GPPi
GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Whose Bright Idea Was That?

How Think Tanks Measure Their Effectiveness and Impact

By SARAH BRESSAN, WADE HOXTELL

STUDY
October 2023

Think tanks aim to inform or influence policy in a variety of ways. These include efforts to provide expertise that is based on evidence and analysis and to infuse the policy process with new ideas or approaches, as well as various activities aimed at drawing attention to their work. However, while most think tanks engage at least to some extent in all of these areas, doing so effectively and with clear impact is difficult – as is creating meaningful indicators to measure these efforts. What is more, there is little detailed guidance on how think tanks can better contribute to policymaking that also takes into account real differences in operating models and contexts. This study explores the various ways in which think tanks attempt to achieve impact as well as how they try to assess these efforts. In doing so, it highlights key challenges, draws out a number of success factors and provides a framework that can assist leaders and staff in different types of think tanks who want to develop tailored systems for measuring the effectiveness and impact of their work.

Acknowledgments

This study was funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and supported by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the position of the GIZ or BMZ.

The authors would like to thank Alexander Gaus, Julian Lehmann, Claudia Meier, and Katharina Nachbar for input on how to approach this study, as well as the staff of the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) for all of their helpful suggestions during a workshop held in May 2022. A special thanks to Henrike Ilka for all her assistance in getting this study off the ground, particularly for digging through and organizing the literature on the complex topic of (policy) influence. Thank you also to Sonya Sugrobova for her work on the visualizations and layout as well as to Alissa Jones Nelson and Katharina Nachbar for their excellent editorial work.

In addition, we are grateful to our colleagues at the GIZ for their useful input and support over the course of this study, specifically to Fabian Klein, Markus Weissert, Manfred Häbig, Franziska Krisch, and Katherina Huber.

Finally, we are indebted to thank our think tank colleagues fom around the world for sharing with us their experiences, insights, critical reflections, and helpful resources on the topic of policy impact and effectiveness (see page 79 for a list of interviewees). Moreover, we would also like to thank the participants of an exchange organized by the Think Tank Lab at the German Council on Foreign Relations and the Mercator Institute for China Studies in December 2022 as well as the think tankers and participants from the GIZ and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) who all helped to refine the initial results of the study.

Table of Contents

Figures and Case Boxes

Executive Summary

What are think tanks for? What are those who work for them trying to achieve? What approaches do they use to be more effective and have impact in their priority area(s)? And how do they actually know whether they are making a difference? In an age that has many postulate a growing polarization around political questions or express worry over attacks on the legitimacy of science and expertise, these questions about the role and influence of think tanks are especially timely.

However, across the world, organizations that sit at the intersection of research and policy advice still struggle to find answers to these and other related questions. This is hardly suprising: achieving – as well as assessing and confidently claiming – effectiveness and impact are complicated endeavors. In addition, think tanks often lack the financial resources, expertise and time needed to design and implement well-conceived measurement systems. As a result, most organizations use measurement models and indicators that are not particularly useful for determining their effectiveness or impact. And unfortunately, the little guidance that does exist tends to be too broad or not fully applicable to the diverse range of think tank models out there or to the different contexts in which they operate.

To help fill this gap, this study proposes a framework that can help think tanks systematically measure and achieve impact and effectiveness. By illustrating important trends as well as challenges these organizations face, and by outlining key success factors for measuring the effectiveness and impact of the different types of work that think tanks do, it also aims to provide guidance for those who want to develop more thoughtful and tailored monitoring and evaluation systems. At the same time, we aimed to take a more nuanced look at the sector – by differentiating between think tanks based on their operating or funding models as well as their geographic, political, economic, or social contexts. Similarly, we took into account that different organizations pursue different objectives via various types of activities. Recognizing the effect of contemporary trends such as polarized political climates, a declining trust in experts or organizational development challenges, among others, we deliberately set out to not only highlight good practices in how think tanks develop effectiveness and impact indicators and how they monitor and evaluate the corresponding data, but also to provide an honest look at the challenges, both external and internal, that think tanks face as they pursue relevance in the 21st century.

Through background research as well as interviews with think tank representatives from around the world, we found that there is a stronger focus on quantifying and qualifying the work of think tanks – and by and large this is seen as a positive development. Most think tanks find it important to consider how they can be more effective and impactful as well as how to measure this for a number of reasons, including that such information serves an accountability function, helps with learning and improving a think tank's work and outreach, and can make an organization more competitive in a challenging influencing environment, among other benefits.

At the same time, this emphasis on measuring effectiveness and impact – which also springs from related demands made by funders – is drawing much-needed attention to the fact that think tanks generally struggle to do this well. While most think tanks have a clearly defined theory of change and try to approximate effectiveness and impact as best as they can with the resources they have, they more often than not use indicators that, while helpful in illustrating some aspects of organizational effectiveness, say little about their actual impact. In fact, none of the think tank representatives we spoke to claimed to have a system for this that they find useful across the board, and most questioned the value of at least some of the metrics their organizations are monitoring.

The fact is: it is difficult to measure effectiveness and impact, for a number of reasons. Causal chains and influence timelines are often long and it is tricky if not impossible to isolate the influence of one output or actor among many (the "attribution problem"). Further, organizations frequently lack the resources for monitoring and evaluation – an area considered to be outside their "core work" – and struggle to find funders who are willing to put up the money or other resources for them to do so in a more structured and professional manner. In addition, and in part because funders frequently require it, think tanks often use overly simplified linear models for conceptualizing how change happens, focusing on the outputs and outcomes of various activities instead of drawing up more complex and arguably more realistic non-linear models that try to also account for, for example, the role of other actors as well as medium- to long-term (intermediate) outcomes.

There is no consensus regarding the best approach to all of this and even think tanks with a strong discussion culture around impact struggle to effectively and sustainably implement a formalized or semi-formalized measurement system. Still, some good practices have emerged. These include: building a culture of open reflection on these issues; building and maintaining strong relationships with stakeholders and clients to regularly solicit feedback on a think tank's activities and impact; taking time to analyze successes and failures; and crafting (and ideally sharing) impact stories. In addition, even a simple – let alone a more complex and non-linear – theory of change model can serve as a useful tool for think tankers to design the appropriate activities that will help them achieve specific objectives, and to reflect on the effectiveness and impact of these activities at more strategic level using a tailored mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators.

That said, think tanks and their funders also need to be realistic regarding both the added value that an extensive measurement approach can offer and the extent to which think tanks can feasibly implement an "ideal" measurement system in light of internal or external constraints and other challenges. While well-designed and tailored monitoring systems and indicators can have a number of benefits, attempts to qualify or quantify all or even only certain aspects of a think tank's work are no substitute for the real success factors in achieving impact, such as: fostering an organizational culture that encourages reflection and learning; producing high-quality outputs; attracting and developing talented staff; and building a credible and sustainable organization.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to making an impact or measuring success. We hope that this study enriches the discussion on these issues by providing some practice-oriented guidance and actionable tools to help different types of think tanks operating in various contexts – and with different internal and external limitations – to develop theories of change, translate these into targeted activities, and better measure and evaluate the effectiveness and impact of their work.

Introduction

The growth in the number of think tanks worldwide in recent decades has been enormous. What began in the early 20th century as a niche industry with a small number of organizations located predominantly in North America and later in Europe, has grown into what is often referred to as a "marketplace of ideas," with thousands or even tens of thousands of organizations worldwide seeking to influence policymakers at all levels of government as well as in regional and international institutions. Whereas the first think tank iterations were largely made up of academics working closely with decision-makers to construct a post-World War I international order, think tanks now seek to influence decision-making in every policy area imaginable.[1]

Furthermore, the think tank industry is no longer solely made up of a small number of government-funded organizations. Think tanks now take numerous forms, including small, independent boutique research organizations, departments within international consulting firms, and think tanks in public institutions, such as the European Commission. Think tanks have taken on an expanded role as creators of a civic space for political debate, which has contributed to the emergence of grassroots organizations alongside established and exclusive elite fora – all at a time when complex political challenges have reinforced the need for think tanks to act as a bridge between scientific research, policymaking and political interests.

As the number of organizations labelling themselves "think tanks" has grown globally, their approaches to exerting influence on policymakers and the policy-development process have also changed. Whereas think tanks used to utilize formats such as confidential discussions between experts and policymakers, fora for public debates, and academic research papers aiming to comprehensively present policy implications, they now also seek to influence policy via many other avenues, including shaping public debate and using public opinion as a lever to achieve policy change, or by directly engaging with policymakers, governments and other institutions using tools such as social media platforms. Moreover, these activities take place in an increasingly fast-paced, crowded and, in many cases, contentious space for public debate.

In some regions, the increase in both the number of think tanks and the funding available for research and idea generation is leading to greater competition in the marketplace of ideas. In other areas, think tanks are playing a significant role in political transition processes, establishing themselves as spaces and capacity-builders for policy debates. At the same time, think tanks around the world face a number of challenges. Some think tanks worry about their continued existence as a result of the shrinking space available for independent research – particularly research that may challenge government policies or call them into question – as well as difficult or otherwise unsustainable funding environments, among many other factors. Other

1 See, for example, R. Niblett, "A History of Think-Tanks: 12 Things You Should Know," Chatham House, November 22, 2018, accessed May 30, 2022, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/11/history-think-tanks-12-things-you-should-know.

It has proven difficult for many think tanks to conceptualize and also to implement meaningful approaches to measuring their impact and effectiveness.

recent trends – such as how policymakers and the general public consume news, backlash against experts, societal polarization and populism, and declining trust in research results – call for think tanks to reconsider their existing strategies, methods and activities in order to remain credible and relevant. Furthermore, think tanks have often undermined their own credibility through poor research practices, biased political positions and interests, fundraising models with built-in conflicts of interest, or a lack of transparency in their role as gatekeepers to political power circles, among other things.

In response, many think tanks have become much more conscious of the need to adapt to new trends and to the larger social, political and economic environments in which they operate. One key aspect of this is reflecting on their respective theories of change and key objectives, how effectively they achieve or fail to achieve these objectives, and how they can realistically measure their own effectiveness and impact in getting target audiences to take up their ideas. The issue of measuring effectiveness also comes up at least in part due to increasing demands from funders that think thanks should not only demonstrate how they attempt to be effective and achieve impact, but also that they provide data to support such claims.

Yet it has proven difficult for many think tanks to conceptualize and also to implement meaningful approaches to measuring their impact and effectiveness. At present, think tanks often utilize indicators such as the number of publications or citations in academic journals, or tools that are implemented inconsistently across the organization, in an attempt to measure the effects of their influencing activities. Furthermore, digitization has spurred think tank industry trends toward attempting to measure and determine effectiveness and impact via other quantitative indicators, such as the number of (new) social media followers and website statistics. However, such measurements are merely proxies for determining impact, and they often provide an unreliable or overly simplistic look at a think tank's actual impact.

Unfortunately, practice-oriented guidance and actionable tools specifically designed for think tanks to help develop theories of change, translate these into fit-for-purpose activities, and better measure and evaluate the effectiveness and impact of these activities are scarce. Moreover, much of the debate on measuring think tanks' influence is still stuck in the 20th century, with little practical guidance on good practices in indicator development or monitoring and evaluation. Where such guidance does exist, it offers little to no differentiation between think tanks that have different operating or funding models or that operate in different geographic, political, economic, or social contexts. This need for clarity on what think tanks do, how they ultimately influence politics in different contexts, and how their work can be assessed is the starting point for this research.

In this context, the purpose of this study is to:

- Provide an overview of the state of the art as well as of current trends and limitations in measuring the effectiveness and impact of the different types of work think tanks do;

- Explore how selected think tanks conceptualize and approach their policy-influencing activities as well as how they measure impact and effectiveness; and

- Outline a set of indicators for monitoring and evaluating think tanks and their activities with respect to effectiveness and impact.

The key questions this study addresses are:

- Which explicit or implicit theories of change underpin the work of selected key think tanks (or individuals within them)? How do these differ with respect to various policy areas or regions? What can we learn regarding their effectiveness and success factors? How can we define success for different types of organizations and activities?

- What types of activities do think tanks undertake in order to influence policymakers and policy development processes? What are the relevant success factors?

- Which methodological approaches, tools and systems do think tanks use to monitor and evaluate the impact of their activities and policy proposals? What are the challenges, strengths, weaknesses, and success factors of these approaches, tools and systems? How can these challenges and weaknesses be overcome?

- Which indicators can think tanks use to measure the impact and effectiveness of their policy advice? How can such monitoring tools and systems contribute to organizational development, not only with respect to influencing policy, but also in areas such as leadership, learning, communication, and fundraising?

