomes, especially when the organisation is small (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven 2014; Kirkpatrick and Locke 1991; Mason 2015). Precisely because they are small, the executive director is involved in almost all issues, from strategic planning, to engaging with the board, to employee supervision, becoming key in the organisation's success (Kearns et al. 2015).

According to a report from the Think Tank Initiative, strategic leadership is key for think tank sustainability because leaders 'attract people, create the conditions to generate ideas, and manage the financial resources that help transform those ideas into proposals and concrete action plans.'

Think tank leaders matter because they provide strategic direction (with support from the board and their senior management staff, when available), manage the day-to-day operations (managing the financial resources and appointing and supporting the right team), provide intellectual leadership, fundraise and oversee the organisation's finances, and represent the organisation and establish partnerships. But most importantly think tanks EDs need to be able to guide and support the organisation to reach its goals, and this responsibility is where their importance lies.

> ### Think tank EDs need to be able to guide and support the organisation to reach its goals, and this is where their importance lies

With this overview in mind, we define think tank leadership as the ability to provide a strategic vision for the think tank, to ensure the availability of resources (financial and other) and to guide, support and manage the team to implement that vision.
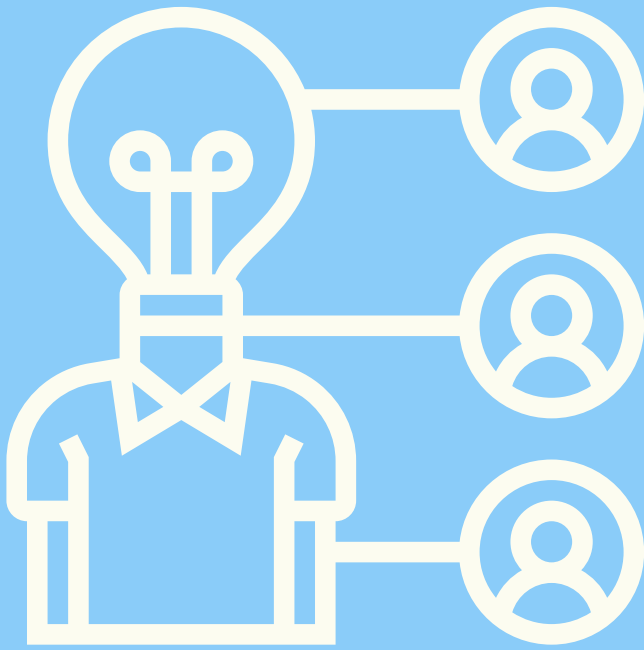
3. Trajectories, skills and experience

This chapter describes the trajectories that interviewees followed to become think tank executive directors, showing that most became the ED of the organisations they were already working for rather than applying for the director position from another thinktank. This might be a result of the sample we had, and more quantitative research might be needed, but it is nonetheless an indication that many EDs rise from within the think tank or were one of their founders (in the case of the more recently established ones). We also discuss the experiences of female think tank leaders, who on paper followed a similar path, but have vastly different lived experience. In any case, though, it is interesting to highlight that a commitment to the success of the organisation was highly prevalent and mentioned (in different ways) by many interviewees.

The chapter then gives an overview of the experience and qualifications required. Here it is interesting to note that previous leadership experience was a requirement in all job posts but was not such a stringent requirement for the EDs in the interview sample.

Finally, we discuss the key skills that are found to be crucial for running an organisation. We acknowledge that not every ED has every skill, but EDs need to be able to evidence the minimum skills that their organisation needs in order to function, and these might vary with the context.

a. Trajectories

Most interviewees became EDs of organisations they were already working in, rather than externally applying for the position. This contrasts with the experiences of non-profit directors we found in the literature, where there is more mobility among organisations (Norris-Tirrell et al. 2017). Additionally, most interviewees had not, in general, switched sectors. Most seemed to follow a mission of working on research and policy related issues for most of their careers, in research-oriented institutions, the government/civil service, academia – sometimes maintaining ties to universities – or policy consulting firms. For instance, 10 directors had previous experience working for the government, 11 had previously worked in academia, three had worked in the development sector, two had a civil society background

and two had experience in the private sector. The fact that so many directors in the sample had trajectories that included different sectors is in line with Thomas Medvetz's (2008) idea that think tanks are boundary organisations that occupy a social space within different fields: the political field, the field of knowledge production, the economic field and the media field, and their actors can, and do, move from one space to the other.

Most of the interviewees had moved up within the organisation where mentors and colleagues often helped them succeed in their careers. This contrasts with findings by Landles-Cobb et al. (2015) in the non-profit sector in the US, who found that leaders leave their organisation because of a lack of an environment for learning and growth, as well as lack of mentorship and support within.[9] The majority of interviewees had previously held senior positions or were regional/programmatic directors in their organisations and were considered for the ED position from within, as these two EDs explained: '*When I was the Head of Research, the previous executive director wanted to explore other opportunities and I was the next in line. So, we decided I would take the role of acting executive director and about after one year, based on my performance, I became the director*' (AF-2). Some temporarily left their organisation to pursue further studies or for work with the government (the so-called revolving door) but their links to think tanks seems to be very strong: '*I have held this position for 20 years, but three times I have had to leave, temporarily, to fulfil public functions*' (LA-8). Having built a career within the think tank, executive directors are already familiar with the organisation's mission, the team, and the type of services offered, and they have a clear idea of what they would like to lead the organisation towards.

> '*After ten years at the Foundation, I started working with CIES, as Executive Secretary, and then as Deputy Director. In 2007, the Board of Directors appointed me as Executive Director*' (LA-9).

In the cases when the newly appointed ED was not an existing staff member of the think tank, we found that they were closely connected to it and were familiar with its mission. As one another ED explained: '*As an independent consultant, I had managed a successful project for PAC for over a year when the incumbent Director left office. After a short spell as Acting Director, I was offered the position of Director of PAC by the Board, which I accepted. I was well-prepared for this position as I had had a year's experience of watching the organisation from the "outside" and was alerted to the major fault lines in the organisation with regard to structure, personnel and finances*' (AS-20).

In short, the think tank directors interviewed followed trajectories that led them to a leadership position inside their existing organisation, rather than switching to other institutions. One of the reasons for this could be that the think tank landscape in the regions where most interviewees work (Africa, Asia and Latin America) is much smaller than in Europe and the United States, where it is easier to switch between organisations. But our findings coincide with those of Mendizabal (2014b) who has already discussed that EDs in many think tanks usually rise from being the most senior researchers, rather than being recruited, becoming EDs as they were next in line and showed commitment to the role.

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9. Although to properly compare this we would need a wider sample of think tankers in different positions and levels of responsibility within the organisation.

b. Commitment to the organisation's mission

Through the interviews we observed that most think tank EDs seem to be driven by a strong commitment to their work and to the organisation they lead. Several think tank executive directors in our sample mentioned a commitment to leading an organisation that offers high quality products that can be used to inform policy change and national debates: '*I always liked contributing my analysis to policy discourse. This led me to leave the civil service and join an independent policy think tank in 2001*' (AS-16). Other interviewees explained that what attracted them about working for a think tank was that it is the one space where they could combine two passions: research and working towards better policies. For instance, one Asian director explained: '*I've wandered around Indonesia's development sector before finally realising that research is where I can contribute the most*' (AS-17).

This finding is line with that of Perry and Wise (1990, a bit dated but still relevant) who discussed that professionals who orient their careers to working in the non-profit sector are often guided by 'public service motivation', that is they are motivated by a desire to serve public institutions for reasons such as civic duty, social justice, compassion, attraction to public policy making or a general commitment to public interest. In the review of job posts, this kind of public service motivation can be inferred in the requirements that some think tanks had for directors to be 'passionate about' or 'committed to'

the think tank's mission, e.g.: '*A demonstrated commitment to human rights and social justice in the Americas*' (JP–NA–4); '*Passionate about generating evidence and analysis to improve public policies and government programmes*' (JP–LA–2);'*great passion and ability for advocating evidence-based research and capacity-building for the economic and social transformation of Africa/Nigeria*' (JP–AF–1).

