



Collaboration Case Note

External Evaluation of TAI as a Collaborative

May 2020

Transparency and Accountability Initiative (TAI) seeks to foster collaboration between two or more members around our shared strategic priorities. Collaboration case notes document and assess the utility of such initiatives from the funder perspective.

What Problem(s) Were We Addressing?

As a global funder collaborative, TAI's organizational model and approach are based on delivering an adaptive workplan and fostering collaboration within and across funder member institutions. Ultimately, this work is intended to advance the transparency, civic participation, and accountability (TPA) goals across funder members and the organization partners they support. TAI collects and regularly analyzes monitoring data to track progress annually. This [series of annual case notes](#) is part of that effort, designed to reflect on the quality and usefulness of collaborative initiatives. But TAI did not have systematic evidence of its overall achievements and challenges or a sense of funder collaborative benchmarks against which to assess its efforts. TAI's [2017-2019 strategy](#) included plans to commission an external evaluation. Through this evaluation, TAI sought to narrow the evidence gap to inform member discussions and expectations and refine its collaborative strategy beyond 2019.

Who Collaborated and How?

The Steering Committee (SC), TAI's governance and decision-making body, reviewed an evaluation options memo drafted by the Secretariat and determined the type and direction of the evaluation. The Secretariat then partnered with Arabella Advisors as the external evaluator to design, conduct, and support use of the evaluation. Strategy consultant Chris Michael of Collaborations for Change supported Secretariat staff planning for the strategy refresh and engaged in the transition from evaluation to strategy refresh.

Program and evaluation officers, including one person from a member field-based office, participated in an evaluation advisory group with the Secretariat to prioritize evaluation

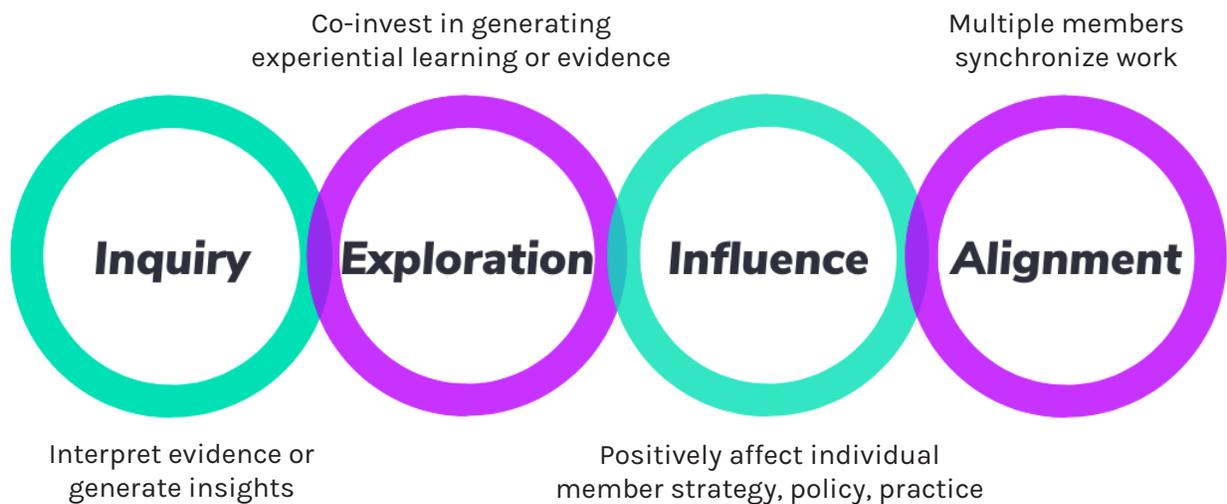
questions and comment on evaluation products. This group’s mandate expanded to draw on evaluation findings and revise TAI’s theory of change. A broader group of funder members participated in a virtual discussion of early evaluation findings. Finally, SC members and others convened for an in-person sense making workshop to interpret final evaluation findings and kick-off the strategy refresh effort with Secretariat staff and external evaluation and strategy partners.

What Type of Collaboration Was It?

This collaboration took several forms. It began with ‘exploration,’ where members co-invested in the evaluation through TAI’s collaborative budget. The initiative also included ‘inquiry,’ as members interpreted evidence and engaged in sense making to inform TAI’s future work. Ultimately, the initiative yielded ‘alignment’ in the form of TAI’s 2020-2024 strategy. The evaluation also surfaced evidence around how TAI supports collaboration among members, which is discussed below.