This study aims to take a nuanced look at these questions. There is no monolithic idea of what a think tank is, and consequently there is no one-size-fits-all approach to making an impact or measuring success. Among other differences, individual think tanks have varying operational models, pursue different objectives via various types of activities, function in different geographical, economic, social, and political contexts, follow different theories of change depending on their operational model and objectives, and have different levels of resources (if any) available to measure the effectiveness and impact of their activities.

Defining and measuring impact can be an important tool for think tanks (and their funders) to help them wield the kind of influence they wish to have.

Furthermore, indicators of success and questions around how to monitor and evaluate activities also differ depending on a think tank's approach and objectives. Such differences require not only a differentiated look at current thinking around these questions, but also a more dynamic view that takes into account how such thinking has changed – and how it may change in the years to come, with an eye to the trends outlined above. Ultimately, getting better at defining and measuring impact can be an important tool for think tanks (and their funders) to help them wield the kind of influence they wish to have. It can also help them navigate contemporary challenges such as innovation, diversity and inclusion, and to adapt to new challenges, such as polarized political climates or declining trust in experts and in nuanced research more generally.

In order to provide a practical and flexible tool (Chapter 4) to monitor and evaluate the impact and effectiveness of different types of think tanks in a variety of contexts, this study outlines key challenges to and success factors for both achieving

(Chapter 2) and measuring (Chapter 3) effectiveness and impact. That said, a think tank's effectiveness in terms of influencing policy is not merely a function of its theory of change and its policy-influencing objectives and activities; rather, developing and maintaining institutional structures, processes and relationships that help to enable success – including by fostering a healthy and constructive organizational culture, protecting credibility, executing a good branding and communication strategy, and building networks, among many other success factors – is also critical. We have thus included small textboxes to highlight interesting cases and approaches and to shed light on some of these issues.

Methodology

This study was conducted between May and November 2022 and utilized the following approaches in answering the key research questions:

Document Review

For this study, we reviewed the following types of documents:

- Academic literature, particularly on measuring (policy) influence;

- Practitioner-oriented documents on think tanks in general, as well as more specifically on impact measurement systems, theories of change, and indicators from think tank websites, existing studies, and documents received directly from our interview partners;

- Literature on how policymakers consume think tank outputs and what they feel are the most effective ways in which think tanks can impact the development of policy.

- A comprehensive list of the sources we reviewed can be found in the references section.

Interviews with Think Tank Representatives

In selecting interview partners, the research team aimed to achieve variance across the following organizational features:

- **Type of organization and activities:** In order to ensure a comprehensive look at think tank practices and activities, we interviewed representatives from think tanks with varying – though not mutually exclusive – missions or business models. This included think tanks that conduct: non-partisan, independent research following scientific methods; contracted research and consulting; applied policy research for governmental bodies or other funders, such as companies or foundations; and advocacy activities, namely ideologically driven, interest-based policy influence work.

- **Geographical balance and context:** We aimed to achieve geographical balance in this study by including think tanks from all populated continents, with variance in social, economic and political contexts.

- **Size and resources:** In order to ensure that our data was not too heavily skewed toward larger think tanks which potentially have more resources (both human and financial) available to, for example, design and update their theories of change or measure impact, our interview partners also included representatives from smaller think tanks.

Figure 1 below provides a list of the think tanks of which representatives were interviewed for this study. Figure 2 shows their geographic distribution and size (in terms of number of staff). Annex III provides a list of all individual interview partners.

Figure 1: Think Tanks Represented in This Study

Think Tank	Location	Region
Caribbean Policy Research Institute	Jamaica	Latin America/Caribbean
Consejo Mexicano de Asuntos Internacionales	Mexico	Latin America/Caribbean
Getulio Vargas Foundation	Brazil	Latin America/Caribbean
Grupo FARO	Ecuador	Latin America/Caribbean
Agora Energiewende	Germany	Europe
Belgrade Centre for Security Policy	Serbia	Europe
International Crisis Group	Belgium	Europe
Brookings Institution	United States	North America
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	United States	North America
Observer Research Foundation	India	Asia
Solutions for Our Climate	South Korea	Asia
The Tokyo Foundation	Japan	Asia
Triangle	Lebanon	Asia
Democracy Development Programme	South Africa	Africa
Institute for Security Studies	South Africa	Africa
Le Think Tank Citoyen de L'Afrique de L'Ouest	Senegal/regional	Africa

Figure 2: Location and Size of Think Tanks Represented in This Study

Workshops as Joint Learning Exercises

In addition, the we also organized two workshops and took part in an additional discussion to gather input for this study and get feedback on the initial results. The first workshop in May 2022 was an internal discussion held with other staff at the Global Public Policy Institute and associated fellows to discuss the key research questions and approaches to answering them, as well as to reflect on how we as a Germany-based, independent, non-profit think tank aim to achieve and measure our impact, the lessons we have learned, and the challenges we face in this respect. The second workshop, held in December 2022, was a broader discussion with a number of think tank representatives as well as staff from the GIZ and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) to make sense of and refine the initial results of the study. Also in December 2022, we presented the results and received feedback during a virtual discussion organized by the Think Tank Lab of the German Council on Foreign Relations.

Limitations

The scope of this study was restricted by a set timeframe and the financial resources available for the project. In particular, the amount of collectable data and the number of interviews were limited, and a fully balanced, global perspective on think tank influence and approaches to measuring effectiveness and impact was not possible within the limitations stated above. We attempted to mitigate these limitations by increasing the variance in the types and contexts of think tanks considered in this study (see the methodology section above).

In order to keep the focus area manageable, we established a definition of "think tank" and applied case selection criteria which excluded organizations that fall into other sectors (as outlined in Annex I), such as governmental or public body think tanks as well as those closely linked to universities or political parties. However, we realize that this excludes a range of entities which self-identify as "think tanks" and which may have lent interesting insights to this study, which is why we attempted to mitigate this by considering a broad range of policy influence literature. We are also aware that our definition excludes think tanks located in regions under fully autocratic governments with no independent policy influence bodies and that we thus also exclude certain countries and political systems, biasing the selection toward open and democratic systems. We attempted to mitigate these effects by ensuring geographical balance within the scope of these limitations and, where it was possible to do so without deviating from our approach or endangering individual interviewees, by including think tanks that operate in different and challenging political contexts. While this limits the transferability of our findings, they can still be relevant to think tanks in the contexts and sectors we did not survey.

The Covid-19 pandemic and related difficulties constrained our ability to conduct interviews and workshops. The pandemic likely affected different demographics and types of organizations in differentiated ways, which may lead to an imbalance in the responses and collected data. We attempted to mitigate this by ensuring that the research timeline was flexible (allowing a longer interview period than initially envisaged) and critically reflecting on our own biases. With regards to the latter, given that we also work at a think tank, we possess an innate assumption that think tanks can have a positive effect on society and that measuring effectiveness and impact can help think tanks to better achieve their objectives.

Finally, the scope of this study was limited to a selection of think tanks. However, the think tank sector can learn a lot about achieving and measuring impact from other sectors and disciplines outside the political and social sciences. We could surely learn a number of lessons from private-sector management consultancies with public policy practices, political risk consultancies, advocacy organizations, and community organizers, among many others.

How Think Tanks (Try To) Achieve Effectiveness and Impact

Organizations that self-identify as think tanks have very different objectives and undertake different activities; as such, the term "think tank" is not standardized. Yet a think tank is usually associated with the role of informing or influencing policy through expertise, and beyond this the term suggests a certain set of values, such as evidence-based research expertise or ideas creation and vetting through debate and peer review. That said, this does not mean every organization that self-identifies as a think tank embodies these values.

Entities labelled "think tanks," initially funded by private capital from wealthy individuals or their foundations, emerged in the United States and the United Kingdom at the beginning of the 20th century with the objective of bringing the expertise of scholars and managers to bear on the economic and social problems of the day.[2] However, over time a number of new think tank models emerged to satisfy demand for policy research – initially including the eradication of poverty-related social problems and interstate wars – not only among government decision-makers, but also among numerous other actors with an interest in influencing policy.[3] At present, many research entities, party-affiliated organizations, and even private-sector entities identify as think tanks for any number of reasons, such as to signaling that they (purport to) conduct evidence-based research, touting their international understanding of various issues, or taking advantage of opportunities to attract funding from governments, international organizations or other actors seeking local partners in the political sphere.[4]

In order to provide some structure within which to understand different think tank models, some experts have attempted to define and categorize think tanks according

---

2 See J. G. McGann, "Academics to Ideologues: A Brief History of the Public Policy Research Industry," in PS: Political Science & Politics 25, no. 4 (December 1992); J. A. Smith, The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite, New York: The Free Press, 1991; and P. Linden, "Powerhouses of Policy: A Guide to America's Think Tanks," in Town and Country (January 1987).

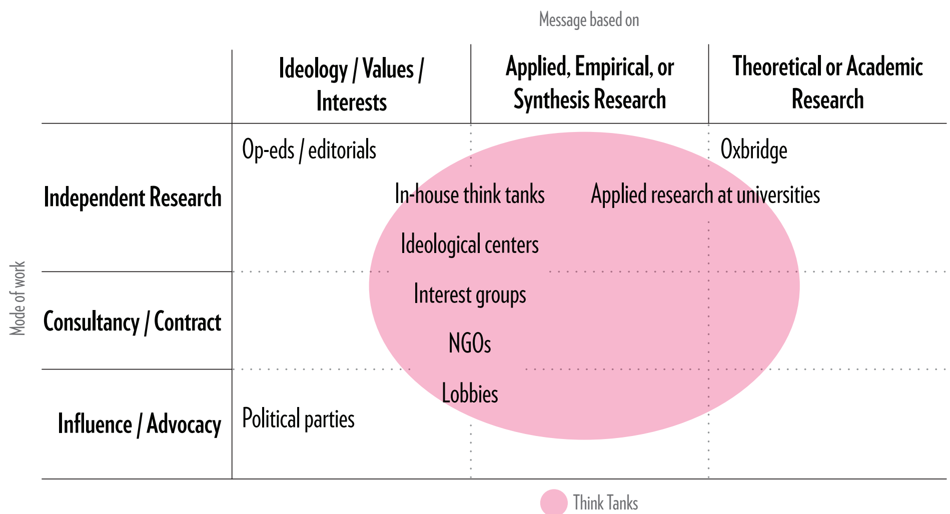
3 McGann ("Academics to Ideologues") describes the evolution of think tanks over four periods until 1990. See also Chatham House, "Our History," accessed June 20, 2022, https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/our-history.

4 E. Mendizabal, "On the definition of think tanks: Towards a more useful discussion," On Think Tanks, 2010, accessed October 8, 2022, https://onthinktanks.org/articles/on-the-definition-of-think-tanks-towards-a-more-useful-discussion/.

to the different types of activities they undertake in their efforts to influence political processes. As Diane Stone put it: “think tanks collect, synthesize and create a range of information products, often directed towards a political or bureaucratic audience, but sometimes also for the benefit of the media, interest groups, business, international civil society and the general public of the nation.”[5] Enrique Mendizabal described six different potential roles for think tanks, namely: providing legitimacy for policies; acting as spaces for debate and deliberation or as sounding boards for policymakers and opinion leaders; offering a safehouse for intellectuals and their ideas; providing a financing channel for political parties and other policy interest groups; attempting to influence the policy process; providing cadres of experts and policymakers for political parties and governments; and performing auditing functions.[6]

Mendizabal further defines think tanks according to certain characteristics, namely their business model and the nature of their arguments (see Figure 3). This typology allows think tanks to be situated within a broader framework of actors that may perform similar activities. Figure 3 shows that while think tanks (represented by the area inside the pink oval) primarily conduct applied and empirical research or synthesize existing research, some think tanks or activities are also more ideologically or values-driven – such as think tanks linked to political parties or particular political orientations – or more closely resemble academic research institutions, such as universities. Moreover, while the work think tanks do is most often characterized by independent research or applying expertise in more practical settings by means of consultancies or contracted research, some think tanks also utilize advocacy approaches more akin to lobbying organizations or civil-society interest groups to shape their approaches to exerting influence.[7]

Figure 3: Think Tanks in the Policy-Influencing Environment[8]



5 D. Stone , Think Tank Traditions: Policy Research and the Politics of Ideas: Policy Analysis Across Nations, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.

6 Mendizabal, “On the definition of think tanks.”

7 Interviews. “Advocacy” as a term can mean different things in different contexts. For example, some use the term to describe support for a specific policy issue or political position and efforts to convince others to support the same issue or position. Others use the term more broadly and flexibly – for example, to describe their policy outreach, their distribution activities, or their capacity-building and training efforts.

8 This graphic is based on Mendizabal, “On the definition of think tanks.”

While this typology can be helpful to illustrate the think tank sector and the different think tank models operating within it in broad strokes, it also shows how difficult it is to clearly distinguish think tanks from other types of organizations. Think tanks are not the only actors undertaking these types of activities. Furthermore, think tank activities are constantly evolving, and they increasingly overlap with other modes of work, such as activism and journalism.