One ED explained that he accepted the position at a moment when the think tank had stopped receiving core funding from a large donor and they faced the challenge of moving forward. He said that he chose to do take the post of ED because of his commitment to the organisation: '*I became director knowing we needed to find a new and sustainable business model. It was a huge challenge, but I believed in this institution and I wanted to move it forward*' (LA–3).

Another ED explained: '*I feel a very strong commitment to this institution. Over the years, I have received offers to work in other places, but I never wanted to hear about the economic benefits because I did not want to feel that temptation*' (LA–2). He also explained that he was among the few senior researchers in the organisation willing to take the job, as many others preferred to continue working on their research. Indeed, several directors suggested that there was a lack of interest in the ED position among staff because of the challenges of the job (e.g. securing funding and ensuring the credibility of their organisation) but their commitment helps them advance in difficult times (see the section on <u>challenges</u>). Believing that the work of the organisation is important in informing policymaking helps directors continue in difficult times or even with the knowledge that working in a different sector they could aspire to higher salaries.

c. Experience and Qualifications

Based on the job posts and interviews, three key aspects emerge regarding the experience and qualifications required of EDs. The first is having a strong academic background. Academic credentials help build the status of the researcher and of the institution. A second required qualification is to have previous leadership experience. This does not need to be necessarily as an ED, but it is important to have experience leading teams, which is something most directors were already doing in their organisations as senior researchers before becoming directors. Finally, having fundraising experience was also found to be important, and in some cases required, as this is one of the main responsibilities of executive directors. We discuss all three below.

i. *Postgraduate studies and academic background*

According to Stone (2007), the 'knowledge' credentials of think tank scholars, such as a PhD or an academic career history, provide them with a certain credibility in policy debates and make their recommendations seem scientifically objective. Also, as part of their role as leaders, EDs are expected to ensure the quality of the think tank's research output and to mentor new researchers, so academic credentials are important.

A strong academic background, with experience leading and publishing research is a way to ensure that they can provide intellectual leadership.[10]

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10. Half of our interviewees (27) have a PhD, while the rest have at least one master's degree.

> **'Ideally, they [EDs] must have some academic recognition such as a master's degree or PhD, which gives them authority to discuss with an area director. In my case, even though I didn't have a PhD, people assumed that having studied at Harvard gave me sufficient intellectual credit to discuss issues with the area directors'** (LA-13).

In the review of job posts, we found that 6 out of 14 adverts required candidates to have an advanced degree (for three a PhD was an advantage). This academic background, as one of the interviewees explained, is necessary for the institution to show a distinguished public presence: '*For internal management, one needs management skills, but for the institution's public presence, it is important that the director have an academic background*' (LA-11).

The importance of academic credentials is evident, and most job post descriptions required having a master's degree and considered a PhD desirable, but there might be regional and organisational differences in relation to academic background preferences. For instance, Anglo- American think tanks are more likely to value practical qualifications (such that demonstrate interpersonal skills and the capacity to deliver the mission, and previous policy and influence experience) while African think tanks tend to award greater value to formal academic qualifications. The same is true among some Latin American and South Asian think tanks as well as German think tanks, where the prevailing model of think tank is more academic than advocacy oriented.

ii.   *Previous leadership and management experience*

The majority of the job posts required that they have previous leadership experience managing similar organisations. This requirement was phrased thus: '*A significant leadership role in an organisation in the private, voluntary or public sector*' (JP-EU-6); '*The Executive Director will have an outstanding record of leadership, with experience of building an organisation's global profile*' (JP-EU-4); '*Previous experience in a leadership role, including oversight of an organisation or department's talent, operations, and finances* (JP-NA-1); and '*Experience in an executive or senior leadership role at an entity of a scale, function, and/or complexity similar to that of NDI, in the nonprofit, private or public sector*' (JP-NA-2).

Most interviewees had become EDs of the think tank where they had previously been employed or that they (co-)founded. Some moved upwards and acquired leadership experience in other senior management or research roles or as regional directors *within* the organisation. Thus, even though they did not have previous experience as EDs, they did have some leadership experience, and, most importantly, were familiar with the overall programmes, functioning of the organisations, objectives and vision. One ED explains: '*My close association helped me have an in depth understanding the ethos, vision, mission and mandate of CPD. When I became the Executive Director in 2007, I was thus well-conversant with its activities, its vision and mission, and where it aspired to go in the future. I had carried out the responsibilities as CPD's Research Director for about eight years then the Board appointed me as the Executive Director and I was closely involved with planning, operational and implementation related activities spearheaded by the executive director. I had long been a part of the senior management was thus, as it were, an "inside" person*' (AS-21).

Nonetheless, as we will discuss in the section about challenges, some executive directors interviewed did not have any direct leadership experience, as they had been mostly involved in research roles. This meant that one of their biggest challenges at the beginning was learning how to manage an institution (see <u>challenges</u> section: learning to manage a think tank).

iii.   *Fundraising experience*

The analysis of job posts revealed that most (9 out of 14) expected the candidate to already have demonstrated experience successfully raising funds. Similarly, some organisations expected the candidate to bring to the position an already established professional network of funders: '*A relevant network of senior-level contacts and experience in influencing networks in settings similar to those in which ECDPM operates*' (JP-EU-1) or '*good working relations with international development/donor agencies*'.

Ensuring that the organisation has sufficient and sustainable funds is, as we have seen, one of the main functions of executive directors and, as we will discuss in the next section, one of their main challenges. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the required qualifications for candidates for the director position is to demonstrate that they have been successful at fundraising in the past and that they have an extensive network to tap into for resource mobilisation.

However, extensive fundraising experience was not something that all directors interviewed had before taking the position, and in these cases, they had to gain new skills and increase their networks on the job. Several directors already held senior positions in their organisations, but these were often research positions in which fundraising was only part of their tasks.

d. Skills

This section describes some of the skills that our analysis found to be important for think tank executive directors. We found that EDs need to combine management and leadership skills with strong intellectual abilities and with being excellent communicators passionate about their mission.

We have organised our analysis by connecting what we found with the categorisation framework proposed by Simon Maxwell: <u>four models of policy entrepreneurship</u>. Maxwell identifies four key skills of policy entrepreneurs: the Storyteller (communication skills), the Networker (interpersonal skills), the Engineer (management skills), and the Fixer (political savviness). For Maxwell, these are the four key styles (and skills) of policy entrepreneurship and of how a researcher can best contribute to the policy process. Although he is referring to policy researchers and not directly to executive directors, we find that this typology translates well, and helps organise the skills that emerged from interviewees and job posts.

i.   *Communication skills: The Storyteller*

Maxwell discusses the power of narratives to inform policies. Compelling narratives can help get the message across to policymakers about an issue and about likely solutions, so he argues that policy entrepreneurs need to be good storytellers. And storytelling has at its basis communication skills that need to be displayed not only when engaging with external audiences but also with internal ones.

Communication skills are clearly important for executive directors across sectors, and increasingly they need to understand new ways of engaging with stakeholders and audiences. An article which analysed interviews with private companies' CEOs found that they considered that executive directors should have '21st century communication skills' which allow them to engage with multiple audiences and cultures taking full advantage of new technologies (Gordon and Martin 2018).

Mendizabal (2014b) argues that '*think tanks are as much about* communication *as they are about research*'. The ED is responsible for providing a vision of the organisation's main messages and channels of communication. The importance of having or developing communication skills was corroborated in the interviews, as respondents explained that in their roles, they have to establish dialogue and collaboration not only among staff but also with a variety of stakeholders: '*I communicate to the media not only in the capacity of an expert, but also in reaching out to non-academic audiences, thus informing the broader public about key issues of democratic governance*' (EU-1).

