

## **Abortion Think Tank call: Summary of discussions**

**Date: 18<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

**Time: 5-6pm**

### **Present:**

Dr. Alka Barua, CommonHealth

Dr. Arvinder Nagpal, CommonHealth

Ms. Dipika Jain, Jindal Global Law School

Mr. Kuldip Chand Nangal, CommonHealth

Dr. Manisha Gupte, MASUM

Dr. Nilangi Deshpande, CommonHealth

Ms. Renu Khanna, CommonHealth

Ms. Rupsa Malik, CREA

Ms. Sanjeeta Gawri, CommonHealth

Dr. Souvik Pyne, CommonHealth

Dr. Subhasri Balkrishnan, CommonHealth

Dr. Suchitra Dalvie, CommonHealth

Dr Sundari Ravindran, CommonHealth

Ms. Swati Shinde, CommonHealth

Alka led the discussion and began by giving a brief introduction about CommonHealth's plan to set up a Think Tank for Safe abortion rights and access to services. She made reference to previous discussion around it within the SC members. She believed it would be useful to have a group of experts to work on the issues who look at all the emerging data, evidence, concerns and comes up with a response or position of all the activists /advocates. The idea is exploratory as of now and not very concrete.

She further shared that the group had earlier discussed that the objectives, membership criteria should be clearly articulated. She talked about why it should be a collaborative effort engaging with other organisations as within CommonHealth there are resources limited to the period of the project and this needs to be sustained beyond that.

The following objectives were put forth for discussion:

- Analysis of existing ecosystem – identification of existing and potential barriers and opportunities for securing safe abortion as a right for individuals in need
- Deliberate and propose contextually aligned solutions and strategies including legal, policy, programmatic and systemic reforms to address challenges to securing safe abortion as a right for individuals in need

- Develop position papers, policy briefs and knowledge products related to safe abortion as a right for individuals in need, for dissemination
- Advocate for safe abortion rights using evidence, appropriate vocabulary and persuasive arguments (??)

She informed some of the activities are already been done but there is no formal entity established and there is a need of expert inputs rather than larger groups working on it.

Dipika opined that the idea of think tank is to have a bunch of people who can think through some of the policy interventions and support knowledge generation and informed that they are already doing it through other group. She suggested that it would be good for the group to deliberate on the concrete activities/ideas/projects to be done annually, the time commitment for the same and the kind of infrastructure. She also suggested discussing on the funding and sustainability of this effort.

Sundari agreed with Dipika about small group voluntarily making time commitment for this. About objectives of the Think tank, she added by saying that it would be good to look at those countries who have progressive laws and how have they framed laws that acknowledge rights or treat abortion as just another medical procedure.

Alka responded although to some extent it would get covered under the objective 2 but she hadn't thought explicitly about laws outside country and was mainly thinking in terms of India. Dr Suchitra shared her thoughts and said that it is a important initiative. and believed that the think tank will evolve over the course of time and then it would be more clear about what kind of platform it would be. She talked about the challenges of working with a large group of 40-42 people as the group lacks a cohesive identity and it slows down the momentum. She said that it would be good to create a formal structure of purposively selected people rather than being very inclusive. She suggested that having a theory of change statement along with the objectives would be useful. In her opinion the space it would create for thought leadership would be an important contribution

Rupsa shared her thoughts on the idea of think tank. According to her it would provide a space which fosters evidence based work in 2 ways:

1. Firstly, think tank itself would produce evidence and could consider itself as a clearing house. One is clearly the objective that foregrounds evidence based ways to advance action
2. Secondly it would distinguish itself from other configurations influencing policy by ideating the thought leadership in the direction of influencing policy.

There is need to deliberate on what space we are building or nature of alignment to determine what evidence based work the group should take on to influence policies programmes, a larger ecosystem. She suggested refining and sharpening the objectives a little more that will enable us to mark the boundaries. She put forth the question that would the think tank position itself for national level advocacy or will it look at the state level work in terms of advancing policy change?

Renu talked about the point 'advocating for Safe abortion rights using evidence', she suggested there is need to unpack many terms that are been used and evidence is one such term.

Manisha shared her thoughts and agreed it is a great initiative. She shared her opinion saying that the objectives were bit ambitious keeping in mind the voluntary time commitments by members and one needs to be mindful of the same. She believed, for a long term think tank, a consultative process might work for initial 6 months to one year between organisations who work largely on abortion such as CH, CREA, ASAP, Pratigya, Jindal Law School. She further expressed her concern that she works on different issues and that abortion is not central to her work and commitment to build on evidence, writing policy papers etc becomed intimidating for her. She emphasized on having a consultative process once in 2 -3 months led by CH as it becomes easy for her who doesn't work primarily on abortion. She opined that Think Tanks doesn't necessarily create policy papers that is how she understand it and asked the group to clarify.

Alka put forth her query, 'Consultations between groups and organisations and networks is already been happening as we started on the MTP amendment bill and would this will only provide a more formal structure to the whole process and go further from there? She talked about her idea of structure being a group of individuals who have more expertise or experience in the process. She opined that if the earlier group (40 people) is made formal, it may be inclusive but it may not be a think tank in terms of giving expert inputs.