For the purpose of this study, and to limit the scope of organizations that fall under our analysis, we define think tanks as organizations that seek to influence policy but are independent in terms of having more than a single source of funding and therefore do not fall into one of the following adjacent sectors: research and education; government; political representation; the private sector; or advocacy and activism (see Annex I for a detailed breakdown of relevant sectors and types of organizations). In particular, we did not include in this analysis any in-house think tanks that are directly affiliated with an (inter)governmental entity or those that operate in authoritarian countries, given that think tanks in these contexts operate in close proximity to decision-makers and thus have different impact pathways, challenges and success factors compared to the other think tank models covered by this study.

Policy Influence

The primary defining feature of think tanks is their main objective - to exert influence on policy.

The primary defining feature of think tanks is their main objective – to exert influence on policy. A number of theories in political science, sociology and psychology attempt to explain the factors that drive political influence. Some theories focus on the conditions of the political process rather than the actors involved. For example, agenda-setting theory argues that change occurs when policy advocates connect two or more policy components in order to create a "window of opportunity."[9] Other theories assert that policy and institutional change occur in significant leaps when the right conditions are in place.[10] In contrast, some theories argue that specific coalitions of actors are the agents driving change, or that powerful elites – political, corporate and military leaders at the highest level – are the crucial force behind change.[11] In a similar vein, still other theories assert that a small core of influential individuals can manipulate political change by supporting and empowering policymakers.[12]

Overall, external influence is a fundamental variable in decision-making – and both academics and practitioners agree that it is notoriously difficult to grasp and to measure. Measuring policy influence and change involves numerous different approaches, including: screening a variety of actors, networks and other external variables that interact with each other; utilizing methods such as process tracing or discourse analysis in an attempt to prove some semblance of influence; and often

9 J. W. Kingdon, Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies, New York: Longman, 1995.

10 F. R. Baumgartner and B. D. Jones, Agendas and Instability in American Politics, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

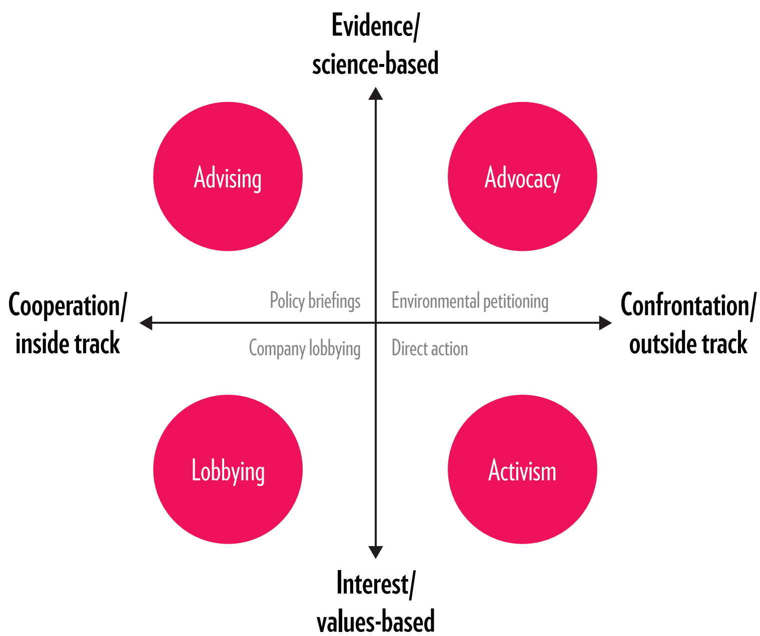
11 H. C. Jenkins-Smith and P. Sabatier, "The Advocacy Coalition Framework: An Assessment," in Theories of the Policy Process, ed. P. Sabatier, Boulder: Westview Press, 1999; G. W. Domhoff, The Power Elite and the State: How Policy is Made in America, New York: Routledge, 1990.

12 C. N. Stone, Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946–1988, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989.

making (sometimes uninformed or opportunistic) assumptions when trying to attribute a particular policy outcome. Furthermore, the value of efforts such as building relationships with policymakers or actively participating in networks or events is often intangible – and such efforts, as well as any resulting impact, may take place over a long period of time.[13]

For their part, think tanks attempt to influence policymaking at different stages and in a variety of ways, such as by nurturing public debate on key policy issues, raising new questions, and producing research for policymakers to aid them in their decision-making.[14] In this respect, most attempts to categorize think tanks revolve around the types of activities they undertake to influence policy. Similarly to Figure 3 above, Harry Jones also distinguishes between advising, advocacy, lobbying, and activism,[15] while Daniel Start and Ingie Hoveland have developed a typology of policy-influencing approaches by using the same four categories but applying them to a variety of organizations, including activists and the private sector (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Approaches to Influencing Policy[16]



13 D. Lomofsky, "Monitoring, evaluation and learning for think tanks," On Think Tanks, 2016, accessed October 8, 2022, https://onthinktanks.org/articles/monitoring-evaluation-and-learning-for-think-tanks/.

14 See, for example, D. E. Abelson, Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009; A. K. Rashid, "Efficacy of Think Tanks in Influencing Public Policies: The Case of Bangladesh," in Asian Journal of Political Science 21, no. 1 (2013); and M. W. Thunert, "The Development and Significance of Think Tanks in Germany," in German Policy Studies 3, no. 2 (2006).

15 H. Jones, "A guide to monitoring and evaluating policy influence," ODI Background Note, 2011, accessed June 22, 2022, https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/6453.pdf.

16 Graphic based on D. Start and I. Hovland, Tools for Policy Impact: A Handbook for Researchers, Overseas Development Institute, 2004, accessed October 8, 2022, https://odi.org/en/publications/tools-for-policy-impact-a-handbook-for-researchers/.

In addition to the examples listed above, there are a number of other (types of) activities that think tanks and researchers utilize to exert influence.[17] Figure 5 below situates these activities within what we term the think tank creation cycle. In simplified and idealized terms, this cycle consists of four main steps:

1. The **“information in”** step includes the activities and methods think tanks use to conduct research, such as gathering data and evidence through interviews, surveys and document reviews. This step also involves a set of research standards, ethics or good practices to help think tanks ensure that the final results are credible.

2. The **“processing and analysis”** step involves creating value from the data by drawing conclusions, creating new knowledge, or synthesizing existing knowledge in a new and useful way. Inherent in this step is the use of analytical and critical-thinking methods as well as efforts to reduce biases in the analysis.

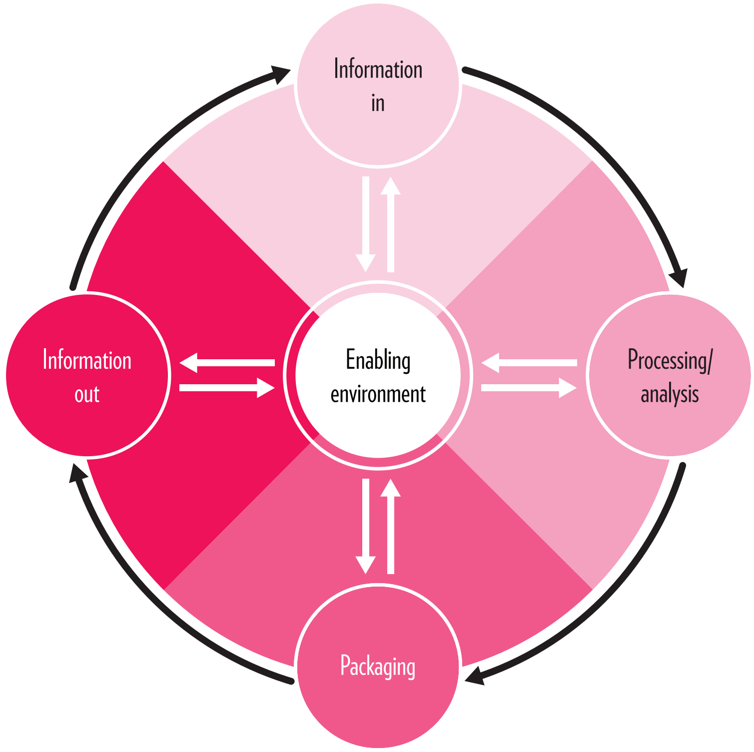
3. The **“packaging”** step involves creating specialized outputs or pursuing dissemination activities that fit the activity’s objective, such as longer studies, shorter and more practical policy briefings, policy memos, podcasts, testimonies, bilateral meetings, media appearances, workshops or conferences, trainings, educational curricula, op-eds, or advocacy campaigns. Increasingly, this step also entails applying good practices and lessons learned with respect to communication and branding.

4. The **“information out”** step involves implementing an outreach strategy to reach the relevant target audience(s), such as the policy community, the general public, or other researchers. Standard distribution channels include the think tank’s own or other websites, academic journals, news media sites, social media platforms, or direct mailings or e-mails.

Finally, it is not sufficient to only analyze the think tank creation cycle itself; equally important is the enabling environment that supports these activities and enables a think tank to operate effectively and sustainably as well as to achieve and measure its impact across these four steps. This environment includes an organizational culture that fosters open debate and peer review, experience in attracting funding and writing compelling research proposals, a good communication and branding strategy for reaching target audiences, strong relationships with other individuals and organizations, the ability to acquire and utilize research talent, and occupying a specific thematic or methodological niche that can serve as a unique selling point.

17 See, for example, Abelson, Do Think Tanks Matter?; Mahmood Ahmad, “US Think Tanks and the Politics of Expertise: Role, Value and Impact,” The Political Quarterly 79, no. 4 (2008); J. Y. Lerner, “Getting the message across: Evaluating think tank influence in Congress,” in Public Choice 175 (2016); F. Ohomeng, “Civil Society and Policy Making in Developing Countries: Assessing the Impact of Think Tanks on Policy Outcomes in Ghana,” in Journal of Asian and African Studies 50, no. 6 (2015); and A. Rich and K. Weaver, “Think Tanks in the Political System of the United States,” in Think Tanks in Policy Making – Do They Matter?, eds. A. Rich, J. McGann, K. Weaver, M. Garnett, M. Thunert, R. Speth, R. Traub-Merz, and Y. Yang, Shanghai: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2011, accessed October 8, 2022, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/china/08564.pdf.

Figure 5: The Think Tank Creation Cycle



Another way to conceptualize think tank activities is to link them with the different phases of a typical policy cycle (see Figure 6 below).[18] Ultimately, think tanks cannot exclusively rely on good ideas and products that are timely, well-researched and well-communicated. They also need to operate within political environments that are subject to numerous, often complicated variables, sometimes over extended periods of time, and to leverage different tools – such as networks or relationships – to turn ideas into policies. These broad and simplified phases include:

1. The **"problem identification"** and subsequent **"agenda setting"** phases, during which think tanks generate new ideas and responses to identified political problems or gaps and distribute new research findings. In doing so, they enlarge the array of policy options available to address a particular problem.[19] In addition, they may design public intervention alternatives[20] or produce frames

18 Similarly, see J. G. McGann, Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2005, accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7_dokument_dok_pdf_7042_1.pdf/720e9151-74aa-8525-7ff8-ffcacde0cc5c?version=1.0&t=1539665881457.

19 See Ahmad, "US Think Tanks and the Politics of Expertise"; Ohomeng, "Civil Society and Policy Making"; and Rashid, "Efficacy of Think Tanks."

20 O. Bellettini, "The Role of Public Policy Centers in Public Reforms Implemented in Latin America," in Think Tanks and Public Policies in Latin America, eds. A. Garcé and G. Una, Buenos Aires: Fundación Siena and CIPPEC, 2010.

