

Session 2.2.d: The Role of Think Tanks

Are Think Tanks an Indicator for Societal Progress?

Author: Waltraut Ritter, Councillor, The Hong Kong Foresight Centre

There are more than 5,000 Think Tanks in the world according to a study by the Philadelphia– based Foreign Policy Research Institute ⁱthe majority are in the United States, Western Europe and Canada (61.37 %). Think tanks in Asia are growing fastest and there are more than 600 in 2007.

Think tanks come in many forms and shapes and can generally be described as organisations engaging in advocacy for a particular socio-economic and/or political issue. The number and variety of think tanks in a country can be considered an indicator for the openness of a society to listen to new ideas, and also reflect the institutional capacity of a country.

In this regard think tanks are important in measuring and fostering the progress of society, however, the widely different modes of operations and funding of think tanks make it difficult to clearly define their role and contribution to societal process.

Earlier this year, 33 representatives of less developed and emerging economies declared in the so-called Cairo Declarationⁱⁱ that promoting think tanks in developing country could increase good governance and decision making, and collaboration between thinks tanks in developing and developed countries could increase and speed up the capacity building process. The Cairo Declaration also aims to increase sharing of research and ideas through common websites, workshops and better exchange between think tanks, creating a basis for collaborative research projects and expertise pooling, as well as engaging in national and international advocacy on issues of common interest. Interestingly, the increasing focus on international issues was also confirmed by the 2007 survey, indicating that more societal issues reach beyond the boundaries of national policy making. It may also indicate the higher degree of complexity of issues that require global idea sourcing.

In developed, but less open societies, e.g. in many countries in Asia, where public involvement in decision-making is limited, think tanks play a crucial role in providing ideas to governments, however, the impact of ideas of think tanks on actual policy making is difficult to establish and less transparent than in open societies. In a political and regulatory environment hostile to think tanks and NGOs, the influence on the progress of societies is limited, but the very existence of Think Tanks may eventually contribute to more open public policy dialogues.

What do Think Tanks “think”?

Based on the above mentioned study, policy research is the largest field of think tank engagement, followed by scholarly work, public education, contract work, training and technical assistance, policy advocacy, regional and international studies, social research, peace and conflict resolution studies. Most think tanks conduct different type of research. The basis function of think tanks is bridging the gap between knowledge and policy-making.

Since the competitive environment of think tanks has been increasing in recent years, the quality and relevance to the “thinking work” are challenged by For-profit consulting firms, NGOs, lobbying and advocacy groups, as well as the internet (e.g. Blog as public think tanks).

Think tanks produce ideas in the form of studies, surveys, policy recommendations, qualitative and quantitative analysis of various societal issues, and these ideas are meant to engage and influence policy makers, the media and the public.

In the US, think tanks are closely watching their influence measured by citations using the Nexis news media database.ⁱⁱⁱ The number of citations and the percentage of change in citations every year are important measures of influence.

The Quality and Impact of Think Tanks

Another criterion in assessing the effectiveness and impact of think tank would be to look at their role in developing new ideas for a society/government. Who is listening to their ideas? Are think tanks policy actors, lobby groups with vested interests, or are they actually solving problems through thinking? Who gives them their mandate?

There is very little research done on the management and production of know how through think tanks, and it would certainly increase the credibility and influence of think tanks to distinguish themselves as high-quality idea factories in a competitive environment.

The challenge for think tanks is to produce timely and accessible policy oriented research that effectively engages policymakers, the press and the public on the critical issues facing a country or the world. The US survey states that “Gone are the days when a think tank could operate with the motto “research it, write it and they will find it. Today, think tanks must be lean, mean, policy machines that produce research and analysis that is understandable and accessible for policy makers and the public.” The output of think tanks does not reflect the impact of the ideas produced, and the direct impact on policy-making through a particular think tank study is difficult to establish in most cases. Better monitoring of the impact on policy making would be an important indicator for the quality and influence of a think tank.

Are Think Tanks high-quality independent idea generators for societal progress?

Some think tanks are funded by governments; others are dependent on corporate funding or contributions by individual stakeholders. How independent is the thinking in think tanks? Financial independence is a critical issue in assessing the independence relating to their aim or mandate; however, transparency of think tanks is not always given.

Ideally think tanks contribute to a pluralistic, open and accountable process of policy analysis, research, decision-making and evaluation, however, due to the private nature of the funding of most think tanks, their results are biased to a varying degree. Some argue that think tanks will be inclined to promote or publish only those results which ensure the continued flow of funds from private donors. This politics of expertise is one of the reasons, why the image of think tanks is blurred.

In recent years, independent think tanks engaging in horizon scanning, exploring unknown, ill-defined or complex societal issues have been experimenting with new working forms of public policy think tanks. In Europe they have been established a future centres (www.open-futures.net). Future centres have a stronger focus on idea generation within groups of stakeholders rather than relying on research only. This is an interesting development of think tanks, as it takes into account the complexity of policy problems which often require new ways thinking and exploring unknown and

uncertain interdependencies of a problem. Future centres challenge traditional ways of thinking, and can be regarded as innovative new forms of think tank. Think tanks often assume that timely and concise information and analysis produced in the right form at the right time is a proven way to influence policy-making, while future centres focus on actionable outcomes. The emergence of future centres can be seen as a reaction to the loss of impact of think tanks on societal progress in some countries where they have lost their role as distinct social agents, being key players on the political landscape with unique properties.

The US survey quotes the *Economist* describing “good think tanks” as those organizations that are able to combine “intellectual depth, political influence, and flair for publicity, comfortable surroundings, and a streak of eccentricity.” Those who fail to organize and integrate these qualities into their think tank will become known for their “pedantry, irrelevance, obscurity, poverty and conventionality.

Given the increasing number of public-policy challenges in today’s world, the role, quality and capacity of think tanks should be strengthened so that their impact can be regarded as a strong indicator for societal renewal and progress. The “most gratifying moments in the think-tank world have come when ambitious ideas, politically out of the question at first, have worked their way through academic and professional debate, got noticed by public officials and legislators, and eventually were adopted as policy.”^{iv}

ⁱ Foreign Policy Research Institute: *Global Trends and Transitions: 2007 Survey of Think Tanks*, August 2007

ⁱⁱ Cairo Declaration, "International Conference on the Role of Think Tanks in Developing Countries; Challenges and Solutions" 18 January 2009

ⁱⁱⁱ Nexis database on major newspaper and radio and TV transcripts

^{iv} Christopher Demuth. *Think-Tank Confidential: What I learned during two decades as head of America's most influential policy shop*. *WSJ* 11 October 2007