



Winter School for Think Tankers, 2017

From Sunday 22 to Saturday 29 January 2017, the Think Tank Hub co-organised, with On Think Tanks and *foraus*, the Winter School for Think Tankers, the first ever training for tomorrow's Think Tank leaders. The event took place in the heart of International Geneva and was delighted to host 14 proactive individuals from around the world: Nigeria, China, Ukraine, France, Brazil, South Africa, Austria, Germany, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Switzerland and Iran. It was a unique opportunity for them to develop their knowledge and understanding of Think Tanks and to prepare themselves for a future as policy changemakers. More particularly, it offered a practical approach, rather than just theory, with input and advice coming from a range of professionals.

Indeed, the speakers were all practitioners coming from different backgrounds, from think tanks, non-governmental organisations and international organisations. They included

- Will Paxton, Director of Kivu International;
- Francesco Pisano, Director of United Nations (UN) Library;
- Jenifer Freedman, Chief of Communications and Outreach, Results and Evaluation at UNRISD;
- Philippe Stoll, Deputy Head of Public Communication at International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC);
- Verena Parzer, Head of Communications and Production at Avenir Suisse;
- Emilia Pasquier, Director of *foraus*;
- Catherine Fiankan-Bokonga, Correspondent Journalist at the UN and Vice President of the Geneva Press Club;
- Andrea von Siebenthal, Communication Manager at the Geneva Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD);
- Stephen Yeo, Former Chief Executive Officer at the Centre for Economic Policy Research;
- Kali Taylor, from the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) and Founder of Students Energy;
- Enrique Mendizabal, Founder and Director of On Think Tanks;
- Sonja Stojanovic Gajic, Director of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BSCP);
- Dr. Marc-André Pradervand, Head of Direct Marketing at Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF);
- Katinka Koke, Associate Programme Officer at UNITAR;
- Benjamin Tyler Smith, Knowledge Management Officer at Green Growth Knowledge Platform;
- Johan Rochel, Board Member of *foraus*;
- Alexandre Munafò from Interpeace;
- Thomas Guerber, Director of DCAF; and
- Laura Merrill, from IISD.
- Thomas Biersteker, Director of Policy Research, Graduate Institute Geneva

THINK TANK HUB

Each day of training was dedicated to a specific theme. On Monday the speakers focused on “How to develop a Policy Relevant Research Agenda.” Will Paxton (Kivu International) invited the participants to debate how and to what extent policy makers actually listen to researchers. He also highlighted the importance for a think tank to have a clear focus, concrete strategies for policy changes, and an awareness about which “windows of opportunity” are open to it. In the afternoon, the participants visited the UN Library, where Francesco Pisano delivered a brief history of the UN and its library, and encouraged think tanks to engage more with the UN in general. In this vein, the next speaker, Jennifer Freedman, discussed how think tanks could actually engage with the UN and used her organisation, UNRISD – an autonomous research institute within the UN – as an example. Her advice: « stay relevant » and « one of your priorities should be translating academic papers into short messages and finding the right channels to get messages to the targeted audience ». In the evening a reception was organised where a lively debate took place on think tanks and their role in implementing the SDGs of Agenda 2030.

Tuesday was dedicated to Communications. Philippe Stoll presented the ICRC, explained how communications can be used for humanitarian aid, and spoke about the role of new technologies. The second speaker, Verena Parzer, from Avenir Suisse, gave some more practical tools to the participants on how to effectively use communications as a think tank, including how to best promote research. She reminded the participants that, as a think tanker, “you have to be ready to be challenged. You will have a lot of criticism, which is good, but you have to be ready to jump back.” Over lunch, Emilia Pasquier explained how *foraus*, a Swiss grassroots Think Tank, was created. Because Switzerland doesn’t have a strong tradition of Think Tanks, she explained, it was very challenging to create one. She continued by underlining how important it is for new think tankers to have innovative ideas, and be pro-active with propositions. Later in the day, Catherine Fiankan-Bokonga briefly presented the Geneva Press Club, and then focused on how think tankers can connect with the press. She stressed the necessity of short, coherent and appealing communication, but warned of falling into oversimplification. The last speaker, Andrea von Siebenthal from GICHD, animated a vibrant workshop on public speaking. She gave the participants various tips on how to best deliver a speech, such as “be authentic, be fresh”, “keep it simple but powerful”.

On Wednesday, the morning presentations focused on Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E). Stephen Yeo presented how M&E works for think tanks, which is quite different from companies. Indeed, he argued, “achievement is more important for a think tank than for companies.” As a think tank, he continued, you have to show results to donors and society ; be transparent and able to demonstrate that achievements have been made. Further, he

THINK TANK HUB

explained to the participants how to assess the value of a think tank, how to measure the performance internally and externally, and how to deal with donors regarding M&E demands. Following Mr Yeo's intervention, a brown bag lunch on systems change and innovation for sustainable development, with Kali Taylor, from IISD, was organised. The last speaker of the day, Enrique Mendizabal from On Think Tanks, spoke about communications as an orchestra, or more precisely, on how to use different communications channels effectively. For the rest of the day, the participants had some reflection time to work on their Learning Journals: notebooks handed out on the first day of the Winter School for participants to assess their lessons learned throughout the week and reflect on what they will need to further develop for their own purposes.

On Thursday, the theme developed was Fundraising and the Financial Management of think tanks. Sonja Stojanovic gave practical examples from her own Think Tank (BCSP) on developing a sustainable funding strategy, identifying and evaluating possible funding sources, managing the relationship with funders and highlighted the importance of being transparent. The next speaker, Marc-André Pradervand reminded the participants that "fundraising is not sponsoring": there shouldn't be direct rewards for the donors. He mentioned that preparatory work inside the organisation is very important for fundraising. Furthermore, he explained that the rational as well as the emotional parts are important during the process. At the end of the day, the participants visited the environmental house, which gathers under a common roof a range of UN and non-governmental organisations active in the field of environment and sustainable development in the Geneva area, where each speaker presented his or her organisation: UNITAR, Geneva Environment Network, Green Growth Knowledge platform.

On Friday the topic was Governance and Management. Enrique Mendizabal, as founder of On Think Tanks, gave some practical advice about the size and role of boards, selecting the right people for leadership positions and on fostering creativity within the team to spur innovative outcomes. In the afternoon, the think tankers discovered the *Maison de la Paix*, where Thomas Biersteker spoke about the use of expertise in international organisations and the challenges of integrating external research into their activities. He affirmed: "Lack of incentives is one of the main challenges facing external research in regards to policy research at the UN". Following Mr Biersteker's intervention, a presentation of the main centres of the *Maison de la Paix* was offered: Johan Rochel presented *foraus* and its relationship with its board members, while Andrea von Siebenthal, Thomas Guerber, Alexandre Munafò, and Laura Merrill respectively introduced GICHD, DCAF, Interpeace and IISD.

During the final day, the participants spoke about the lessons learned during the week and gave some feedback to the organisers. To optimise the discussion, a group work session was organised to reflect on lessons learned. Enrique Mendizabal concluded the Winter

THINK TANK HUB

School with some last advice on how to set up a Think Tank, such as “Get started before you seek big funding. Publish, organise events, network, be coherent. Help them find you”.

Overall, we have had, so far, good feedbacks from the participants. On Think Tanks and the Think Tank Hub intend to continue working together to develop general follow-up support for all the participants, as well as more specific engagement for those with on-going projects to develop or lead a think tank.