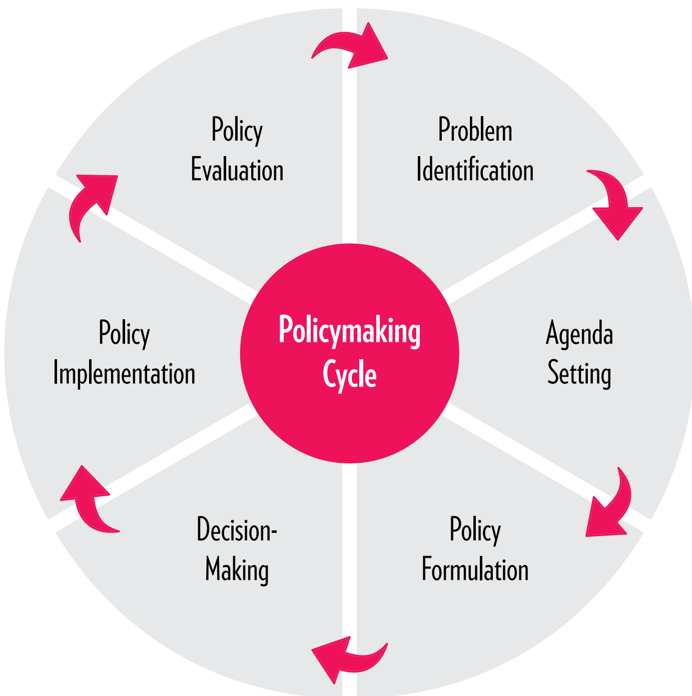
and narratives capable of pervading the existing rhetoric and policy proposals circulating in the policymaking system.[21]

2. The **"policy formulation"** phase, during which think tanks might lobby governments to make decisions consistent with their objectives,[22] support interest groups,[23] or even play a direct role in designing a particular policy.[24]

3. The **"decision-making"** and **"policy implementation"** phases, during which think tanks may lobby for certain policies or reforms and actually help to implement them,[25] increase policymakers' capacities,[26] or work to legitimize these policies among other actors.[27]

4. The **"evaluation"** phase, during which think tanks might monitor politicians and new or existing public policies to determine their effectiveness.[28]

Figure 6: A Simplified Policy Cycle



21 Ohomeng, "Civil Society and Policy Making."

22 Ibid.

23 E. Mendizabal, "Facing complex contexts? Five strategies for impact," On Think Tanks, 2017, accessed June 22, 2022, https://onthinktanks.org/articles/facing-complex-contexts-five-strategies-for-impact/.

24 Bellettini, "The Role of Public Policy Centers."

25 Ibid.

26 Rashid, "Efficacy of Think Tanks."

27 Mendizabal, "Facing complex contexts?."

28 Bellettini, "The Role of Public Policy Centers."

In addition, think tanks might also conduct certain activities outside the policy cycle that are nevertheless designed to further their impact, such as creating, facilitating and managing networks,[29] creating safe spaces for exchange,[30] or training new researchers and policymakers.[31]

Theories of Change

A particularly useful and widely adopted tool for framing a think tank's key objectives and working out how to achieve them is a theory of change.

A particularly useful and widely adopted tool for framing a think tank's key objectives and working out how to achieve them is a theory of change (ToC). Similarly to logic models, ToCs provide a detailed definition of the actors and systems a think tank wishes to influence and the types of activities it will use in order to achieve a specific outcome or change.[32] The concept, which originates in both management theory and reflections on how to improve and evaluate public sector programs, became a popular planning and evaluation tool in the 1990s, when experts argued that the reason complex programs are difficult to evaluate is that assumptions about how they function are poorly articulated.[33] Accordingly, ToCs attempt to articulate the causal links and influence mechanisms between actors, activities and other elements of a program or activity, thereby facilitating not only ex-post evaluation but also planning and goal-oriented execution.

Today, a think tank's theory – or theories – about how it attempts to effect change and influence policy can be explicit or implicit and exist on different levels, including the organizational, program, project, and individual levels (which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4). Figure 7 below presents a generic theory of change logic, beginning with describing the desired changes and moving forward from there. This cycle repeats over time.

29 D. Stone, "Think Tanks, Global Lesson-Drawing and Networking Social Policy Ideas," in Global Social Policy 1, no. 3 (2001).

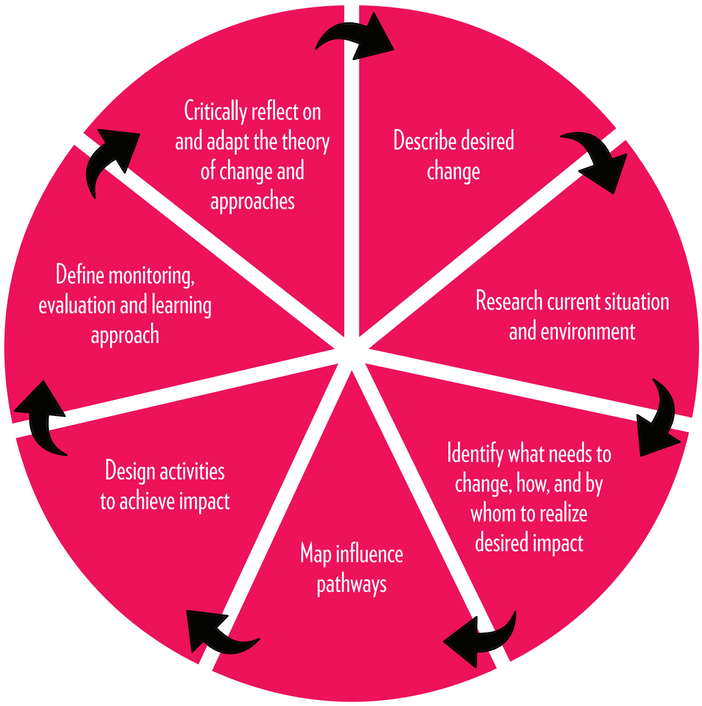
30 Mendizabal, "Facing complex contexts?."

31 Ibid.

32 See, for example, S. Stoffel, J. Steets, and F. Westphal, The Logic of Protection Approaches: Four Models to Safeguard Civilians from Harm, Global Public Policy Institute, 2022, accessed October 7, 2022, https://gppi.net/2022/06/08/the-logic-of-protection-approaches.

33 C. Weiss, "Nothing as Practical as Good Theory: Exploring Theory-Based Evaluation for Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families," in New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives, Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 1995.

Figure 7: Theory of Change Logic



Most think tanks have at least an implicit theory of change at the organizational level, as reflected in their mission statements, which provide a broad description of the organization's key objectives, activities and, in some cases, operating principles. Others have highly detailed and formal theories that more strategically and tactically inform the organization's activities. Additionally, some think tanks have more granular theories of change with various levels of formality (some of which may not be explicit at all), all the way down to different individuals within the organization who have their own formal or informal theories.

The main theories of change described by the think tank representatives we interviewed for this study can be summarized as follows:

1. **Achieving influence through rigorous research and evidence:** The most commonly cited theory of change is that high-quality, independent research and evidence can inform and improve policy processes and policies themselves. While most think tanks see this as part of their mission, their strategies for ensuring that rigorous research reaches a specific target audience and actually has an impact differ in their level of detail.

2. **Influencing the discourse:** Another prevalent way think tanks attempt to impact policy is via agenda setting and influencing discourses – both general public discourse on policy options and specific expert or policy discourses.

Organizations with strong thematic foci and a mission to heighten attention to specific policy issues particularly emphasized agenda setting.

3. **Promoting participation and engagement through (inclusive) debate and networks:** By promoting participation and engagement via (inclusive) debate, a think tank positions itself as a platform or a forum for fostering a culture of public discourse on certain policy issues and between a variety of actors who may not usually engage with one another. Among the organizations analyzed for this study, this approach was particularly common in countries or contexts that do not yet have a long tradition of think tanks and/or democratic political debate. Some of these organizations place more emphasis on inclusivity – bringing as many actors as possible, including the general public, into the debate – while others emphasize networking and discussion among a select group of policymakers and experts or focus on connecting domestic and international policy debates.

4. **Impact through impactful people:** Providing talented think tank staff with training, a support structure, feedback, and a good enabling environment, among other factors, can play a large role in helping them to achieve impact – either through the think tank itself or using the skills or values they learned within the think tank in another, future role.

However, organizations or individuals within them may pursue multiple different strategies simultaneously at different levels, and as such, these theories are not mutually exclusive. More elaborate theories of change and an individual organization's mission statement may combine different aspects of these typical ToCs and may even include additional aspects. Figure 8 below summarizes the key theories of change as well as some specific examples we encountered at think tanks around the world.

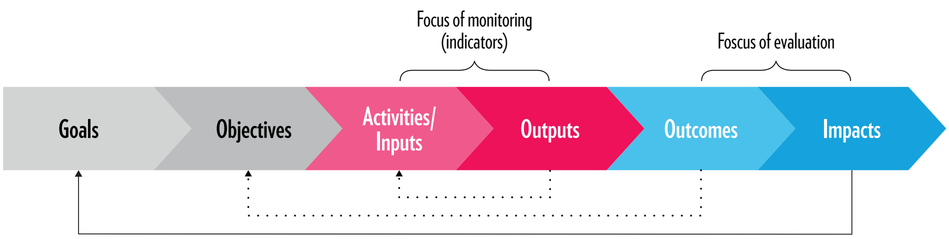
Figure 8: Examples of Think Tank Theories of Change

Theory of Change	Specific Examples from Think Tanks
Evidence-based research influences policy.	• Rigorous research and engaging with relevant actors from the policy community, the media and the general public can improve governance and public policies. • Producing and distributing independent, innovative, policy-relevant thinking can have a positive effect on policy processes. • Collecting data and showcasing practical information, if properly documented and presented, can influence policy conversations. • Collecting new or rethinking existing evidence can inform all think tank activities and policy advocacy.
Influencing the discourse (agenda setting) is key.	• Providing the right people with research and using appropriate formats can increase attention to a particular issue and lead to policy influence. • Consulting with people, such as policy entrepreneurs, who are open to change and new ideas can positively drive policy agendas. • Preparing high-quality, credible, forward-looking research can enable faster decision-making on key policy challenges when the policy environment is ready for change.

Think tanks are a platform for open debate.	• Think tanks can promote a better understanding of the need for evidence to drive better decision-making. • Strategically convening stakeholders, offering trainings and technical support, and providing open spaces for exchange can lead to more relevant and better-tailored policy options. • Networks and partnerships between think tanks, the broader research community, (inter)governmental organizations, citizen interest groups, and other stakeholders can enhance an organization's ability to drive change. • Helping to inform citizens, civil society organizations, and interest groups on the importance of key issues or broader concepts can act as a strong lever for influencing policy.
Individuals can drive change.	• Think tanks can build individuals' capacities to drive policy changes – both through through their own work as think tankers and when they work for other organizations later in their careers.

While most of the think tanks we spoke to had specific theories of change, as listed in Figure 8 above, very few had conceptualized their organizational theory of change according to a specific model. Nevertheless, a dominant practice within the think tank sector – originating from funding institutions in particular – is the use of linear models such as logical frameworks (so-called logframes) to structure goal-setting processes, design the activities necessary to reach these goals, and understand their potential impacts. Figure 9 below illustrates a typical linear theory of change model.

Figure 9: A Linear Theory of Change Model



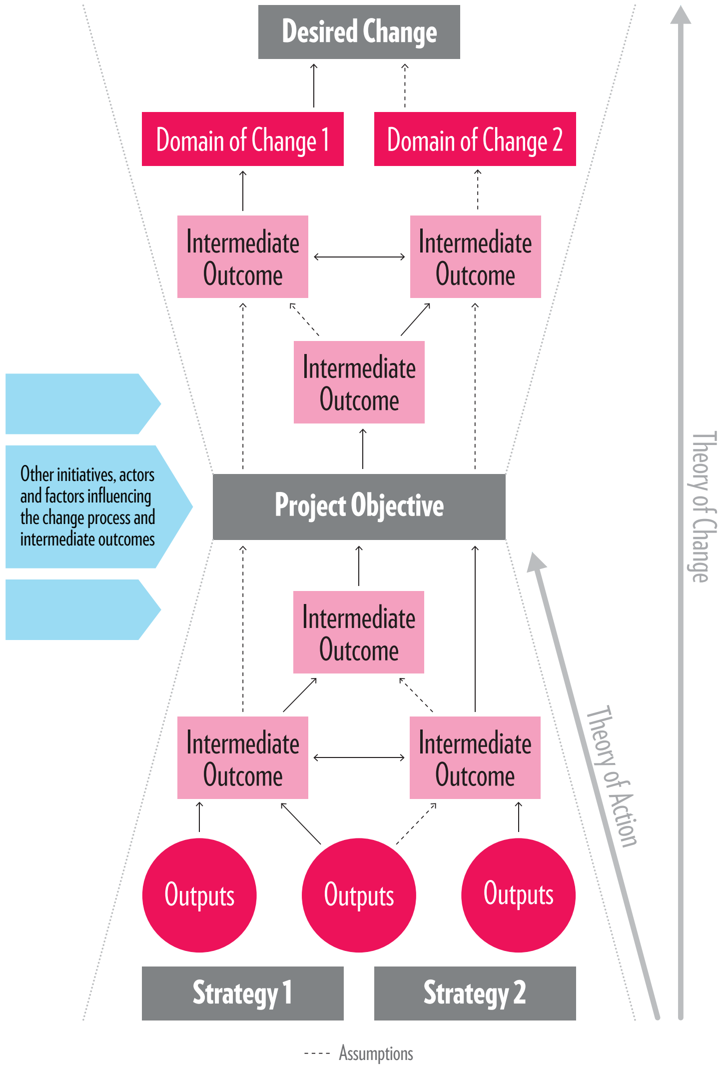
Think tanks often use such models when required, for example in grant applications, but very few spend resources to translate these into an actionable monitoring and evaluation strategy . The key reason is that it is often too time consuming or difficult to monitor various indicators for inputs and outputs, and that the impact of think tank outputs is often hard to determine, thus making it difficult to evaluate that impact. Another reason is the recognition that such linear models cannot adequately illustrate change processes – regarding policy influence, for example – that are often very complex and unpredictable.[34] In this respect, non-linear, systems-oriented theory

34 M. Van Es, I. Guijt, and I. Vogel, Theory of Change Thinking in Practice: A Stepwise Approach, The Hague: Hivos, 2015, accessed November 21, 2022, https://hivos.org/assets/2021/02/Hivos-ToC-guidelines-2015.pdf.

of change models better reflect the complexity of the problems they aim to solve and the approaches to doing so. Such non-linear thinking around theories of change can be useful in a number of ways, including by compelling think tanks to strategically interact with a variety of other actors in a network rather than only the ultimate target audience, with the goal of exerting influence in multiple directions. In fact, there is no limit to how complex a representation of an organization's interaction and impact network can be. These non-linear models can provide both a more systematic perspective on the operating environment and a more realistic and useful view of the impact pathways think tanks can pursue.