According to the job posts, EDs are expected to be *exceptional, confident* and *persuasive* communicators. These communication skills refer to both speaking and writing abilities as well as being active listeners. They need to be able to tailor information to different audiences, including donors, experts, policymakers and the media, and to be able to navigate these audiences seamlessly. For instance: '*Exceptional, persuasive public speaking and written communication skills*' (JP-NA-1); '*Confident public speaking skills, with an ability to comfortably present to multiple audiences as the public spokesperson*' (JP-EU-6); '*Excellent communication and representation skills, including the ability to engage with the media*' (JP-LA-1); and '*Speak, listen, and write in a clear, compelling, and timely manner, using appropriate and efficient communication tools and techniques*' (JP-NA-4). Communication skills, then, do not only refer to speaking but also to listening to employees' (and other stakeholders) concerns and to work on those concerns: '*I always try to listen to others to take into account the opinions of the staff and also it is a source of improvement in my way of managing and directing the internal and external activities of institution*' (AF-7).

ii. *Interpersonal skills: The Networker*

A second style of policy entrepreneurship has to do with the ability to network, which although related to communications and being able to tell stories, also involves other skills. Maxwell explains that policymaking usually takes place within communities of people who interact and are familiar with each other. Both formal and informal networks are key in in influencing policy. In terms of our research, we found the following specific skills related to being a networker: interpersonal skills, partnership building, and public relations.

Representing the organisation and fundraising are key ED responsibilities, and they both require strong public relation skills and that the ED be well-connected. One job post required the candidates to be '*skilled relationship-builders, able to build constructive relationships at a senior level whilst maintaining the Institute's Independence*' (JP-EU-4) and other asked for '*Demonstrated aptitude for building and cultivating strong relationships with key stakeholders*' (JP-NA-1). One ED presented her ability to navigate different social spaces and network with a variety of actors as one of her key skills as a director: '*I am very good at making*

the organisation visible in the global context and that really helped us bring in funds. But I also have important relations with key social actors in social movements in the country' (LA-1). Directors also need to establish strategic and constructive partnerships and, for this, they need to be comfortable navigating different professional spaces with different stakeholders. One ED mentioned: '*The relationship with other players such as politicians, the private sector, donors and the media, requires the executive director to have a contact network, the ability to talk with very different people, advocacy capacities, ability to raise funds and interact with government and media*' (LA-9).

iii.   *Management skills: The Engineer*

The third skillset proposed by Maxwell relates to the ability of researchers to both draft and execute plans, to work with senior level policymakers, as well as 'street-level bureaucrats', and to test their ideas to engage decisionmakers with good evidence.

As mentioned, our analysis showed that think tank EDs need to combine both research and management skills; they have the responsibilities of managing operations and providing intellectual and research guidance and leadership. Here, management skills are understood as the combination of several abilities to organise and plan the vision of the organisation, to interact with a variety of interlocutors, to oversee the work of their staff and to navigate all these different tasks in a way that helps carry the organisation's mission forward. In other words, executive directors need to be excellent multitaskers who can navigate different environments and have a global vision of the organisation's work and expertise to communicate this to all their stakeholders. One job post summarised this as having '*the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to perform the key tasks include intellectual capacity and curiosity, humility and reflective ability, excellent* communication *and listening skills, strong interpersonal skills, the ability to broker, and the capacity to lead strategically in and with respect for a culturally diverse environment*' (JP-EU-1).

Similarly, one director explained this combination of skills as: '*for internal management, one needs management skills, but for the institution's public presence, it is important that the* director *have an academic background*' (LA-11). Or, in the words of one Asian director: '*ideally the director will have the combined stature of an efficient manager, an effective communicator, and an intelligent businessperson*' (AS-22).

iv.   *Political savviness: The Fixer*

The final skillset proposed by Maxwell is about having a deep understanding of the policy and political process. They need to be able to articulate solutions, and it is important to be recognised as knowledgeable and authoritative on certain topics, as this conveys the 'expert power' that can help one convince stakeholders about how to approach an issue.

In our analysis, we found that think tank EDs should have strong conceptual skills, which, according to Kearns et al. (2015), relate to the capacity to create a strategic vision for the organisation and to solve complex problems. The interviews and job post analysis also showed that think tank directors need to have extensive knowledge of the policymaking landscape, as well as the specific topics that the organisation deals with, and to be a respected and recognised figure in their field. This can be demonstrated through experience producing '*political flair and*

substantive thinking' (JP-EU-3); '*a proven track record of innovative and impactful thinking and analysis*' (JP-EU-6); '*skilled in high level policy advice and public affairs*' (JP-EU-4); '*demonstrated expertise in fiscal policy and a deep knowledge of policies related to poverty and racial equality*' (JP-NA-1). Thus, these think tanks are looking for a leader who can not only manage the organisation successfully but who can also guide the teams and oversee the products they offer as an expert in the area.

This knowledge, credibility and expertise are key skills that directors need for one of their main functions: to be able to drive the mission of the think tank forward. In order for them to be good leaders, they need to be recognised as having that 'expert power' by their staff as well as by key partners and stakeholders.

Leadership skills, and self-reflection, were mentioned both in interviews and job posts. They were mentioned in terms of action (which is why they have been included in the skillset of the fixer), but other abilities, such as such as emotional intelligence or 'the ability to live with contradictions, ambivalence and doubt' (Mowles et al. 2019), were not discussed by interviewees. They seemed to focus on more 'practical' skills that were needed for efficient management of an organisation while leaving out those qualities that shape the organisational culture and the relationships within the organisation.

4. Challenges

This section explores the main challenges that EDs face and how they deal with them, including whom they turn to for support. First, we look at personal challenges, which we group into: the difficulties of juggling many functions at the same time; issues related to personal characteristics (such as age, race or gender); and learning how to manage a think tank. Secondly, we discuss organisational challenges the directors face, which we divide into: securing funding, establishing and maintaining the credibility of the organisation; recruiting and retaining qualified staff; finding a demand for their products; and increasing their impact.

a. Personal challenges

i.   *Juggling different functions*

In the section about executive director's roles and functions, we described that think tank directors are like 'jacks of all trades', responsible for a wide array of tasks: overseeing day to day operations while at the same time conducting and supervising research and engaging with stakeholders. Because of this, the most common personal challenge discussed by respondents was the difficulty of balancing many responsibilities. One ED said this: '*This day-to-day whirlwind makes it very difficult to think about the long term, which the director should also be concerned with*' (LA-12).

> **BOX 5:**
> **BALANCING MANY RESPONSIBILITIES**
>
> One of the main personal challenges EDs face is managing many responsibilities at the same time, which at times can be extremely demanding. One ED put it this way:
>
> '*Working in all these different areas requires intense concentration. Fundraising and developing strategic partnerships is huge work. In all these different tasks you end up finding yourself thinly spread. For instance, the role implies many engagements, such as speaking engagements, meetings people expect you to attend to, calls you need to have etc. That is a challenge I am a "jack of all trades". I am doing organisation management, I am doing strategy, I am doing board related issues, I am working with funders, thinking about the next steps of our strategy. I have to engage in all these different tasks as head of the organisation because I am the face of the organisation and that means I am thinly spread*' (AF-1).

In an interview with Enrique Mendizabal, Simon Maxwell, former director of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), said that '*think tank directors are doomed to fail, because the job description is so wide. How can you be the world's best researcher, best communicator, best fund-raiser, best leader of change, and best manager, all at once? Of course, you can't*'. It becomes an impossible job, for which directors need the support of senior management staff.