Dipika Jain suggested that it should be a small set of people working together from different perspectives, whether or not abortion is not a main issue, different perspectives can add up. Further she believed that this year could be called as year for abortion legal reforms in India as 2 major reforms were introduced by the GoI and there is huge movement/court movement so there is need to generate information, reports, consultations, get more movements on board and in that sense this would also be a great solidarity group. She expressed her concern in terms of the structure and how people would commit time voluntarily for position paper. She informed that there is no feminist position paper on abortion and think tank would be able to do that, the concern is just about the infrastructure. One needs to think of tangible and reasonable contributions that each member should be able to commit over the next 6 months. She felt the idea of think tank is great as there is nothing such in India and it should function consistently beyond the law which will allow grass roots advocacy also to be part of it.

Suchitra pointed out that next year would be the 50<sup>th</sup> year of MTP Act and it is a right time to come in with this.

Subhsri agreed to ideas of Manisha and Dipika about what this think tank is supposed to do. She gathered that there are 2 broad roles envisaged out of the objectives listed:

1. Thought leadership and discourse building (changing or bringing alternative discourse may be legal, policy etc) along with advocacy
2. Building evidence –writing policy papers/briefs /knowledge products seems to be more on ground

She suggested focusing on the thought leadership and discourse building and leaving the evidence building to individual constituents say CH, CREA or whoever has the capacity. She gave example of the current discourse on decriminalisation to clarify more on ‘thought leadership’ i.e. also bringing in alternative narrative to Safe abortion and felt having this under a formal set up would be useful.

Alka responded saying while putting down the objectives she had not thought of think tank involving itself in evidence building but had thought of it making use of existing evidence and taking a position. She further checked with the group if the think tank should focus on discourse building and thought leadership?

Manisha and Dipika agreed with it. Renu added by saying that it would be good for CH to formalise the think tank and start working to test it out. A short term goal could be set up even though there is long term vision and then review it to check if goes along with the original vision and what challenges faced, what the group not respond to etc. She suggested not holding back until objectives are refined and plan is finalised.

### Discussion on membership

Manisha raised following queries about membership:

1. Would it be an individual or would be institutional and network membership (means people representing networks or institutions)? It would be good to think of structure that is how would be different from any other network (USP?)
2. How to utilise the 2021 in the best possible way (next year marks 50<sup>th</sup> year MTP)

Sundari opined that for a Think tank membership should not be representative but should be based on feminist or rights based positions taken, track record of activism, publications on abortion and identification of people who are capable of making concrete contributions, make time and prioritize it. She reiterated that one part of the think tank should be learning from the

organising that is going on in terms of interventions that strengthen access to abortion services, interventions by grass roots, service provider groups and from policy changes elsewhere. (For e.g, how did Poland get million women on street?)

Nagpal shared his views on membership and section approach for the same. He said that the think tank should have individual membership of people who have capacity to contribute and agreed with Suchitra on purposive selection of members with expertise. Think tank should have short term goals, it will evolve over time and long term goals will emerge in the process of building it up.

Nilangi liked the idea of Theory of change as that would make it more clear in terms of outputs. She agrees to the suggestions provided and the idea of starting and working around it to enable coming up with a more concrete structure.

Souvik suggested on the point of Think tank working for national or state level advocacy. He said it would be good to focus on the gaps at the sub national level as in national level advocacy the narrative are usually from northern and central India and state level narrative (or context of far flung areas) do not get covered or do not come in mainstream conversations and it would be good to bridge those gaps. He informed that can be a 2 way process as one can do advocacy at state level as well as bring those contextual narratives to national level advocacy.

Talking about criteria for membership, Dr. Subhasri thought it would be useful to have representation from disability and LGBTQ groups and movement to enable discourse building inclusive of these groups. The group can think through how this could be done, whether making them part of this think tank or they could be invited in during discussion specific to the groups. Sanjeeta put forth her query and asked for greater clarity on the target audience/groups for which the think tank will build the discourse? And how will it work?

Alka in this context pointed out that coming up with a 'theory of change' may to a large extent clarify this, not just the objectives but the audiences, what is the expected change etc

### Position on national and /or state level advocacy

The discussion further among members was about taking position on working in national space and or also looking at state level advocacy, considering the scenario in different states differ in terms of advocacy space, lobbying, changes etc

Dr Suchitra believed the think tank as an ideological, intellectual and thought leadership space rather than looking at the minutiae of how one can advocate for state level. She thinks it as a high level group as already CH, CREA and other groups are rooted in ground level advocacy and given the limitation of time, resources and small group of experts it may not be feasible to get into the state level advocacy. She further reiterated looking at the ToC would help the group to bring clarity on what could be the focus and feasible for the think tank.

Renu suggested it should be both at national and state level because state high courts and state judgements would be good examples for building discourse.

Rupsa endorsed the visioning exercise and ToC to bring greater clarity. Additionally, she gave example of Center for Policy Research being positioned nationally at the same time roping in fellows who partly bring representation from different geographies. She suggested aligning the core work to national advocacy to begin with and also endorsed the idea of individual membership and setting up the think tank away from each of the organisations, locations, positioning etc to create a more autonomous entity having its own position and space which is not partisan view but an evidence based view. An external facilitator who would facilitate envisioning Theory of change process would also be helpful. By external facilitator she clarified just having a good facilitator to take the members through the process, something which they have done and been part of at CREA. They do not bring their ideas/opinions they just do the work of facilitating the process. Rupsa agreed to support with providing names of people who could help with strategic planning and ToC process.

Renu suggested having two or three more consultations with a wider abortion community to facilitate the process of Think tank.

The discussion concluded with Dr Sundari's suggestion to Alka to initiate the process and put up ideas and discussions on the google docs for others to go through and input so as to begin the thinking process.