Figure 10 shows a non-linear theory of change model that takes into account a number of additional variables, including assumptions as well as how often unpredictable external factors play a role in a achieving or hindering desired outcomes.

Figure 10: A Non-Linear Theory of Change Model[35]



35 Figure adapted from Van Es et al., Theory of Change Thinking in Practice.

None of the think tank representatives we spoke to for this study claimed to be actively using a non-linear, systems-oriented theory of change model to conceptualize their work. Nevertheless, some think tanks do utilize an impact logic that can be classified as non-linear. For example, one European think tank employs what they call "boomerang diplomacy," an approach whereby they relay their key messages to the general public and to other actors – in this case European Union delegations and policymakers in Brussels and other European capitals – in the hope that these actors will translate the think tank's main messages into political pressure on their respective governments.[36] This non-linear logic can be especially important in non-democratic contexts where think tanks do not have direct access to the political class in power and, as such, need to leverage other actors and networks to exert influence.

In fact, most think tanks seem content with a broadly defined theory of change, using a simplified model to present the overarching structure for their work when necessary. However, this does not imply that they are unaware of the complex environment in which they are operating. On the contrary, most interviewees were keenly aware of the myriad factors, both internal and external, that either help or hinder them in achieving their desired outcomes.

Challenges to Achieving Effectiveness and Impact

Think tanks face significant challenges in their efforts to exert influence on policy processes as well as to understand which influencing strategies are successful. These challenges broadly fall into four main categories: (1) challenges or trends within the think tank sector; (2) organizational challenges think tanks face in their efforts to achieve impact; (3) external challenges; and (4) operating environment challenges. While think tanks around the world certainly face numerous other challenges, these four were the most common categories we encountered during our research, and examples of such challenges were either most often mentioned or provide an otherwise interesting perspective.

Keeping Up with an Evolving Environment

Even good analyses have to struggle either to be seen or to obtain legitimacy.

The think tank sector specifically, but also the information-generation industry more broadly, is evolving quickly. This evolution includes changes in how policymakers and the public consume news. Increasingly, the volume of (mis)information available to the public, along with the rise in popularity of convening tools such as social media platforms, has led to a more combative information environment in which even good analyses have to struggle either to be seen or to obtain legitimacy and can also be subject to attacks from those who do not like the results.[37] Changes in large social media companies' business models as well as algorithms limiting the reach of non-paid content also pose a particular threat to non-profit think tanks' ability to spread information of

36 Interview.

37 Interview.

interest to the public – a trend which will likely be exacerbated in the coming years.[38] In addition, in many different regions around the world populist politics and increasing societal polarization have led to a number of trends that affect the think tank sector, including a backlash against experts and declining trust in research results.[39] That said, it is also important to note that think tanks themselves in some cases have made it easier to question their credibility, for example by accepting funding from wealthy individuals, companies or authoritarian governments that try to influence research agendas and results, either directly or indirectly.[40]

At the same time, the policy-influencing industry is growing. This growth is not only limited to think tanks and academia, but also includes management consultancies with public policy practices, political risk consultancies, advocacy organizations with research arms, and even policy research units directly associated with public agencies. In such a crowded field of competing actors, achieving impact can feel very ad hoc, and as such, it is often difficult to pinpoint how or why a particular idea or piece of work influenced policy, or even where the idea originated.[41]

In this context, a specific theory of change may become less relevant or even largely obsolete over time. This is starkly illustrated by the think tank industry's evolution in recent decades: away from a handful of primarily government-funded think tanks conducting in-depth and nuanced policy analyses toward more diverse think tank models that often place a premium on timeliness and brevity in today's fast-paced information environment.

Organizational Challenges

Think tanks also face a number of organizational challenges, such as high staff turnover rates, frequent leadership changes, insecure funding, and difficulties with knowledge management.[42] Related to the point on competition in the previous section, advocacy organizations and international non-governmental organizations, for example, are increasingly developing high-quality research and analysis capabilities. Given their size and funding structure, these organizations often pay better and thus draw talent away from traditional think tanks.[43] Relatedly, developing and maintaining a professional management structure with skilled managers can be a considerable challenge for smaller and largely project-funded think tanks.[44]

---

38 See S. Ford, "Facebook Organic Reach Decline Called 'Catastrophic' for Nonprofits as News Feed Visibility Vanishes," America's Charities, 2015, accessed June 26, 2022, https://www.charities.org/news/facebook-organic-reach-decline-called-%E2%80%98catastrophic%E2%80%99-nonprofits-news-feed-visibility-vanishes.

39 See, for example, R. Balfour, What are think tanks for? Policy research in the age of anti-expertise, London: LSE Ideas, 2017, accessed October 8, 2022, https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/LSE-IDEAS-What-are-think-tanks-for.pdf; and H. Collins, R. Evans, D. Durant, and M. Weinel, Experts and the Will of the People: Society, Populism and Science, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

40 See, for example, D. Friedman, "A Top DC Think Tank Took Millions from Foreign Governments. Now Lawmakers Want Answers," Mother Jones, October 3, 2022, accessed October 4, 2022, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2022/10/brookings-institution-elizabeth-warren-chuck-grassley-ted-cruz-qatar/?utm_source=mj-newsletters&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=daily-newsletter-10-03-2022.

41 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interview.

42 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interview.

43 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022.

44 Ibid.

Organizational challenges also stand in the way of working in an effective and impact-oriented manner.

Such organizational challenges also stand in the way of working in an effective and impact-oriented manner. Developing a coherent strategy for achieving impact, not to mention regularly evaluating and improving it, is difficult and time consuming. This is particularly true since influencing policy is often a long-term project requiring patience and persistence in a difficult operating environment with limited resources.[45] While a number of the think tank representatives interviewed for this study stressed that they regularly reflect on their effectiveness and impact, finding the resources to translate these reflections into organizational change nevertheless remains a challenge.[46]

At the same time, a culture of excessive impact orientation and efforts to quantify the value of individuals or activities can also be counterproductive and create adverse incentives.[47] Doing so runs the risk of focusing solely on activities for which the impact – however inconsequential – is easily quantifiable or identifiable, rather than on activities for which impact may be higher but more difficult to quantify, such as creating confidential dialogue spaces for experts and policymakers. Similarly, a strong focus on relatively easily collected quantitative metrics can provide incentives for staff to "game the system" and to focus on activities that are not objectives-driven but merely look like impact.[48]

Dealing with External Actors' Needs, Priorities and Limitations

Impact pathways are unique to specific situations and deriving lessons learned on good practices for achieving impact is a complex process.

Being effective and achieving impact is not only a function of think tank activities and processes, but also of the demands and limitations imposed by the policymaking community as well as other actors, such as funding institutions, political parties and the general public. The means by which think tanks can reach policymakers and the public are constantly changing, and impact pathways are often unique to specific situations. For these reasons, deriving broad-based lessons learned on good practices for achieving impact is a complex process .[49] Furthermore, a lack of transparency in political decision-making processes and weak parties or governmental structures can also severely limit a think tank's ability to influence policymaking processes.[50]

Many of our interviewees also agreed that policy research and recommendations often simply cannot be presented to policymakers. Openness and receptivity to external ideas varies, and some policymakers may even be resistant to external ideas and recommendations for a number of reasons, including bureaucratic or political limitations. At the same time, too close a relationship with policymakers or funders can jeopardize a researcher's independence and credibility, and it is often advisable for think tank staff to maintain a professional distance, which is nevertheless frequently difficult to judge. In this context, the revolving door between the government and

45 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interview.

46 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interviews.

47 Interview.

48 Interview.

49 See J. G. McGann, The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks, Public Policy, and Governance, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016; and J. Reisman, A. Gienapp, and S. Stachowiak, A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy, Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2007.

50 Mendizabal, "Facing complex contexts?"

think tank sectors can, on the one hand, contribute to better policy advice, based on strong thematic or governmental expertise as well as insights into how organizations function.[51] On the other hand, a think tank's reputation can suffer if the revolving door jeopardizes the organization's independence, evidence base or ability to speak truth to power – in other words, if the think tank is, or is perceived to be, ideologically affiliated with or too close to powerful circles.[52]

In addition, think tanks that rely solely on project funding and have no sustainable core financing or endowment face an additional set of challenges. In particular, they often have to adapt their work to their funders' current priorities and simultaneously try not lose sight of their core mission, theory of change and impact goals. Aligning the latter with whatever project funding is available can be challenging. Moreover, project funding often has very little or no margin with respect to timing or staff budgets, meaning staff members have a limited buffer between projects in which to conduct additional activities that may improve the think tank's impact – such as meeting key decision-makers or attending high-profile events to present their research results.[53]

Challenging Political Environments

Related to the previous point on other actors' demands on and interactions with them, think tanks in more volatile or less open operating environments have to deal with additional challenges and other types of actors in their attempts to be effective and impactful. For example, in less open political systems such as autocracies, or in situations in which democratic institutions and structures are under pressure, governments can be hostile to the work of think tanks that are not aligned with government interests.[54] In such situations, the standard "demand side" turns into an adversary that uses coercion and sometimes violence to intimidate, threaten or even silence think tanks. In political systems under which political opposition is suppressed, independent think tanks that contradict the government can be instrumentalized and treated as a proxy opposition outside the formal parliamentary system, where political opposition no longer exists.[55] Under such conditions, think tanks go to extraordinary lengths to protect their staff. For example, they keep financial assets in other jurisdictions to protect them, write contingency plans and standard operating procedures on how to react when employees are abducted or taken into custody, and thoroughly analyze and carefully navigate which issues and arguments powerful players perceive as contentious or threatening.[56] In some cases, the political climate leads think tanks to reconsider their mission and theory of change, and to focus on serving as a neutral platform for exchange and for individual researchers to develop their ideas and sharpen their profiles before moving

51 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interview.

52 Interview.

53 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interview.

54 FP Analytics, "Navigating Through Turbulence. Think tanks' Impact on Policy in a Rapidly Changing World," in Foreign Policy (2021), accessed June 21, 2022, https://navigatingthroughturbulence.com/.

55 Interviews with a think tanker, including personal accounts of government threats, intimidation, and violence toward staff.

56 Interviews.

into other influential positions, while the organization itself remains "policy agnostic" by not taking an open stance on any substantive issues.[57]

Furthermore, donors that fund think tanks from abroad, including European governments and the European Union, may not be fully aware of the dangers think tanks face in other operating environments. For example, such donors may insist that a think tank in a more volatile or repressive political environment continues to organize dialogues with an antagonistic government to achieve impact, even though the government is hostile to the organization and its employees, has no interest in exchange, and the activities could put the think tank and its staff in danger through increased personal exposure.[58]

Finally, think tanks have little to no control over the circumstances under which they are trying to use their work to make an impact. One interviewee illustrated this challenge as follows: a think tank can work to establish stability in a region by working closely with local governments on a variety of security issues, yet it has no control over who is in power, including whether and when military coups occur. Thus, while the think tank may work continuously with a variety of actors toward building resilience in the face of violent extremism, for example, it cannot ensure success in this area, either for the region or across a broader area, nor can it prevent other disruptions that may undermine its ability to impact a policy outcome or measure its contribution.[59]

Key Success Factors for Achieving Effectiveness and Impact

In terms of think tanks' efforts to achieve effectiveness and impact, the most common success factors our interviewees cited were the quality of the think tank's work and staff, as well as a strong management and organizational culture that promotes and sustains the conditions for success. While these were the most important, interviewees also highlighted a number of other factors that have contributed to making think tanks more effective and impactful.

