



THE IDEA OF A STIAS-WALLENBERG ROUNDTABLE

From time to time, successful institutions of advanced study face the question of how the considerable resources expended on them can be seen to be of any benefit to society at large.

Though not necessarily subscribing to the idea that all research must have some immediate practical or beneficial application, STIAS recognises its obligation to demonstrate that research of the highest order is not a luxury but is in fact necessary to develop the capacity to come to grips with some of the most complex problems facing us today.

To this end, STIAS decided to utilise the idea of a roundtable as a forum for researchers and experts to interact with different sectors of society around a topic or problem of common concern.

Against this background, the Marianne and Marcus Wallenberg Foundation, key funders of the STIAS programme, is supporting an annual roundtable forum where representatives from South Africa, Sweden and a broader international community can engage in dialogue and debate around a central theme, typically one related to current global challenges, and in particular focusing on its local manifestation.

In the context of STIAS as primarily a research and scholarship institution, the concept of the roundtable endorses the idea that research of the highest level should be done not only for the benefit of the community of scholars but also for the benefit of the wider community and for the benefit of life outside the confines of a research project, the library or the laboratory.

The roundtable philosophy holds that research-based applications and interventions developed in consultation with interested and affected parties are in the long run more likely to be successful than those which are not.

For this reason, roundtables stimulates the cross-pollination of ideas by providing a forum for discussion amongst researchers, practitioners, public and private sector leaders, civil society and potential beneficiaries of research and its application or implementation.

Such a forum is intended not only to debate whether current and proposed practices, policies and interventions are effective and efficient, but also whether they are financially, politically and culturally acceptable and feasible in the broader scheme of things.

The concept of the roundtable also endorses the idea that all participants in the conversation are afforded equal status in presenting their views and in questioning the views of others. This principle does not deny the existence of experts and expertise, but is designed to counteract the inclination of a one-way or hierarchical flow of information from “experts” to “lay” persons, and in promoting opportunities for mutual learning not only amongst peers but also amongst participants from a variety of societal sectors.

The Wallenberg Foundation tasked Ms Maud Olofsson to assist STIAS in developing strategies for annual roundtable forums. Her involvement as Sweden’s former Deputy Prime Minister and as former Minister of Energy and Enterprise equipped her with a wealth of experience and international contacts which are especially valuable in organizing high level events of this nature.

Key expectations

During the implementation of the concept, certain expectations were foregrounded as distinguishing characteristics of the STIAS-Wallenberg roundtables.

Participants

First among these was the size and composition of the roundtable participants. To encourage personalised, face-to-face interaction, roundtables are flexibly capped at around forty invited participants. No registration or participation fees are levied, on the understanding that STIAS will sponsor the flight and accommodation costs of participants whose employers do not support their participation. Geographically the roundtable should consist of representatives from South Africa and Africa, as well as Sweden and the broader international community. In demographic distribution, attention should be given to gender parity and to representation from Africa. To promote “cross-pollination” special efforts should be made to hear voices from a variety of societal sectors, that is, apart from (obviously) researchers and experts, also (especially) politicians and policy makers should be involved, as well as professionals and practitioners, the business or private sector, the social or civil society sector, and where possible the intended beneficiaries or end users of the products or services involved.

Outcomes and impact

A second expectation is that a roundtable will have definable outcomes and preferably discernible impacts. Outcomes could vary from a press release or statement at the end of a roundtable, further media reports or coverage, policy briefs, technical reports or academic publications, or the formation of projects or associations to continue some work identified in the roundtable. The short term or longer term impacts of such outcomes are difficult to measure but should be reported where possible.

Preparation and organisation

It follows that realisation of the above expectations requires appropriate preparation and organisation of roundtable events. The expectation is that the choice of topic should be settled well in advance, followed soon by the nomination of a core committee whose members’ job it is to develop the concept around the topic in consultation with STIAS. This committee will also advise on the main steps to be taken in the preparation for the roundtable, the main outcomes to be realised and the manner in which they might be realised in the actual meeting, and identification of suitable participants to be invited to approach a desirable representation and to realise the outcomes elaborated above.

Topic

Last but not least is the expectation that the topic and the outcomes of the roundtable should bear some relationship or resemblance to the main “business” of STIAS. This can be achieved in a variety of ways. One is that the topic of a roundtable should be aligned with the research undertaken at STIAS, preferably as formulated in one of STIAS’ main research themes. This would be especially useful if a body of knowledge has accumulated in such a research theme and its possible utilisation is built into the topic. A second is that the outcomes of a roundtable could identify gaps in knowledge that could be further pursued by work at STIAS, and again alignment with a STIAS research theme would be desirable.

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