The intensity of these many responsibilities can make it difficult to concentrate on the long-term research strategy of the think tank or on the research that the director would like to continue conducting. In this line some think tanks may even struggle to retain long-term leaders (especially those recruited among their senior researchers) because this position takes them away from the research that they often consider their main motivation. For example, one ED mentioned: '*Once [funder]'s support ran out we had to quickly adjust and harmonise our finances. This took a lot of my time, I had to work mostly on administrative issues and sort of disregarded the research work*' (LA-3). Since most think tank executive directors interviewed have a keen interest in being active researchers and advancing their research agenda, some find ways to ensure that they have enough time to produce their own research: '*I think the function that takes longer is research. Personally, I invest a lot in research. It is true that the management also takes a lot of time, but I delegate a lot of responsibility in order to have more time for research*' (AF-7). Nonetheless, those seeking to become EDs should be aware that the role takes them away from research and into management.

ii.   *Learning to manage a think tank*

Most interviewees became directors after a career focused on research and found it challenging at the beginning to take on the new tasks, such as administrative issues, the managing or motivating of staff, or becoming the public face of the organisation. Making the transition from (senior) researcher to ED requires learning new skills and adapting to new ways of thinking about the organisation. Interviewees explained it thus: '*Another challenge was beginning to deal with aspects related to institutional management. It was extremely difficult, because I needed a "right-hand man" with experience to accompany me in my work*' (LA-12). '*Coming to the think tank community from the position of an individual researcher and lecturer, managing and organising the work of others was at first sight quite a novelty for me*' (EU-1).

In addition to the challenge of learning new skills as they transition from a research-oriented role to the role of director, many of the EDs interviewed were familiar with only one organisation – the one they had been working for. Therefore, their management style may be marked by the previous leader's approach, or they may be founders who are learning to navigate a completely different role. So learning and uncovering their personal leadership style takes some time, and there is also a long process of staff getting used to the new style.

Some of the directors interviewed saw themselves as empowering their staff by providing opportunities to grow professionally: '*I really try to empower every staff member to make decisions with confidence. I don't want an organisation that becomes sclerotic because the head decision maker is not around to keep the process moving forward*' (LA-4). Others avoid hierarchical relationships that could hinder their staff's potential and organise their teams according to the project's needs and each team member's strengths. Nonetheless, even when directors want to empower their staff, provide them with room to grow and display an inclusive and collaborative approach, some think tanks are still hard environments to work in. As Datta

(2020) documents, some OTT-TTI fellows report "anxiety and concern about unrealistic demands made on them by more senior managers, not having space to assert oneself with colleagues or managers, and the need to have difficult conversations with people both above and below them in the hierarchy". Therefore, there could still be a disconnect between the leadership style directors want to have (or believe they have) and what their staff actually perceives.

iii.   *Personal characteristics (age, race, and/or gender)*[11]

The image of a think tank executive director tends to be of a middle-aged male, with the racial and cultural profile of those with most power (and privilege) in the country in which the organisation operates. And although there are many examples where this stereotype is not true, those who do not have these age, gender, cultural or racial features more often than not need to deal with how others perceive them, as they are often seen as lacking the required skills or experience to run the organisation because of these personal characteristics.

Thomas (2019), examining the challenges faced by women and minority leaders, explains that 'role overload' can be exacerbated when leaders face stereotypes about their abilities because of their race, age or gender. Thomas (2019) argues that people of colour and women in the US are underrepresented in leadership positions across industries and they have to manage how colleagues and subordinates respond to their authority as someone who is from a group not usually identified as being in a leadership position. When leaders come from underrepresented groups they may suffer tokenism, isolation, resistance and intense scrutiny in contexts where typical leaders are white and male and this, in turn, may lead to frustration with their job once they become leaders (Cook and Glass 2013).

These stereotypes were highlighted by some of the directors interviewed, who explained how they can lead to self-doubt and having to work harder to show that they are just as capable of performing as the more 'typical' leader (someone male, older, and from the dominant race in that context). For instance, one interviewee (AS-17) expressed that he felt that senior government officials and other superiors had doubts when they see that the representative of the organisation is someone deemed too young or without enough academic credentials (he did not yet have a PhD). Another had a similar experience because she was young and female: '*Being young is another one. When I had just started (before people knew who I was), I would need to take one of my older male board members to different meetings with different ministries in order to have a receptive audience. Now I no longer need to do that, now I can walk into certain spaces because I think I have managed to gain a reputation, as well as build relationships*' (AF-6).[12]

Although race and age came up in two interviews, gender was the one personal characteristic that several female directors pointed at as a challenge in their pathway to a leadership role. There are leadership stereotypes that are inherently underlined associated with men, so in some contexts there can be resistance to women leaders. One Latin American former director who was elected in the 1990s explained that: '*The fact that I was a woman generated some suspicion about whether I would be able to lead the organisation*' (LA-8).

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11. In some cases, educational background, ethnicity, mother tongue and others may also play a role.

12. This same director also experienced negative perceptions as a Black woman working in India, where she was often the first Black person walking into certain spaces.

But in addition to stereotypes, there are still structural organisational issues that limit the career accession of women. Some female executive directors interviewed in our study discussed the work-life balance challenges women experience when advancing in their careers. For instance, one explained: '*It is very hectic at the top level too. You are required to go to summits, meet development partners, etc. Meanwhile, you have a home and children you are supposed to look after, and a husband as well. It is difficult, but it is doable*' (AF-7). For women who do not have adequate domestic support, it can be more difficult to take on the increasing responsibilities that come with leadership positions and increased time on the job.

> **'My experience is that women most often face a key challenge mid-career, like balancing work-life priorities, and those decisions ultimately have an impact on how far you get and how quickly' (AS-8).**

Women make up an important share of the workers at non-profit and civil society organisations, but they are still underrepresented in leadership positions. This is similar in think tanks across contexts. Balfour et al. (2020) in a paper focusing on 25 European think tanks, show that while there is a relative gender balance among employees overall (45% being women), leadership is still male-dominated, with all presidents and three quarters of directors in those organisations being men (Balfour et al. 2020). This indicates that while women are an important part of the think tank workforce, they rarely make it to the top.

In order to address these issues, one female director suggested: '*The most you can try to do is to encourage women to employ their skills and education and provide as much flexibility as possible within an organisation to foster those talents*' (AS-8). In this sense, Priyanthi Fernando, the former executive director of the Center for Poverty Analysis in Sri Lanka, argues that some changes implemented during her tenure as director targeted at blurring stereotypical gender roles and at facilitating work-life balance for both male and female researchers allowed women to take on more leadership roles (Fernando 2015). Froehner (2015) also proposes to change perceptions of who is imagined to be a successful think tanker by encouraging and supporting the promotion of women and creating spaces in which they can see themselves thriving.

b. Organisational challenges

i. *Securing funding*

As we discussed in the section on roles and functions, ensuring the financial base and sustainability of the think tank is one of the main responsibilities of think tank executive directors. It is also the first challenge that EDs mention facing, one which is shared with non-profit and civic organisation directors in general (Bartczak 2014). Cornelius et al. (2011) conducted a survey with 3,000 executive directors and found that the 2008 recession exacerbated the chronic financial instability faced by numerous organisations. The report points out that '*developing a sustainable business model that fully finances a non-profit's desired impacts and allows for strategic organisational development and growth over time*' (p.7) is an endemic challenge in the sector. Obtaining funds was, indeed, the main organisational challenge discussed by the think tank directors in our study.

Interviewees discussed not only obtaining funding in general, but also the difficulties of finding *core funding* that can help them develop an agenda, in an environment in which most donors increasingly only fund projects. One interviewee explained: '*Fundraising is a major challenge: I spend most of my time selling the organisation, convincing donors to support research on a certain issue, but not a specific project*' (LA-6). Obtaining this kind of core funding that is not tied to small projects or consultancies is what, in the words of several interviewees, allows think tanks to grow and develop their mission: '*When salaries, rent and running costs are covered, you can play the role of a thinking leader and maintain your mission. Without core support, it is difficult to focus on the mission of the organisation. It is a real challenge to keep focused on the mission and not adjust our attention according to where the money is*' (AF-4).