Quality of Work and Staff

High-quality work is important not only in and of itself, but also to build credibility, which can ultimately be used to achieve objectives such as shifting the discourse around a particular policy issue or even changing policy directly. However, the factors that constitute "high-quality" think tank work differ from quality criteria for those types of research that see scientific discovery as an end in itself.[60] Some of the most important criteria for think tanks include their role in filling crucial policy research gaps with evidence and expertise, translating data and insights into practical policy options, and

57 Interview.
58 Interview.
59 Interview.
60 Interview.

subsequently attempting to influence policymaking based on these findings.[61] As one interviewee explained, "This is how we measure our impact – can we create data to influence the conversation?"[62]

The quality criteria for this type of analysis are much less tangible and often rely on experience and a certain understanding of or "feel for" the political space. A number of the success factors outlined below relate directly to these factors. Nevertheless, a few criteria for generating high-quality, impactful work emerged from our analysis:

- **High research standards and methodologies:** It is important to deliberately choose the correct evidence base in order to ensure relevance and credibility.[63] For some, this means building findings around information drawn from a variety of sources. For others, gathering data from a particular constituency or location is more important – meaning, for example, that the think tank should be embedded in those contexts which its work is supposed to impact.[64]

- **Interdisciplinary research:** Researchers often need to link research results from different disciplines – such as political science, international relations, law, sociology, and economics – and ground these results and policy recommendations in political realities.[65]

- **Quality control mechanisms:** Consistent and rigorous mechanisms include processes such as peer review.[66]

Impact comes from impactful people.

The quality of a think tank's work is also directly related to the quality of its staff. Hiring the best scholars and attracting top talent – including people who know how the public sector works at different levels – is therefore a priority for many think tanks.[67] Ultimately, as one interviewee put it, "impact comes from impactful people."[68] Another interviewee stressed that their think tank's primary role is not just to attract impactful people, but to train them so that they can move on and make an impact directly among the think tank's target audiences – for example, in government or the private sector.[69] Relatedly, another interviewee argued that think tanks also have a responsibility to support researchers who not only possess good research and communication skills, but also have a passion for improving society, as this is a key differentiating factor between think tanks and other types of research organizations.[70]

61 Interviews.
62 Interview.
63 Interview.
64 Interview.
65 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interview.
66 Interviews.
67 Interviews.
68 Interview.
69 Interview.
70 Interview.

Management and Organizational Culture

Organizations that truly want to think ahead and provide high-quality advice must also cultivate a culture of open, rigorous debate and disagreement and foster a diversity of viewpoints in internal discussions.

Another critical success factor is effective organizational leadership and management that emphasizes impact orientation, goal setting, and some form of accountability in producing high-quality, impactful work.[71] However, this is only one piece of a larger puzzle. Organizations that truly want to think ahead and provide high-quality advice must also cultivate a culture of open, rigorous debate and disagreement and foster a diversity of viewpoints in internal discussions. That said, while some interviewees highlighted such characteristics as success factors for their work, they also agreed that these factors are intangible and therefore extremely difficult to measure or substantiate.[72] Since think tanks see value in grappling with difficult questions for which there are often no concrete or readily available answers, creating space for and a culture of vibrant, respectful and diverse disagreement and debate can strengthen a think tank's outputs.[73] Relatedly, such open discussion cultures can help to establish a stronger relationship between management, more established researchers and younger staff, which can ultimately prevent old ideas or approaches from calcifying in a way that stifles the organization's potential to increase its impact.[74]

In addition, successful think tanks are often impact oriented, and quality expectations constitute a central part of their organizational culture, meaning they include all of their staff in organizational and personal goal-setting, quality control, and feedback processes.[75] While their public-facing work often places individual experts in the foreground, relying solely on talented individuals is not sufficient. Rather, to ensure sustainable high-quality work, think tanks should continuously invest in building up their talent pool and supportive organizational structures by promoting frequent exchange and collaboration, both in well-managed teams and at the strategic organizational level.[76] Such exchanges include regular conversations among teams to link research topics and outputs to impact goals by asking critical questions and supplying feedback, as well as encouraging both teams and individuals to think about the impact they want to have in the medium to long term.[77]

Furthermore, think tanks should not only conduct regular feedback meetings and performance reviews with individual staff members – such discussions should also include conversations on impact, goal-setting and professional development.[78] Some of our interviewees stressed that one key objective of such conversations should be fostering a culture of improvement, with realistic expectations and encouragement.[79] However, as briefly discussed in the section on challenges above, some interviewees also cautioned against using impact orientation and goal-setting as a scheme to quantify the value of an individual's work, as such approaches may create the wrong incentives.[80]

71 Interview.

72 Interview.

73 Interview.

74 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022.

75 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interview.

76 Interviews.

77 Interview.

78 Interview.

79 Interview.

80 Interview.

Finally, think tanks can foster an impact-oriented culture by means of regular discussions on organizational strategies and individuals' roles in implementing these strategies.[81] This includes constant re-evaluation of what an organization's impact should be, why, and how this can be measured. A few think tank leaders we spoke to are using their business experience to bring more comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems into their respective think tanks, and they claim this has helped to improve their measurement activities (see, e.g., Cases 2 and 3).[82] However, not all of the think tanks we spoke to believe in the value of such measurements, and most either do not have the resources to implement similar systems or do not prioritize more comprehensive measurement systems.[83]

At a minimum, think tanks should set aside time in regular increments – for example, quarterly, bi-annually or annually – to reflect on strategy, organizational positioning, effectiveness, and impact.[84] Particularly for think tanks with resource constraints, these processes can help to escape a narrower project- or donor-driven logic and enable the organization to focus on the bigger picture of impact as well. By zooming out from the individual or the project level and also including regularized strategic objective-setting at the program or the organizational level, think tanks can better maintain their intellectual independence.[85]

Other Success Factors

While the quality of work, staff, management, and organizational development efforts emerged as the most important success factors, think tanks can take a number of additional steps to better achieve impact:

- **Develop objectives-driven activities.** Think tanks often frame their work around research questions and outputs. Instead, they (and their funders) should start with concrete objectives in terms of what they want to change and how, and then design activities and outputs accordingly (see the section on theories of change above).

- **Ensure feasibility and relevance.** A key success factor for influencing policy is feasibility – whether governments can actually implement the recommendations, taking into account their own capacities, limitations and the realities of the political and bureaucratic environment.[86] While think tanks and the researchers they employ are often driven to create change in a certain area, policymaking bodies may not (yet) be receptive to new ideas. In such cases, it can help to identify and better understand the issues and limitations policymakers

81 Interview.

82 Interviews.

83 Interviews.

84 Interviews.

85 Interview.

86 Barkhorn et al., "Assessing Advocacy."

are facing.[87] Impact-oriented work also requires think tanks to identify where there is a need for more information and evidence, better or more compelling arguments, or additional space for debate in order to solve a specific problem.[88] To further ensure the relevance of their work, think tankers should have regular conversations with different audiences, including funders, policy community representatives, and other researchers.[89]

Think tanks can play a crucial role in providing forward-looking analyses and, in doing so, create awareness and demand among policymakers and funders for new knowledge in areas that require action.

- **Take a forward-looking stance.** Many think tank employees stressed the importance of working in a forward-looking way and being aware of current and future trends. This includes an awareness of new developments in substantive policy areas and important debate-shaping events, of how policymakers work and consume information, how the general public feels about and discusses political topics, and how the policy-influence sector is evolving.[90] This is especially important in volatile or hostile political environments and operating contexts, where think tanks need to be able to adapt and to anticipate political developments.[91] In addition, forward-looking analyses can give think tanks an edge over other actors. For example, traditional research institutions such as universities tend to focus more on analyzing past events and they seldom emphasize drawing practical policy conclusions as a basis for current and future action. For its part, the public sector is often busy with daily political pressures and has little time to think in a forward-looking manner.[92] Think tanks can play a crucial role in providing forward-looking analyses and, in doing so, create awareness and demand among policymakers and funders for new knowledge in areas that require action.[93]

- **Provide the necessary resources.** Many success factors ultimately depend on resource availability and allocation. Quality assurance, forward-looking analyses and strategies, talent acquisition and development, high-quality management, and organizational culture are all activities that require both human and financial resources as well as organizational planning and processes. Otherwise, organizations risk being pulled in different directions according to various priorities – whether those of funders or of individuals within the organization – or being drawn into ad-hoc public debates and at the same time losing sight of the bigger picture: their desired impact and their effectiveness in achieving it.[94] Case 1 below illustrates an interesting example of setting aside dedicated funding in order to better achieve impact.[95]

87 Interview.

88 Interview.

89 Interviews.

90 Interviews.

91 Interview.

92 Conversation with a Berlin-based policymaker, September 2022.

93 Interview.

94 Interviews.

95 The information in this text box was taken from the organization's website and also provided to us in an interview.

- **Find a niche and play to your comparative strengths.** In order to ensure relevance and increase the likelihood that they will achieve impact, think tanks should identify their clear strengths – as compared to other actors in the policy-influencing space – and position themselves accordingly. This enables a more strategic approach when it comes to obtaining funding and garnering attention for outputs and arguments in a crowded market of information and ideas, for example.[96] Two key activities can help think tanks to find this niche as well as to define their objectives and develop a strategy for achieving them: First, a think tank should conduct analyses of actors in its field – such as relevant governmental departments or other research institutions – mapping their positions on certain issues and ideas, as well as their strengths and weaknesses, in order to identify gaps and better determine how the think tank can stand out vis-à-vis its target group.[97] Second, a think tank should closely track developments, existing arguments, and ideas in certain thematic spaces over time, identifying weaknesses or other potentially useful and currently lacking perspectives that should be addressed in the respective policy debate.

Case 1: Flexible Funding Enables a Strategic and Reactive Approach to Impact

The funding an organization receives greatly impacts its ability to operate. One good-practice example from our sample is an organization that receives flexible funding from large international foundations dedicated to an abstract cause that aligns with the think tank's mission.

This enables the think tank to:

- Stay independent by not accepting any money from the government in the country where it seeks to influence policy but still have the resources to build and maintain long-term relationships with all political parties and perspectives, even those (currently) in the opposition;
- Make strategic decisions thanks to its freedom to choose how to best achieve the policy goal it shares with its funders;
- React quickly to shifts in current debates and provide the resources necessary for internal reflection, learning and adaptation, and also to seize political windows of opportunity quickly – for example, before important legislative or judiciary decisions are made;
- Constantly adapt its approach to achieve maximum impact by closely monitoring policy debates in coordination with its funders; and

96 Interviews.

97 Interviews.

- Stay one step ahead by leveraging these flexible resources to research and anticipate upcoming political decisions, respond to policymakers' demands, and consequently tailor its output.

In addition to flexible funding, the following aspects, which are necessary to realizing this approach, have helped the organization achieve policy impact:

- Close coordination with its funders, also enabled by the necessary capacity on the funders' side, in following policy debates and supporting informed decisions about where to strategically invest resources;

- High-quality analyses and methods, which the public sector may lack, to provide (for example) quantitative estimates and models to support political decisions; and

- Strategic positioning in a field of multiple actors – for example, by deliberately choosing not to advocate for the maximalist demands of the most radical activists, but positioning the organization as an ambitious yet realistic advocate for change.

- **Maintain a clear focus and dare to negotiate.** Effectiveness and impact require clear focus and dedication, sometimes over longer periods of time. In this regard, think tanks should be cautious when it comes to deviating considerably from their strategies or objectives, for example as a result of funders' efforts to influence their work. Open conversations and negotiations with funders can help to align funder demands with activities that fit the think tank's mission, capacities, strategic development areas, and impact goals.[98] At the same time, think tanks also need to be receptive to funder needs and limitations, and openly discuss meaningful and necessary work.[99] This also helps to ensure intellectual independence, as organizations that follow their own impact strategy are less likely to be beholden to outside interests. To help maintain this focus, think tanks should put in place regular processes by which to set and update objectives, to define which activities and products can help to achieve these objectives, and to systematically track progress throughout the year. This can also help to determine whether to conduct projects or activities that may not be clearly in line with this focus, but may nevertheless help to achieve other institutional objectives.