"If we wanted to get similar outcomes [without TAI] we'd have to commission a lot more research independently to look at trends in the field and scope opportunities for investments."

-TAI Member

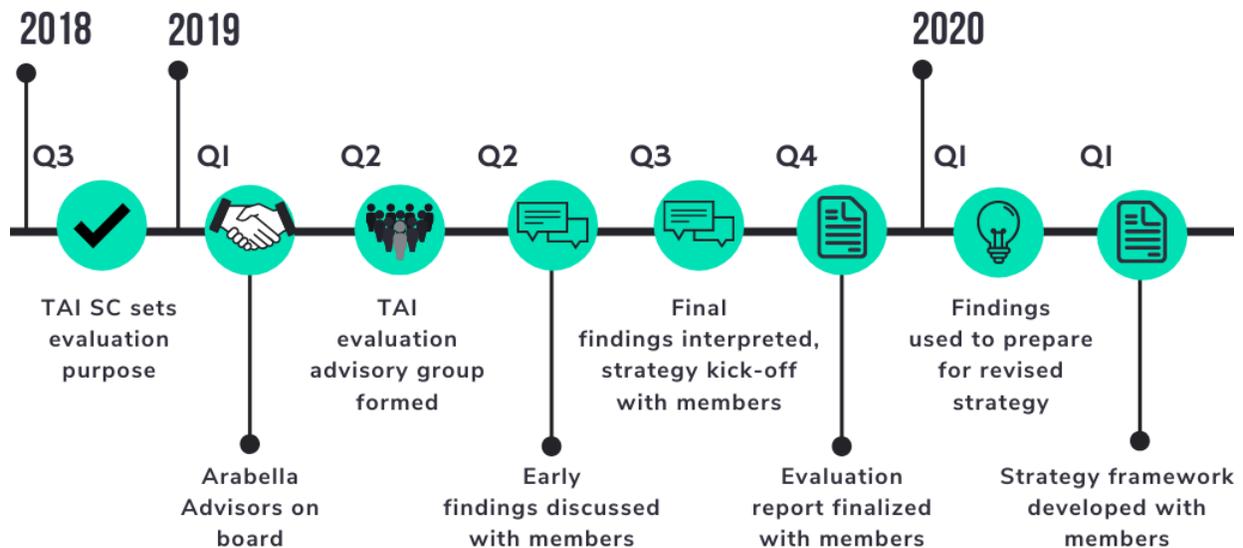


How Did the Collaboration Evolve?

TAI initially planned to conduct a mid-point assessment, but the actual evaluation occurred closer to the end of the 2017-2019 strategy period. This shifted the anticipated touch points across the evaluation and the 2020 strategy refresh efforts. The 2019 TAI member retreat did not serve as an evaluation data collection moment as planned. Instead, the evaluation relied on remote data collection. Later in the year, TAI convened an extraordinary in-person meeting to interpret and sense make evaluation findings and begin the strategy refresh process.

TAI used the evaluation findings as planned to inform the new strategy. The revisions ultimately pursued and endorsed by the SC, however, went beyond clarifying and updating the existing strategic themes, as the Secretariat had anticipated. The evaluation evidence, evaluation partner expertise, and member effort to sense make the evaluation findings all contributed to a new theory of change and strategic framework, and a shift away from the previous four established strategic themes.

Timeline



What Have We Achieved?

As a collaborative initiative, TAI realized several achievements around the evaluation outputs produced, the actors involved, and, importantly, the use of evaluation findings.

The Secretariat led members in completing a systematic inquiry into TAI’s model and strategic work. Preliminary and final findings and evaluation products helped various institutional member staff engage during this process. These perspectives, and those of TAI’s evaluation and strategy partners, contributed to the quality of the process and outputs produced.

The evaluation succeeded at engaging a diverse range of collaborative funder members including and beyond the SC. This group included program and evaluation officers serving on the evaluation advisory group, and others who joined SC members for the virtual preliminary findings session and the in-person sense making workshop. Engaging this range of member voices in reviewing, interpreting, and applying evaluation findings to TAI’s work was an important asset and accomplishment.

Finally, this initiative yielded evidence about TAI’s collaborative practices, and TAI members contributed to distilling this evidence into actionable insights. Through virtual and in-per-

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son member engagement, TAI applied evaluation findings to assess past collaborative work, clarify its collective purpose, and design a strategic framework for future work.

