Highlights of an Oak evaluation conducted on philanthropy in India

Introduction

Between December 2015 and September 2017, three of Oak's climate and energy programme grantees conducted external evaluations with the support of Oak. All three of these organisations are think tanks based in India. The evaluations were not aimed at rating performance but were instead meant to help the organisations understand their efficiency, relevance and ability to identify new opportunities. We hoped that the evaluations would help guide future strategy development. The evaluations presented a great opportunity for us to not only learn more about these organisations, but also reflect on the process of evaluations themselves. At the end of these major evaluations, Oak held a meeting with the evaluators to document and share their learning. Through the article, we hope to share some of these learnings with you all.

Key outcomes

- **Focus on the process, not impact**: There is a tendency to want to quantify the relation between money spent and social outcomes. This is not useful for think tanks and research organisations where it is far more useful for evaluations to focus on the process rather than on quantifying the impact itself.
- **Use clear guidelines to frame the evaluation**: It is useful to frame the objectives of the evaluation as a series of questions in the Terms of Reference (ToR). This helps drive clarity on what kind of answers and insights the evaluation should be producing.
- **Ensure that key stakeholders are on the same page**: It is essential to ensure that all parties (in this case, Oak, the evaluators and the organisation being evaluated) meet before the start of an evaluation and agree on the objectives and methodology of the evaluation.
- **Allocate sufficient time**
- **Allocate sufficient internal resources**
- **Allow for mid-course corrections**: The framing or focus of an evaluation may shift after the initial internal discussions or after the first few interviews with external stakeholders. These might reveal new areas of interest or make some areas infeasible due to lack of time/data.

- **Selecting the right evaluator**: An ideal evaluator is one who understands think tanks, has prior experience of such work, and the ability to understand the technical aspects of an issue without necessarily being deeply involved in that sector. If technical expertise is required, consider having more than one evaluator to balance any potential bias.
- **Plan how to use the evaluation**: Organisations should also plan from the beginning how they will use the results and recommendations of the evaluations. The results of the evaluation should be shared with internal and external stakeholders and ideally even put in public view, barring any sensitive information.

Major Takeaways for Oak to further reflect on and integrate for the future

In the context of the magnitude of the climate problem and the scale and complexity of actions needed in India, it is important that more minds focus on research, innovation and public policy. While it would be ideal to have public policy or innovation centers of high quality at the universities in India, this is not the trend in India. The impact of this has been that private think tanks have found it hard to recruit talent. This either results in them having limited research areas and outputs.

As a result, they have had to face hard choices about spending time and resources on convening versus research, being on high level committees and private briefings on policy matters versus public outreach. With the current context of the think tanks under review, it is important to note that think tanks have been able to grow manifold in terms of numbers; there is no average or recommended size to a think tank in India, but there is certainly a need to have many more think tanks and research organisations like the three organisations which were evaluated. Overall, organisational growth, funding and ability to remain relevant to the need of the sector are important and complex issues that need further thought.

Ethnic and gender diversity is also another important area that was not tackled in depth in the evaluations. Female leadership is low in think tanks in India and it was recommended that Oak works with other philanthropies to address this issue more systematically.

Working with or for the government has shown that think tanks are currently playing a government advisory role, which is helping in not only providing crucial capacity to the government but also helping the think tanks themselves become better-informed about government priorities and processes. They have also been able to build expertise, and perform in-depth or specialized research that government does not have the time or capacity to do. The line is fine between being able to advise the government and speak for them.

Further, public engagement is important for think tanks to consider their impact on public discourse, encourage social movements on climate and provide thought leadership on climate issues in India. Their work would benefit by being more analytical, rather than purely academic and descriptive.

Through this evaluation we have learned some very important and insightful lessons for our grant-making in India about the role of think tanks in climate action. In the coming years, it will be important for philanthropy to continue to support think tanks in India at a level where they can continue to do independent research, track policy progress and help think through implementation barriers for key policy targets for climate action. Key takeaways for Oak include the need to support a diverse set of think tanks that can inform climate action from different vantage points and support programmes that help different think tanks learn and build knowledge networks.