- **Invest in relationships and partnerships.** One important success factor for a think tank's work is creating strong relationships and networks with other

98 Interview.

99 Interview.

Constructing such networks of like-minded organizations can serve to amplify messages across countries and regions.

researchers, organizations and policymakers.[100] To accomplish this, think tanks often map out communities and sub-communities in policy or thematic areas, create spaces for regular interaction, foster good relationships, and sometimes collaborate on projects, activities or outputs.[101] This also includes maintaining relationships with existing or future (e.g., opposition or up-and-coming) policymakers. In addition, think tanks can strategically partner with organizations in other areas or sectors – including domestic and foreign governments, international organizations, research organizations, and the non-profit sector – to help them make progress and expand their influence.[102] Constructing such networks of like-minded organizations can serve to amplify messages across countries and regions, and international partnerships also keep think tanks informed of and connected to debates in other areas, providing them with other perspectives on key policy issues.[103] Furthermore, both think tanks with small core teams and larger organizations emphasize bringing together the right mix of people for debate as a long-term success factor.[104] For example, convening established, influential professionals and young talent helps to build sustainable networks with long-term relationships in the public sector – networks that will use the think tank as a credible forum for high-quality debate about important issues.[105] In addition, organizational, program or project advisory boards made up of renowned experts with strong networks, as well as closely or loosely affiliated fellows across a variety of fields and careers, can be a strategic asset in ensuring relevance, providing peer feedback to ensure high-quality outputs, and distributing outputs for impact, among other benefits.[106]

- **Ensure independence and credibility.** For most think tanks, independence and credibility are extremely important factors in their efforts to influence policy outcomes. Fostering credibility and a reputation for independence can be achieved by selecting talented staff, providing relevant training, adhering to high quality standards, stating a clear mission, and offering transparency with regard to organizational governance and funding sources, among other factors.[107] Regarding transparency in terms of funding, one key success factor is maintaining a diverse funding base in order to reduce the risk of being instrumentalized by one donor or one political position – or indeed of simply being perceived in this way.[108] Some think tanks finance their underfunded issue areas by conducting for-profit activities in other topic areas, for example.[109] Moreover, building and maintaining strong relationships with credible partners and being involved in

100 Interviews.

101 Interviews.

102 Interviews.

103 Interviews.

104 Interviews.

105 Interview.

106 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interviews.

107 Interview.

108 Interviews.

109 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interview.

Independence need not mean remaining neutral or shying away from strongly advocating for changes that may conform to a certain political orientation.

influential networks or research consortia can also help to improve credibility – and ultimately impact – by association.[110] At the same time, independence need not mean remaining neutral or shying away from strongly advocating for changes that may conform to a certain political orientation.[111] Organizations can and should promote positions, arguments and ideas in a specific political direction, but such proposals should be evidence-based, transparent and subject to rigorous quality criteria in order to ensure independence and credibility as well as to provide a safeguard against criticism.[112] That said, it is important to recognize that partisan or biased think tanks can be and often are highly influential, because their input is particularly valued by policymakers or platforms that adhere to the same ideology.

- **Tailor outputs, then communicate and distribute them well.** Communication is integral to achieving impact and building a strong reputation. For this reason, think tanks have increasingly been investing more resources in and paying more attention to professional communication and brand building.[113] Most interviewees agree that providing high-quality research or making compelling arguments is not sufficient in and of itself, and publishing a report on an organizational website is no longer sufficient to reach key target groups.[114] Social networks and audio-visual media – such as unique graphics, videos or podcasts – are increasingly seen as important tools to broaden a think tank's reach and keep its work relevant in a faced-paced information and communication environment.[115] Some think tanks also invest in media trainings for staff to improve their public presentation skills or writing seminars to sharpen their argumentation skills, for instance.[116] Moreover, given the evolving ways in which the general public and policymakers consume information, some think tanks are reconsidering their theories of change and their approaches to achieving impact. For example, some have moved away from a primary focus on long-form analyses toward more targeted policy advocacy and shorter outputs tailored to specific decision-makers or other audiences.[117] Others are prioritizing the production of graphics and visual models, given the complexity of issues they seek to address and the shortening attention spans of their respective audiences.[118] In addition, think tanks not only tailor their products in unique ways to serve different audiences and meet their information-consumption preferences and needs, but they also increasingly utilize a variety of communication channels – such as different social media platforms – using each one to reach specific audiences via different formats.

110 Interview.

111 Interview.

112 Interview.

113 Interviews.

114 Interviews.

115 See J. De Boer, What are Think Tanks Good for?, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, 2015, accessed June 21, 2022, https://collections.unu.edu/view/UNU:3239; interviews.

116 Interview.

117 Interviews.

118 Interview.

- **Identify and exploit windows of opportunity.** Ultimately, impact is not only a matter of producing high-quality outputs – it also requires ensuring that the right output or information arrives in the right hands at the right time.[119] The ability to react quickly, to adapt to developments, and to exploit windows of opportunity in political processes are key success factors when it comes to achieving impact.[120] This requires monitoring policy processes – such as legislative sessions and debates or international negotiations – in real time and reacting swiftly in order to shape these discussions with timely, high-quality contributions.[121] However, building and maintaining the right connections, expertise and tactics, as well as finding the time and resources to identify and achieve impact during these windows of opportunity, can be challenging. One way to do so is by maintaining flexible funding (see Case 1 above), which enables a think tank to shift focus quickly and to take risks when the potential for impact is high – particularly since other research organizations, such as universities, do not often do this.[122] In addition, think tanks can utilize existing relationships or coalitions to help create the critical mass needed to shepherd new ideas into ongoing debates quickly. In more challenging operational contexts, such as regions where democratic institutions are in retreat or where more authoritarian governments are in power, think tanks may also be able to sound an alarm in advance of critical political developments and provide transparent accounts of these developments to both domestic and international audiences.[123]

- **Maintain a stable operating environment.** A stable and open operating environment that allows research organizations to maintain their independence is important if a think tank is to be effective and achieve impact. In particular, this requires a socio-political environment that enables the building of relationships between government ministries and officials, representatives from civil society, industry, the media, and research organizations. Such an environment also requires a sufficiently diverse funding landscape, which enables organizational independence, allows different voices to contribute to the policymaking discourse, and avoids conflicts of interest.[124] Fundamentally, such an environment ideally requires a functioning set of legislative, legal and regulatory institutions with transparent policy processes so that think tanks and citizens can follow developments and ensure some level of accountability in government.[125] Unfortunately, this is not always the case, and think tanks – particularly those in more repressive environments – often need to be very careful when it comes to their activities and the types of impact they can attempt to achieve without jeopardizing their operations in that particular country or region.

119 Interview.
120 See, for example, Barkhorn et al., "Assessing Advocacy."
121 Interviews.
122 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interview.
123 Interview.
124 Ohomeng, "Civil Society and Policy Making."
125 Barkhorn et al., "Assessing Advocacy."

How Think Tanks (Try To) Measure Effectiveness and Impact

Effectiveness refers to a think tank's success in fully implementing planned activities. Impact consists of the short-, medium-, and/or long-term effects of these activities.

Think tanks need to reflect on their effectiveness and impact as well as how to measure both, for a number of reasons. These include the potential of that information to provide more strategic direction as well as considerations around how to create more transparency and accountability with regards to how organizational resoures are spent, particularly donor funding. Regarding the latter, this trend toward more transparency and accountability can be traced back to the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, which prioritized evidence-based substantiation of the results achieved in the field of development cooperation.[126] This led to a decreased focus on measuring activities performed and services delivered, for example, and an increased focus on plausibly substantiated changes that can be attributed to a project's activities.[127]

These shifts in approaches have trickled into the think tank sector, which traditionally also focused primarily on effectiveness rather than the (potential) impact of activities. The standard evaluation criteria used by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), for instance, define "effectiveness" and "impact" as follows: effectiveness refers to "the extent to which the intervention achieved, or is expected to achieve, its objectives, and its results, including any differential results across groups," while impact refers to "the extent to which the intervention has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects."[128] For a think tank, effectiveness thus refers to its success in fully implementing the activities set out in project proposals or terms of reference. Impact, on the other hand, consists of the short-, medium- and/or long-term effects of these activities, such as the political, economic or social effects of the policy solutions implemented.

The two primary goals of evaluations aimed at measuring impact and effectiveness are to ensure accountability and to promote learning. Fields such as the evaluation of development aid have traditionally placed an emphasis on accountability as the main concern – assessing performance and identifying who is responsible for successes or

126 GIZ, GIZ's Evaluation System: General Description, Bonn: GIZ, 2018.

127 Ibid.

128 See OECD, Evaluation Criteria, n. d., accessed October 16, 2022, https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/39119068.pdf.

failures.[129] In contrast, a focus on learning involves accepting risks and uncertainties as well as creating spaces in which errors can be openly admitted and the reasons for both failures and successes can be discussed without fear of negative consequences.[130]

While such learning approaches and measurements can serve to build trust, they can also limit efforts at improving transparency and accountability.[131] Thus, think tanks often find it difficult to navigate the tension between learning and accountability when they are subject to funders' evaluation requirements.[132] While none of the think tanks interviewed for this study explicitly mentioned this tension as a part of their monitoring and evaluation approach, it may become more pronounced in the future as funders increasingly require think tanks to demonstrate effectiveness and impact. In this regard, think tanks presently have an opportunity to design measurement approaches that encourage both accountability and learning, whether internally or alongside their funders, in a way that is tailored to both the think tank sector generally and the individual organization in particular. The field of evaluation provides a variety of tools and frameworks for both accountability- and learning-focused evaluations, depending on the organization's goals, timing and the available resources – for example, by assessing performance after an activity (ex post), identifying challenges or gaps before implementing activities (ex ante), or implementing decision-making and adaptation processes in complex settings (developmental).[133]

Much of the emphasis on the need to quantify the impact of a think tank's activities has been driven by funders.

While think tanks largely seem to agree that measuring impact is just as, if not more important than measuring effectiveness alone, opinions vary as to why it is crucial to do so. Our interviewees stressed three overarching reasons that largely align with the accountability and learning evaluation criteria highlighted above.[134] First, interviewees pointed out that much of the emphasis on the need to quantify the impact of a think tank's activities has been driven by funders who require some form of reporting and accountability for the activities implemented. Large foundations and public funders in particular have increasingly introduced concepts such as "return on investment" and "value for money" into their funding decisions.

Our interviewees' feelings on this development are mixed. On the one hand, funder requirements for achieving and measuring impact, for example through the development and tracking of key performance indicators (KPIs) or logframes, can help to conceptualize more impact-oriented activities and make an organization more effective in implementing them. They can also lend credibility and contribute to building a better reputation in the long run. On the other hand, our interviewees were often very critical of these requirements, particularly as they often lead to prioritizing input and output metrics – such as the number of studies and social media or website statistics (which are relatively easy to measure) – as opposed to outcome and impact

129 Reinertsen et al., "Accountability versus learning."

130 Ibid.

131 Ibid.

132 S. Bressan, J. Friedrich, and M. Wagner, Governing Evaluations – Internationally Shared Challenges in Evaluating Preventive Measures Against Extremism, 2021, accessed October 16, 2022, https://www.gppi.net/2021/07/08/governing-evaluations-preval.

133 Reinertsen et al., "Accountability versus learning"; M. Q. Patton, Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use, London: Guilford Press, 2010.

134 See, for example, Reinertsen et al., "Accountability versus learning."

metrics that illustrate demonstrable short-, medium- or long-term policy impact (which are relatively complicated to measure).[135] Furthermore, particularly when it comes to research that attempts to provide policy ideas to address complex problems, such logic models and rigid planning requirements can actually hinder a think tank's effectiveness and eventual impact.

Measuring an organization's effectiveness and impact serves an accountability function.

Second, measuring an organization's effectiveness and impact serves an accountability function that can help to justify existing work as well as the organizational setup and approaches, among other things.[136] This is particularly useful because new or established organizational leaders as well as current or potential funders tend to ask "the impact question" and to demand some data to back up the organization's responses. Moreover, in countries where there are many think tanks, the perception that the field is competitive increases the pressure on think tanks to illustrate their results in order to stay relevant. Relatedly, measuring and identifying impact can also provide motivation and a sense of purpose to the individuals who work in think tanks.[137] For example, one think tank director highlighted that their effort to discuss and measure impact regularly is an important aspect of building a positive and more effective organizational culture, since it builds stronger relationships between staff members and also generates more understanding of and support for the organization's strategic direction.[138]

Measuring effectiveness and impact can help to calibrate and improve an organization's work through learning.

Third, measuring effectiveness and impact can help to calibrate and improve an organization's work through learning. Think tanks that work in an impact-oriented manner place great emphasis on this particular benefit. Measuring effectiveness and impact can help such organizations to ensure efficiency and to decide where and how to allocate their financial and human resources as well as to refine their theories of change, mission, and impact pathways, among other benefits. This can be particularly important in operating environments where the competition for attention in an increasingly crowded information space is high as a result of the proliferation of think tanks or other policy-influencing actors, for example. In response, think tanks can use this information to better align their outreach and distribution efforts with new ways in which people are consuming information.

Approaches and Tools

Think tanks have formalized their approaches to measuring their effectiveness and impact to different degrees, ranging from highly formalized to ad-hoc approaches. Some think tanks do not measure impact at all due to, for example, a lack of available human or financial resources or because they have not yet found a system that is both useful and realistic to implement.[139] For those think tanks that do attempt to measure their effectiveness and impact, the various approaches include quantitative metrics,

135 Interviews.
136 Interviews.
137 Interviews.
138 Interview.
139 Interviews.

qualitative assessments or a combination of these two.[140] From our analysis of the existing literature on measuring think tank effectiveness and impact as well as the responses our interviewees gave, a number of approaches emerged. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and think tanks often use a mix of different approaches.