What is the Utility of Collaboration through TAI?

Turning from the evaluation experience discussed above, the evaluation itself included a specific line of inquiry to examine how TAI contributed to member collaboration. The evidence indicated that many members see collaboration propelled through TAI beneficial to their individual work and that of the collective.

TAI offers a favorable environment for open communication, exchange of ideas and information, exploration, and learning. Members use TAI as a platform to build relationships and connections with other members, enabling them to collaborate within and beyond TAI-endorsed initiatives. This is particularly appreciated by funders who have joined the TPA field more recently.

Members report being influenced by each other and drawing on each other’s practices and experiences. For example, they have:

- partnered to share perspectives or co-invest in a strategic grantee or opportunity;
- collected information or elicited feedback from other members; and
- discussed and drawn insights from each other’s strategies, programs, and grant-making practices.

Facilitating collaboration across funders is not without challenges. TAI must continuously align members’ expectations and minimize ambiguity around roles and responsibilities, all in the context of diverging needs, systems, and strategy shifts in member institutions.

"I think that having the key field-leading donors together semi-regularly in conversations about their strategies, thinking, and direction, and being able to challenge each other, learn from each other, influence each other is a helpful thing that [otherwise] doesn't exist in this space right now."

-TAI Member

Barriers to TAI Member Collaboration	Enablers of TAI Member Collaboration
Time constraints limit members’ ability to engage, making it difficult to sustain momentum on strategic priorities	Diversity of participants’ personal backgrounds and a participatory, co-design process of member meetings, leading to information sharing and joint inquiry
Too broad of focus and lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities	Members that work on similar issues with common grantees.
Differing expectations regarding final outcomes across multiple stakeholders and challenges with buy-in	Trust, openness, and the unfiltered and honest exchange of information
Member institutions’ differing needs, systems, and contexts and adapting to strategy changes among member institutions	Topic is relevant and aligns with what the institutions are interested in and working on

Source: Arabella Advisors evaluation analysis 2019.

Lessons Learned

On the evaluation as a collaborative initiative

Integrate workplan and design for evaluation and strategic planning initiatives early in the process. This helps position the evaluation for learning and use in subsequent strategic work. Taking a phased approach to planning can allow for adaptation of plans along the way. Beyond logistics, it is also important to clarify the function of each initiative throughout the process. While the evaluation drove this collaborative initiative at the outset, the strategy process became more prominent when packaging and interpreting the evaluation findings.

On TAI as a funder collaborative

Organizational and strategic clarity are drivers of fruitful collaboration. TAI's 2018 and 2019 collaboration case notes, including this one, have affirmed the importance of establishing a clear and shared purpose to support progress and results. It is important to periodically reassess this purpose, whether for the funder collaborative or specific initiatives underway. Members of a collaborative are constantly refining and updating their priorities and ways of working as are the problems we seek to address.

"Learning and effective philanthropy is crucial because the most fundamental yardstick that should be used for TAI in the long term is [whether we] have enabled program partners to be more powerful, more strategic, more impactful, more sustainable in the world. That is the ultimate measure."

-TAI Member

External evaluation can produce data points that are not easily surfaced by the collaborative itself. It is difficult for any organization to surface sensitive evidence about internal challenges. While TAI found that members enjoy trust-based relationships, the evaluation did highlight the importance of organizational attributes that might receive less attention in relation to the success of collaboration. For example, TAI used evaluation findings to focus attention on other priorities, such as having clear governance and membership terms of reference, or a strategic framework that can absorb the continuous evolution of members' institutional priorities.

Visibility of new and in-progress work is important to invite and sustain inter-institutional collaboration. Collaborative member staff engage in TAI's work in the context of many competing and emergent demands on their time. Internal information sharing and communications are crucial practices to be inclusive in inviting participation and to sustain engagement across diverse institutional actors. These practices are also important signals to members on when and how to collaborate with peer funders outside of their institutions to advance shared or complementary interests or goals.

Transparency and Accountability Initiative is a collaborative of leading funders of transparency, accountability and participation worldwide. It envisions a world where citizens are informed and empowered; governments are open and responsive; and collective action advances the public good. Toward this end, TAI aims to increase the collective impact of transparency and accountability interventions by strengthening grantmaking practice, learning and collaboration among its members. TAI focuses on the following thematic areas: data use for accountability, strengthening civic space, taxation and tax governance, learning for improved grantmaking.



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