> '**Funding is going down – most donors have closed their grants to core research in most think tanks and long-term viability of think tanks is not assured. The sustainability of think tanks is becoming a major problem**' (AF-5).

Executive directors deal with this challenge by actively looking for alternative sources of funding. Although they know that consultancies and small projects are not sustainable and do not provide room to grow, they do apply for these proposals because they allow them to keep going: '*To ensure the diversity of our sources of funding and to remain engaged with key development actors we do take part in project-based proposal calls even though they provide little* room *for building core funding*' (AS-19). In addition, some are looking outside of traditional partners and approaching the private sector or the government. One explained: '*We overcame the funding difficulties with our private sector model. Currently, 12 companies donate to us. Their donations are untied and be used for anything. This stream represents 20% of our budget*' (LA-4).

Others rearrange hiring schemes or salaries to work with smaller budgets: '*We also put employees down as consultants when we tender for some research projects, so they may provide input for two months at rates that will pay their salaries for over half a year. That really helps to cover overhead costs and also enables us to keep researchers on board long term, instead of just stringing them along from one project to the next*' (AF-10). In short, obtaining a sustainable financial base is a perennial challenge for most think tank directors. Therefore, they turn to small projects that provide some leeway; they approach new donors, and they create '*financial engineering*' (LA-13) strategies to ensure that they can keep their team on board even when funds are low.

ii.   *Establishing and maintaining the credibility and relevance of the organisation*

The second most common challenge that EDs face is building and maintaining the credibility and trust of the organisation, as well as ensuring its relevancy. To be effective participants in the policy process, think tanks need to be perceived as credible sources of information. As Baertl (2018) explains: '*Credibility qualifies think tanks to be consulted on and invited to participate in policy processes; it makes them attractive to funders; promotes engagement with the media as experts in their field; and facilitates access to reputable networks*' (p. 12).

According to Stone (2005), quality and rigour are paramount for think tanks, and being perceived as delivering unreliable analysis is the worst fate for a think tank. Think tank

directors are well aware of this and they spend much of their time ensuring that their products live up to the expected research quality. '*Our centre is very careful to maintain and sustain its credibility through evidence-based assessment of policies and by remaining honest and maintaining integrity*' (AS-21). '*It is enormously important for a think tank to invest in building up its credibility by consistently maintaining the quality of its outputs*' (AS-22). To produce credible research that can inform the national conversation and influence public debates and decision-making, directors dedicate themselves to supervising the quality of the research process. They ensure that the methods used are sound, that the data collected is reliable and that any recommendations they provide are backed by evidence.

But once they have gained credibility, think tanks need good communication strategies to also gain visibility. They need to find the best format to transmit their content to different audiences, in order to achieve the expected outcome of informing national debates and policy decisions. Some directors spend much of their time ensuring both that the research they produce is of the highest quality and that it is communicated through the best channels: '*Policy impact requires a think tank to constantly "translate" its rigorous academic work into accessible briefs and white papers for outreach and dissemination*' (AS-7); '*Staying and becoming relevant is of utmost importance here. You see, building reputation is not an easy task and if our research speaks to nobody, then we're practically out of our jobs*' (AS-17). Thus, in addition to producing high quality products, they organise activities that increase their impact: '*We are working toward this [being a prestigious institution] by initiating various activities such as organising an annual international conference, enhancing the quality of our academic journal, and also ensuring to impart quality education by training workshops*' (AS-4).

iii. *Recruiting, motivating, and retaining qualified staff*

A study comparing the challenges faced by leaders in civil services with those faced by leaders in the private sector in the United States found that while the most common challenges are similar, there are also differences. For instance, for civil leaders, managing and motivating subordinates is a more salient challenge because they face organisational financial instability that translates into employees needing to assume greater workloads without greater incentives (Ferguson et al. 2016).

Recruiting and retaining qualified staff is a common challenge faced by think tank executive directors, especially senior researchers (Struyk 2015). Mendizabal (2012) also highlights this challenge and discusses two common situations that directors face: one is when there are not enough qualified researchers in a particular country and the other is when there are competent researchers but not enough funds to attract and keep them.

According to interviewees, this was particularly common in Africa and Asia. This is because in some countries think tanks compete for the best talent with international organisations, donors, multilateral agencies, and even the private sector. One respondent explained: '*Building a high calibre research team is difficult in a "thin" market like India, given the scarcity of highly trained human resources*' (AS-7). This sentiment was echoed by several directors. For instance, a director in Tanzania put it this way: '*In Africa, we don't have the same capacity for science and innovation as the North. Here, we have to headhunt widely or hire and aim to build capacity*' (AF-4). Since many of these other actors can afford to pay higher salaries, many talented researchers do not stay long in think tanks: '*Another big challenge we have is*

getting qualified researchers and retaining them. Those that we have are scattered and they are expensive to retain' (AF-5).

> '**Retaining qualified professionals is a major challenge for research agencies and think tanks in Nepal. We find ourselves competing with international NGOs, bilateral donors and multi-lateral agencies for qualified human resources**' (AS-19).

In addition, one interviewee who founded a think tank in Iran in 2015, a time when think tanks were a novelty in the country, explained that '*One of the main challenges was attracting prestigious academic figures who were interested in the policy making process, rather than just being academics, and also attracting young, talented, recent graduates as policy researchers*' (AS-1). In order for the organisation to start legitimising its credibility, the first step was to recruit respected academics whose credentials would help position the organisation in a context in which they wanted to remain politically neutral.

Recruiting and retaining the best talent, however, is not only a challenge for think tanks in developing countries. High turnover is also a problem at some of the best think tanks, where many employees suffer from stress-related problems (Mendizabal 2014a).

Directors and senior managers, then, display different creative approaches to retain qualified staff. One way that interviewed EDs are dealing with this challenge is by actively mentoring and training young researchers who can build their careers within the institution: '*We invest in training a young generation of professionals and provide them with new opportunities. This has helped maintain our staff retention rates*' (AS-19). This is what Struyk (2015) documents as the 'grow your own' strategy. Another strategy is to ensure that staff receive institutional support. For instance, by offering researchers incentives for publications, for travel, or for engaging in more innovative and attractive projects. Thus, executive directors make efforts to improve the quality of their staff's work and also motivate them to grow professionally within the organisation. Other approaches to retaining staff include offering them 'split' positions, where they can be members of more than one institution.

iv. *Promoting and generating demand for research and policy advice*

In some cases, directors have had to create a demand for their ideas and services, while in others they have had to create or lead institutions that are rare or relatively unknown in their contexts. In some countries think tanks are either relatively new or not necessarily known by the public. Thus, policymakers, the media and other stakeholders are not familiar with their work and, although directors know that there is a need to produce quality research that can inform policies, there is an initial lack of demand for it. This meant having to educate the government and the public on what think tanks do: '*There was no role model; no Zambian think tank we could copy. We had to navigate unchartered waters and to some extent we have had to trust our instincts – a feminine instinct on my part – which, so far, has worked*' (AF-9). This was a similar experience for a Jamaican director, whose think tank was founded in 2006 and who explains: '*We did not have other think tanks in the country to learn from. Being academics initially, we didn't really know how to run an organisation. We were not*

coming from business, so they were many organisational challenges and inefficiencies in the beginning' (LA-4).

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BOX 6:
BUILDING THE FIELD

Being a pioneer means having to build a legitimate space in the policymaking arena and showing why the services offered by a think tank are useful. An Iranian think tank founder and director explained: '*The second challenge was the challenge of the unknown. The concept of think tank in Tehran was very new when we started. It wasn't a national concept that everybody knew about. We tried to define what a think tank is, the reasons behind establishing one and why we need to have think tanks when we already have research institutions within public departments or academia*' (AS-1).

