



The STIAS concept of a Roundtable

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 will engage in dialogue and debate around a central theme, typically one related to current global challenges, and in particular focusing on its local manifestation.

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.

In the context of STIAS as primarily a research institution, the concept of the roundtable is utilised first of all to endorse the idea that research of the highest level should be done not only for its own sake but also for the benefit of humanity and for the benefit of life outside the halls of academe. This would require some form of translation of research that is often highly esoteric or technical in nature and therefore inaccessible to lay persons. The application of research may also require huge investments, which may compete with other priorities and thus enter the domain of policies and politics. Roundtables may begin to provide such a forum for discussion amongst researchers, practitioners, policy makers, civil society and potential beneficiaries of research and its application or implementation, not only to debate whether current and proposed practices, policies and interventions are effective and efficient, but also whether they are financially and politically feasible in the broader scheme of things.

The concept of the roundtable is invoked in the second place to promote 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 is fundamental in counteracting the tendency of a one-way flow of communication from “experts” to “lay” persons. The physical outlay of the round table was reportedly used by King Arthur to avoid questions of precedence or hierarchy. Irrespective of the seating pattern, the principle accepts the view that practices and policies should be informed not only by research but also by the concerns of intended beneficiaries and those who are affected directly or indirectly by past or planned interventions.

True to the tradition of roundtable meetings, these events are structured to use state of the art research findings to discuss options in a wider forum, involving actors from the public, private as well as civil society sectors.

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