In some countries where policymakers are not used to taking into consideration the research and recommendations of think tanks, there seems to be a lack of demand for their products: '*The demand for our research is weaker in Africa, unlike in the US, in D.C., where think tanks are part of the decision-making process*' (AF-2). Nonetheless, this challenge of increasing the demand for the services of think tanks is common across the world (Mendizabal 2017).

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Some directors are tackling this by accruing expertise so that they can respond quickly to pressing issues for which government officials need swift policy advice, rather than having to conduct a long research project before they can address policy questions. Accumulating knowledge and creating links to specialists on several topics allows them to be more effective when recommendations are needed promptly.

In order for a think tank's products and advice to be demanded and taken up by policymakers or included in national debates, they must become available to their target audiences. Some directors are doing this by improving their communications: '*This increase in our profile has been achieved by choosing to work on issues which matter to policymakers and then combining policy relevant research with good communications*' (AF-9). Several directors explained that they invest their time and resources in improving their communication strategies to translate their rigorous academic research into more accessible pieces that can be widely disseminated. Some think tanks are much more active in their dissemination via training, workshops and public forums. One director even explained that they sometimes have turned down projects when they do not include support for the crucial phase of communication and dissemination.

The networks that they have with decision-makers are also key, and some leaders are skilled at presenting their organisation as a provider with the capacity to generate knowledge and recommendations. One Latin American director shared that: '*I suspect that compared to other think tanks in the world we have been more than successful in getting our recommendations into policy. The administrators genuinely do lack the knowledge and the resource capacity and, to some extent, they are thirsty for the knowledge we provide. We are working in a receptive environment*' (LA-4).

Context changes

Another organisational challenge is adapting to societal changes that affect how think tanks operate, how they can communicate their messages and how reliable experts are perceived to be by the public. The societal changes that affected organisations as discussed by our interviewees were varied. For instance, several directors were concerned with the arrival of big data and new technologies and the implications these had on the conventional ways in which think tanks conduct and communicate their research: '*The private sector has already shown the way forward with their usage of data and if think tanks prefer to remain in their comfort zone, they will be out of the picture pretty soon*' (AS-17).

Changes in national regimes (e.g. societies that move from more authoritarian to more democratic regimes) and in national regulations affect the role of think tanks as organisations that try to inform policy. Organisations that may have started with more of an activist role that claims democratic governance may change into organisations that want to create links with policymakers and provide them with evidence to inform policy change. '*With this background of increasing demand and lack of supply of evidence [in a context that transitioned from authoritarianism to democratic governance], we were able to capitalise the situation and develop into an established policy research institution in the country*' (AS-22). Think tank directors need to be ahead of these national changes and be ready to quickly adapt and offer the right kind of products when they are needed.

> **'It is very important to understand your context. We cannot just copy successful think tanks in other countries as a model because it may not work in our country. This is not to say that we should not learn from other organisations as certainly there are useful lessons that other organisations can provide. However, by understanding our context, we will be able to set reasonable objectives that we want to achieve as well as determine how we can operate effectively and efficiently.' (AS-22).**

Massive changes in the context can happen both in national environment and more globally. Some directors also pointed to working in more polarised environments, which can be seen across contexts, especially with the growth of misinformation, fake news or issues of 'post truth': '*there is this increasing disbelief in science and the whole Post-truth climate, which is also toxic to our sector. It was already difficult to have a proper policy dialogue or debate using sound evidence as a basis for arguments. Now it will get only more difficult*' (AS-17). Thus, directors look for ways to adapt. One way is to improve their communication strategies, such as increasing the use of social media and targeting their messages to different audiences, and modernising teams and processes. Another way is to maintain their independence by, for instance, deciding whose funds they seek out and accept. And one way to deal with politicised or sensitive issues is to team up with other institutions that do similar work and take on the subject as a group rather than as an individual organisation. Working with others gives them credibility as there is a group of voices with the same view.

c. Finding support

Finding support to deal with both the personal and organisational challenges is important but can be quite difficult for EDs. Some interviewees mentioned feeling alone and like they have no one within the organisation they can go to explain the challenges that they deal with.

Interviewed EDs explained that they were able to overcome the challenges that they face with practice and with support from mentors, colleagues and even the board. Some highlighted the importance of previous leaders or founders of the think tank who provided them with support, advice and mentorship that helped them grow professionally to become successful leaders: '*I was very lucky to have the support of some great mentors who backed me unquestionably, were extremely generous with their time, advice and, most importantly, by joining me in collaborative projects. This emboldened me to leap to the unknown, set ambitious targets, and scale up my work*' (AS-10). Since many directors were new to the task of leading an organisation, relying on the support of mentors and previous leaders enabled them to gain the confidence needed for the job.

Several interviewees also mentioned the positive and collaborative relationship they had with their board, which also provided support in times of changes in the organisation: '*The board has been very cooperative. It was they, after all, who suggested me for the director's position. My interactions with the board members have been full of camaraderie and good will*' (AS-12).

Another way of dealing with challenges is to look at other organisations' best practices and to learn from them: '*When I effectively became the director, I explored the strategies and best practices of think tank management. I engaged people, I asked a lot of questions, I reflected about myself and I also took leadership classes*' (AF-2).

5. Conclusions

This paper has provided an overview of what think tank directors do, their skills, the challenges they face, and how they lead their organisations. There is a lack of literature dealing with think tank leaders specifically, so we have compared their experiences with those of leaders in other sectors, particularly non-profit organisations. One contribution of this article is that while the literature on leadership overwhelmingly focuses on the experiences of directors in the US and Europe, our study has explored particularly the narratives of directors from the Global South.

Below we provide, first, a short summary of what characterises think tank leaders and the main challenges they face; second, a discussion of the implications of the study; and third, recommendations for organisations, donors and think tank leaders.

a. Summary of findings

Responsibilities, functions and skills	We have described five types of roles that think tank directors fulfil. These can be internally facing: providing **strategic direction**, offering **intellectual leadership** and **managing** operations, while others are externally facing: ensuring the **availability of resources** and external **engagement**. It is important that directors have a balance between these two types of roles so that they can lead the organisation as a whole.
	To fulfil these responsibilities, think tank leaders need to have skills that align to those proposed by Maxwell (2009) when discussing policy entrepreneurs:
	Communication skills: think tank leaders should be confident communicators capable of navigating different audiences and establishing dialogues with and among their staff and a variety of stakeholders.

Interpersonal skills: directors should be great networkers capable of establishing strategic and constructive partnerships, so they need to be comfortable navigating different professional spaces.

Management skills: directors supervise day to day operations, which includes the ability to plan the vision of the think tank, oversee and motivate their staff, conduct research, and participate in public speaking events, so they have to be what one leader described as 'jacks of all trades'.

Political savviness: to be effective leaders think tank directors need to be expert researchers, with extensive technical knowledge of the policymaking landscape, and be seen as credible by their staff and other stakeholders.

Qualifications and trajectories

Regarding the qualifications of think tank directors, we found that **postgraduate studies** are key. These credentials among leaders help signal the status and credibility of the analysis offered by the think tank (Stone 2007). All of our interviewees had at least a master's degree, with more than half also having PhDs. The analysis of job posts also showed that postgraduate degrees are a requirement in most cases.

The majority of directors interviewed build their trajectories **inside the organisation** they became directors of (or they founded). The main thread linking their trajectories was a pattern built around **policy-oriented research**: while most had worked mostly as 'thinktankers', many also had experience in government positions, in academia, or in development. Since their careers had been mostly built around being policy-oriented researchers, some of them faced the challenges of acquiring new management, communication and leadership skills once they became executive directors.

Personal and organisational challenges

Learning how to manage a think tank was one of the personal challenges discussed: directors have plenty of research and policy experience, but some are new to day-to-day operational management. For instance, some find it hard at the beginning to be in charge of supervising and motivating other researchers or to dedicate much more of their time to administrative issues than to research and writing.

This is related to another personal challenge: the difficulty of **juggling many tasks** at the same time. In the words of one director, he feels 'thinly spread' because of the many responsibilities that he has. Directors need to be excellent multitaskers who can go from overseeing financial issues to writing a policy brief to talking to the media in one day.

Another personal challenge has to do with the **director's personal characteristics in terms of age, race or gender** and how these characteristics are perceived by others, which can limit their potential because of stereotypes about what a leader should look like. In many contexts, the role of executive director is associated with a certain age, race or gender, which can hinder the promotion

of those who do not fit these expectations. And when someone from an under-represented group becomes director, they may experience self-doubt and require help from colleagues as they establish themselves in that position.

In terms of organisational challenges, the one that think tank directors in our sample encounter most often is **securing funding** that can allow for the proper functioning of the organisation. Their concern is not only to secure funding, which often comes in the way of consultancies or specific projects, but also to obtain *core funding* that allows the organisation to implement their agenda.

A second important challenge is to **maintain the credibility and relevance** of their think tank. According to the literature (e.g. Baertl 2018) and to several directors interviewed, this credibility is closely linked to the research quality of the products offered by the think tank. They, therefore, spend much of their time ensuring that what they and their teams produce is based on rigorous research.

Maintaining credibility is linked to another challenge: **increasing the demand for the services** offered by think tanks. Several directors were pioneers in their countries and had to create a space in which the kind of policy research and recommendations they offered were demanded by the government, the media or the public in general. They had to legitimise the work of a think tank, showing that what they offered was different from the work of universities or from other types of NGOs.

We discussed the challenge of **recruiting and retaining qualified staff**. Think tanks in developing countries often compete for the best talent with the private sector or with international organisations that can offer higher salaries. In order to retain the best talent, directors actively mentor and train young professionals so that they can grow within the institution, and they offer their staff stimulating incentives (such as travel for conferences or attending courses).

Finally, important **societal changes** affect how think tanks operate and communicate and directors have to adapt to these changes swiftly and be ready to offer the right kind of products and services in changing contexts.

b. Implications

Based on these findings, there are some important implications for think tanks in general, for current leaders and for thinktankers who will be leaders in the future:

1. If think tank leaders follow linear '*researcher to director*' career paths they are likely to find themselves in leadership positions without the necessary skills to lead. We have shown how many directors need to learn how to lead a think tank once they take the position. Being an excellent researcher requires different skills from those of being an excellent think tank director. These skills (e.g. management, networking, communications) can and should be learned along the way.

2. Internal promotion processes can replicate past biases – e.g. in terms of the gender or socio-economic background of the leaders or in terms of organisational or management preferences or styles. This can stifle opportunities of reform under new leadership. Many think tank directors are familiar only with their own organisation, which may make it difficult for them to identify shortcomings and to enact integral changes when needed.

3. The preference for certain skills, qualifications and experiences (e.g. PhDs and a research career) affects EDs' leadership approaches and therefore impacts the think tanks themselves. Leadership is not for everyone, but many smaller think tanks choose leaders from among their top researchers without recognising that their main motivation may lie within the research itself rather than with managing the organisation.

4. Stereotypes about what a leader looks like affect the career progression of members from underrepresented groups who may encounter resistance and intense scrutiny of their work, which, in turn, may lead to frustration once they become leaders. In addition to stereotypes, women leaders are still facing more work-life balance problems than men as they may find themselves choosing whether to prioritise their career or their personal life once their responsibilities at work increase. This limits their ability and willingness to stay in leadership roles when the environment and organisational culture are not enabling their growth.

5. When directors are in charge of too many tasks and do not have a reliable senior team to delegate to, they may burn out or neglect important issues. The director is only as good as the senior team they are surrounded by.

6. Attracting and retaining qualified staff is a challenge for many directors who cannot find excellent researchers in their contexts or who cannot afford to pay them competitive salaries. However, think tanks' success depends on more than having exceptional researchers: communicators and programme managers are also key in carrying the organisation forward.

7. Obtaining core, flexible, long-term funding is becoming harder for most organisations. So the challenge for directors is not so much to ensure this kind of funding but to manage the combination of financial arrangement in a way that can balance obtaining funds from diverse donors (e.g. the private sector) while at the same time maintaining the credibility and independence of the organisation.

8. Context changes, both national and global, deeply affect the work of think tanks. Many are currently facing the challenge of growing polarisation, misinformation or a disbelief in experts. If directors are not fully aware of these societal changes and do not display creativity in adapting their teams, products and strategies, they risk losing relevance and credibility.

9. While this paper focused on what think tank directors *said* in interviews, there are implications arising from what they did *not* say. In particular, most directors here did not discuss the importance of skills such as emotional intelligence. For instance, the ability to acknowledge and manage the unwanted feelings that staff might locate in their leaders, or to empathise with anxiety or stress in their teams to find ways to contain these negative emotions and create a positive organisational culture.

c. Recommendations

This section provides recommendations for think tank leaders, boards, and funders, who can address some of the issues that currently limit the progression of leaders.

Creating and participating in leadership programmes that provide leadership capacity building. As we have discussed, many think tank executive directors do not have particular training in leadership or management, since many have spent their careers working as researchers. Once they transition to the director role, they have to learn new skills in several areas such as financial and human resource management or communications. There are many leadership courses available; one example is the School for Thinktankers offered by OTT, which specifically focuses on the needs of current and future think tank leaders. These kinds of initiatives can help directors overcome the initial challenges they face when they become directors and find themselves responsible for new functions.

Establishing senior positions that support some of the tasks of the executive director. Creating senior positions that can take on some of the tasks of the executive director will help address the challenge of juggling too many tasks. Many think tanks already have these structures in place. For instance, IMCO in Mexico has the position of 'Institutional Development Director', who is in charge of contributing to the strategic, operational and financial sustainability of the organisation in support of the director. A different model is that of INESC in Brazil, which was founded with three co-directors who meet regularly and who are each in charge of different tasks.

Implementing programmes that facilitate work-life balance. As we have discussed, women are an integral part of think tanks' workforce. However, few make it to the director position. This is explained by many barriers, such as discrimination, stereotypes, particular contexts, the choice or 'feminine' topics, and the disproportionate care burdens that women are responsible for (Froehner 2015). To address these care burdens, think tanks can offer family-friendly solutions that benefit not only women, but any employees who need flexibility for caring duties. These can include allowing for remote work or providing flexible starting times. Think tanks can also encourage women to participate in leadership training programmes and to apply for promotions when they become available, ensuring they are aware that female leaders are valued in the organisation.

Working towards more diverse and inclusive think tanks. In order to change conceptions of who is or can be a successful think tank director, it is important to encourage the professional ascension of women and minorities as well as to create a conducive, enabling organisational culture within which women and those from underrepresented groups can thrive and lead. One of the directors interviewed here explained that her organisation, ASIES, in Guatemala, actively incorporates women and indigenous people into their staff, their assembly and their board of directors. In this way, they were pioneers in reflecting the diversity that exists in their country but that is not always found at the top.

Working towards broadening the definition of whose work is needed in a think tank. Some think tank leaders still consider think tanks as mostly research organisations. However, outstanding communicators, networkers and managers are also key, so the idea of who is needed in a think tank's team should be broadened and diversified to include different profiles.

Encouraging internal career progression. Many think tanks do not have clear paths for promotion towards leadership positions. Recruiting and retaining the best talent is a challenge for many think tanks. Many directors are already actively working on this by recruiting young researchers and mentoring them, offering supporting workplaces where they can grow and gain confidence. Providing opportunities for

talented thinktankers to also gain new skills (such as attending courses and conferences), to grow their networks and to ascend internally to positions of increasing responsibility will help retain them within the organisation.

This paper has offered insights into what think tank directors do, how they achieved their role and what challenges keep them busy. One important contribution is that the analysis has focused on the experiences of leaders from Asia, Africa and Latin America, while most of the existing literature on leaders of organisations focuses on the Global North. An interesting finding is that the directors in this study followed similar trajectories: they became directors of organisations they were closely linked to and, having built their careers mostly as researchers, they found themselves learning new skills as managers, communicators and networkers. The perennial challenge of obtaining sufficient and sustainable funding is a concern that they all share as they try to implement a vision for their think tank through credible and relevant research. Finally, all the directors are decidedly committed to their organisation's mission and actively find ways to address the challenges they face and to ensure that they and their teams generate high quality products that can be used to inform better policies.

Learning from the experiences of these directors as well as from what is expected from them based on the analysis of job posts will be helpful for current and future think tank leaders. Understanding the commonalities of what characterises think tank leaders across countries, we hope to provide a useful background, particularly by pointing at how the directors' narratives show the paths they followed, the skills they have developed and how they are overcoming their challenges.

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Annex 1. List of OTT interviews included in the analysis

Name	Region	Year of interview	Conducted by
Alvin Mosioma	Africa	2019	Andrea Baertl
Chukwuka (Chuka) Onyekwena	Africa	2018	Enrique Mendizabal
Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni	Africa	2018	Ruthpearl Ng'ang'a
Bitrina Diyamett	Africa	2018	Ruthpearl Ng'ang'a
Eugenia Kayitesi	Africa	2018	Enrique Medinzabal
Chenai Mukumba	Africa	2019	Andrea Baertl
Abdoulaye Diagne	Africa	2019	Founty Fall
Mark Bradbury	Africa	2017	Ruthpearl Ng'ang'a
Pamela Kabaso	Africa	2015	Wil Paxton
Cheikh Oumar Ba	Africa	2015	Till Bruckner
Seyed Emamian	Asia	2019	Andrea Baertl
D. Dhanuraj	Asia	2020	Annapoorna Ravichander
Sunita Naraain	Asia	2019	Annapoorna Ravichander
Samina Khalil	Asia	2019	Annapoorna Ravichander
Jyoti Parikh	Asia	2019	Annapoorna Ravichander
Gurucharan G	Asia	2018	Annapoorna Ravichander
Shamika Ravi	Asia	2018	Annapoorna Ravichander
Dushni Weerakoon	Asia	2018	Annapoorna Ravichander
Salai Ngun Lian Sang	Asia	2018	Annapoorna Ravichander
Yamini Aiyar	Asia	2018	Annapoorna Ravichander
Khalida Gaus	Asia	2018	Annapoorna Ravichander
Hitesh Bhatt	Asia	2018	Annapoorna Ravichander
Nitin Pai	Asia	2018	Annapoorna Ravichander
Sanghmitra S Acharya	Asia	2018	Annapoorna Ravichander
Sachin Chaturvedi	Asia	2018	Annapoorna Ravichander
Abid Qaiyum Suleri	Asia	2017	Annapoorna Ravichander

Fajri Siregar	Asia	2017	Enrique Medinzabal
Sanjay Kumar	Asia	2017	Annapoorna Ravichander
Ajaya Dixit	Asia	2017	Annapoorna Ravichander
Suresh Raghavan	Asia	2016	Annapoorna Ravichander
Mustafizur Rahman	Asia	2016	Annapoorna Ravichander
Asep Suryahadi	Asia	2013	Vita Febriany
Simonida Kacarska	Europe	2017	Enrique Mendizabal
Iara Pietricovsky	Latin America	2019	Andrea Baertl
Santiago Cueto	Latin America	2019	Andrea Baertl
Wilson Jiménez	Latin America	2019	Andrea Baertl
Damien King	Latin America	2018	Andrea Baertl
Roberto Fendt	Latin America	2015	Leandro Echt
Miguel Pulido	Latin America	2015	Leandro Echt
Raquel Zelaya Rosales	Latin America	2015	Leandro Echt
Javier Portocarrero	Latin America	2015	Leandro Echt
Fernando Masi	Latin America	2015	Leandro Echt
Martín Benavides	Latin America	2014	Leandro Echt
Roxana Barrantes	Latin America	2014	Leandro Echt
Nicolás Ducoté	Latin America	2012	Leandro Echt
Alejandro Chafuen	North America	2015	Leandro Echt

Annex 2. List of job posts included in the analysis.

Position	Organisation	Location	Code
Executive Director	Afriheritage	Nigeria	JP–AF–1
Executive Director	Partnership for Economic Policy	Kenya	JP–AF–2
Director	European Centre for Development Policy Management	Belgium	JP–EU–1
Executive Director	Stockholm Environment Institute	Sweden	JP–EU–2
Executive Director	Foraus	Switzerland	JP–EU–3
Executive Director	Overseas Development Institute	United Kingdom	JP–EU–4
Director	Institute for Government	United Kingdom	JP–EU–5
Executive Director	Institute for Public Policy Research	United Kingdom	JP–EU–6
Director Ejecutivo	Grupo FARO	Ecuador	JP–LA–1
Director Ejecutivo	GESOC	Mexico	JP–LA–2
Director	DC Fiscal Policy Institute	United States	JP–NA–1
Executive Director	National Disability Institute	United States	JP–NA–2
Executive Director	Center for Progressive Reform	United States	JP–NA–3
Executive Director	Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)	United States	JP–NA–4

Annex 3. Template think tank executive director job description

The following is a template job description for a think tank executive director compiled from both the interviews undertaken and the job posts included in the analysis. It is a suggestion aimed at helping organisation and should be taken a starting point to be adapted to each organisation.

Template Job Description

1. Responsibilities and Functions

Providing strategic direction

- Providing strategic direction (together with the Board and the senior management team) by delineating the think tank's mission and drawing a strategy to achieve that mission
- Designing and implementing strategic plans, programs and activities.
- Ensuring that daily activities are aligned with the strategy and guiding the team towards that strategy

Managing operations

- Supervising human resource management (strategy, hiring and line management of senior staff)
- Overseeing general administrative issues, including day-to-day finances
- Overseeing the design, implementation and quality of projects and programs, together with project/program directors
- Reporting to the Board of Directors on the think tank's activities and seeking their involvement

Providing intellectual leadership and ensuring research quality

- Providing thought leadership by guiding the research agenda, undertaking his/her own research, and mentoring researchers
- Managing research activities and ensuring the quality and rigour of the work produced
- Maintaining the credibility and relevance of the organisation by ensuring that the outputs are contextually relevant, rigorous and providing clear recommendations

Ensuring the availability of financial resources

- Developing and implementing fundraising plans
- Managing existing funding and establishing strategies to approach new sources of funding
- Supporting, participating in and supervising fundraising efforts at different levels of the organisation

Representing the organisation, establishing partnerships and building networks

- Representing the organisation externally and serving as the main public spokesperson
- Building a robust communications strategy (together with communications staff) and advocating for the organisation with varied audiences

- Maintaining existing partnerships and building new ones with a variety of stakeholders (funders, other think tank partners, government agencies, policymakers)

2. Required skills

- The director will have excellent speaking and written communication skills
- S/he will have demonstrated aptitude for building and cultivating strong relationships with stakeholders (including donors, the media and policymakers)
- Management skills, including managing human resources and financial performance, and a proven record of successful delivery of research projects
- Capacity to lead, motivate and empower staff
- Strong intellectual and analytical skills, demonstrable through previous impactful analysis and strategic thinking about the issues relevant to the organisation

3. Experience and Qualifications

- A postgraduate degree (MA or PhD) in a relevant field
- Proven understanding and knowledge of the policy areas relevant to the organisation
- Previous leadership and/or management experience in a similar organisation
- Demonstrated experience in successfully raising funds for a think tank or policy research centre