Formalized Approaches

Strategic plans and results-based frameworks: Among the more formalized approaches to measuring effectiveness and impact are those that are integrated into an organization's annual or multi-year strategic plan. Such approaches often use results-based frameworks to link organizational theories of change with the desired outcomes, the activities and outputs needed to achieve those outcomes, and the indicators to monitor the progress of these activities toward achieving the desired outcomes, as well as with the quantitative and qualitative data sources that contribute to informing these indicators and ultimately evaluating success.[141]

A strategic plan or results-based framework can include multiple theories of change and set the expectations and processes for tracking numerous inputs (e.g., staff time and financial resources) and outputs (e.g., studies and media appearances) as well as for defining the respective indicators. The key aspect of such a framework, whether the approach is extensive or more limited, is that it is a structured approach to enabling a think tank to achieve its impact objectives effectively, put into place a process and tools to measure its impact, and provide the necessary organizational resources to implement the framework or strategy. Such resources often include designated staff members who regularly collect information on inputs, outputs and data to inform indicators provided by other staff members or organizational teams and then structure this information – in progress reports, annual reports, internal or external newsletters, or impact stories featured on the organizational website, among other examples.[142] Additionally, those pursuing more advanced approaches not only consistently monitor indicators in real time and adjust activities accordingly but also include internal or potentially externally-led evaluations to determine the impact and effectiveness of these activities. How intensive this process is – in terms of, for example, the types and number of indicators tracked and whether evaluation occurs in real time, quarterly, annually, or every five to ten years – depends on a number of different factors, chief among them the availability of (dedicated) staff and financial resources.

Surveys, focus groups, and interviews: As a means to inform indicators, some think tanks conduct (semi-)regular surveys, interviews, public opinion polls, or focus-group discussions with specific target audiences such as policymakers, the general public

---

140 See J. Clark and D. Roodman, Measuring Think Tank Performance. An Index of Public Profile, Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2013; and J. Tsui and B. Lucas, Methodologies for measuring influence, GSDRC, 2013, accessed June 21, 2022, http://gsdrc.org/docs/open/hdq905.pdf. Tsui and Lucas differentiate between theory-based, case-based and participatory methods. However, the categorization we use above more neatly fits the methods practitioners apply.

141 See Impact Consulting, Monitoring and Evaluation Framework: Are You Making an Impact?, accessed September 12, 2022, https://impact-consulting.net/en/monitoring-and-evaluation/#page-content.

142 Interviews.

or project partners. These are common approaches to self-evaluation, the purpose of which is to obtain information directly from these groups on the respective think tank's impact. While this approach can be more resource-intensive than others, one key benefit is that it can eliminate the need to monitor a number of other proxy indicators and, instead, gather input directly from target audiences to assess impact.[143]

Indexes: An index is a tool that aims to track or even promote change in a particular policy area. This is a more methodologically advanced approach and requires high-quality indicators, often both quantitative and qualitative in nature, as well as systematic, rigorous data collection over time in order to track policy dynamics and/or progress toward achieving a particular objective within a defined policy area.[144]

External evaluations: In addition to internal processes and approaches, think tanks can try to measure their effectiveness and impact by contracting an external organization to evaluate their activities, the organizational enabling environment, and their impact orientation as well as communication and outreach strategies, among other areas.[145] The cost of this approach is comparatively high, which is likely the reason why only one of the think tanks interviewed for this study had used this approach, and only on a single occasion.[146] Nevertheless, other interviewees stressed that they are actively looking for additional funding to expand their monitoring and evaluation capacities.[147]

Semi-Formalized or Ad-Hoc Approaches

(Self-)reporting: Even without a more formalized strategic plan and results-based framework, some think tanks use a system of staff (self-)reporting to note staff members' activities and the kinds of impact they purport to have had.[148] Such reports can be made regularly or on an ad-hoc basis, and they can take the form of periodic reporting or feedback meetings between staff and organizational leadership, briefings to leadership, or an organizational monitoring and evaluation officer who tracks milestones such as the release of a publication, the completion of a distribution activity or outreach trip, or the conclusion of a social media campaign.[149]

Impact trackers: A number of think tanks use an "impact tracker" tool to track certain indicators of organizational effectiveness and impact in real time.[150] Despite

143 Interview,

144 For example, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) developed the Security Sector Reform Index to monitor dynamics and assess the scope of security sector reform in Serbia, and more generally to provide other organizations with a research and advocacy tool to assess the security sector in different countries more comprehensively. See F. Klopfer, D. Cantwell, M. Hadzic, and S. Stojanovic, eds., Almanac on Security Sector Oversight in the Western Balkans, Belgrade: BCSP and DCAF, 2012; interview.

145 Interestingly, we did not hear of any instances of donor-led external evaluations of a think tank's impact or effectiveness.

146 Interview.

147 Interviews.

148 Interviews.

149 Interviews.

150 Interviews.

the fact that these primarily quantitative indicators can only serve as proxies for determining impact and effectiveness and rarely provide any definitive insights, think tanks commonly use them because they require relatively few resources. For example, when a new publication is released, think tanks track the number of times the study was downloaded from the organization's website, the number of briefings conducted with key audiences, and/or general feedback received on the publication. However, the interviews conducted for this study indicated that the clearest examples of impact are qualitative indicators, including newspaper articles mentioning a think tank's report in the context of political decisions or politicians and bureaucrats telling think tank employees that their research results were used to craft a certain decision or policy. Methodologically speaking, only the latter is a form of direct impact measurement, as the first example cannot serve to assess whether any direct influence took place. Nevertheless, for many organizations this semi-formalized or even ad-hoc approach is a resource-light and realistically achievable means of getting a sense of their effectiveness and impact. Case 2 below illustrates one think tank's approach to impact tracking.[151]

Case 2: Impact Trackers

How can think tank employees identify impact when they see it? One think tank has developed an organization-wide system to trace its impact in helping to end violent conflicts. At the start of each fiscal year, the think tank's program and project teams write down strategy objectives for different conflicts – essentially their plans for achieving this top-level goal. Internal reports help to trace developments in particular areas of work and individuals enter all of their activities (e.g., publications or meetings) into an additional impact database. For each of these respective activities, they rate impact on the following scale:

- Knowledge: The output or activity has succeeded in distributing new knowledge to the target actor(s), usually decision-makers;

- Attitude: It changed the target actor's opinion about the issue in the desired direction; and

- Behavior: It has led to action in the direction of the desired outcome, e.g., the target actor has made a decision or taken action.

This is one of multiple initiatives within the organization to trace impact and make it transparent to funders and the public. The organization regularly reflects on the advantages and challenges of this prototype system and its other evaluation activities, and it is currently looking for funding to develop its monitoring and evaluation approach further. The team has acknowledged shortcomings such as the subjectivity of individual team members' ratings of their own activities, the effort it takes to regularly update the assessment even after activities were concluded, and how to deal with sensitive information such as confidential meetings with stakeholders.

Cases: Writing up impact, change or success "stories" is another common approach to evaluation.[152] Think tanks often write such stories following a successful attempt to influence a particular policy. For example, they might conduct a mini-evaluation of a substantiated instance of impact in order to identify the lessons learned. The results are then used to consider future efforts to make an impact, and they also serve as a concrete example of organizational effectiveness and impact for other stakeholders, such as funders.

Focus on internal processes: One of the more unique approaches is measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of a think tank's internal organizational processes – rather than measuring its effectiveness and impact with respect to influencing policy.[153] Since defining and tracking the indicators for measuring policy influence is difficult and resource-intensive, think tanks can measure their own internal performance instead. This may include ex-post discussions on project performance, on whether the right stakeholders were involved in the activities, or on whether the results were sent to the relevant target audiences, such as members of parliament or media outlets. Case 3 below illustrates an approach that combines a focus on internal processes with an impact tracker.[154]

Case 3: Tracking Progress on Key Issues to Achieve Focus

Tracing progress on abstract objectives can help to set a direction and also define objectives at more granular levels. In one example, a think tank decided to focus on "equity" as its five-year goal and track its progress over time using the following processes:

1. Deciding that the organization is willing to influence the issue;

2. Checking whether the necessary expertise is available within the organization and whether it is able to make a concrete policy proposal on how to influence the topic;

3. Completing the policy proposal;

4. Sharing the proposal with various actors to get input, refining it, and building coalitions with other like-minded external experts and organizations;

5. Distributing the refined policy proposal to the media and public officials; and

152 Interviews.

153 Interview.

154 The information in this box is based on an interview with the a representative of respective organization.

6. Tracking actions taken by targeted actors that align with the policy proposal.

The same framework is applied at different organizational levels, ranging from executive goals to individual performance. In addition, the think tank regularly reviews its detailed theories of change on how to influence certain actors' behavior and also establishes strategic goals for different work areas.

Ad-hoc discussions and strategic dialogue: Many think tanks do not measure impact at all and may even reject classic measurement indicators altogether. Instead, they focus on strategic dialogue with relevant stakeholders as well as on creating an internal discussion culture around impact-related issues and how the organization can improve.[155] For example, a number of think tanks utilize annual or bi-annual retreats to discuss such issues, and they measure their progress more subjectively by the number and quality of these discussions.[156]

While the above examples illustrate the fact that different think tanks around the world approach measuring effectiveness and impact with different levels of formalization and ambition, instances in which organizations develop and consistently apply formalized impact- and effectiveness-measurement strategies seem rare. Rather, think tanks tend to implement more informal. ad-hoc and/or less rigorous approaches to measuring their impact due to a number of challenges involved in measuring impact more formally (see the section on challenges below). The main reason for this is that influence on policymaking and the impact of many other think tank activities is so hard to measure.[157]

Defining and Tracking Success Indicators

Depending on the kinds of outcomes a think tank wishes to measure, it has to define the correct indicators of success. Most think tanks (and scholars) that choose to measure influence in a structured way often try to do so using quantitative indicators.[158] Quantitative indicators can be measured objectively and in the context of think tank work, these can include the number of publications or citations, website statistics, and social media engagement statistics (Annex II provides a comprehensive list of the quantitative indicators used by think tanks around the world).[159]

155 Interview.

156 Interviews.

157 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interview.

158 See D. E. Abelson, "Is Anybody Listening? Assessing the Influence of Think Tanks," in Think Tanks and Public Policies in Latin America, eds. A. Garcé and G.Una, Buenos Aires: Fundación Siena and CIPPEC, 2010; L. Alcázar, M. Balarín, W. Dushni, and E. Eboh, Learning to monitor think tanks impact: Three experiences from Africa, Asia and Latin America, 2012, accessed June 21, 2022, https://tti.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/Learning%20to%20monitor%20think%20tanks%20impact%20final%20report%20july%202012_0.pdf; and R. Shlozberg, How do you measure a think tank's impact?, Mowat Centre, 2015, accessed October 8, 2022, https://mowatcentre.munkschool.utoronto.ca/how-do-you-measure-a-think-tanks-impact/.

159 Interviews. See also, for example, Abelson, Do Think Tanks Matter?; Ahmad, "US Think Tanks and the Politics

However, these indicators can only help to measure efficiency, effectiveness or visibility by using secondary proxies such as inputs (e.g., hours spent solving a problem), outputs (e.g., number of publications), or outcomes (e.g., observable change in a certain direction – for example, a policymaker changing their voting behavior in the direction the think tank advocated, although the attribution problem will always complicate this determination).[160] Thus, these indicators assess effectiveness in terms of the extent to which an activity is serving to achieve the objectives behind it.[161] Measuring impact, on the other hand, assesses the extent to which an activity has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended higher-level effects.[162] As such, measuring impact differs from measuring effectiveness in that it is more indicative of the ultimate significance and potentially transformative effects of an activity, and it also helps to identify longer-term or broader effects.

Most think tank practitioners interviewed for this study stressed that they try to track relatively straightforward indicators, such as the number of publications and media appearances, at the very least. However, they also feel that while these quantitative indicators can be useful in some respects, they are not directly indicative of outcomes, and interviewees expressed little confidence in their value when it comes to determining the effectiveness and impact of their work.[163] In order to get a more accurate and nuanced understanding of their effectiveness and impact (or lack thereof) beyond quantifiable metrics, think tanks also use qualitative methods and indicators. Such methods include interviews with or surveys of policymakers or other stakeholders as well as case studies and outcome mapping.[164] The common qualitative indicators that think tanks often use include: analyzing the ways in which the language of a debate changes based on their efforts (e.g., through discourse analysis); the quality of their network and relationships; and even the quality of the job applicants the organization attracts (see Annex II for a comprehensive list of qualitative indicators).[165] Arguably the most visible, and to some extent the most controversial, example of qualitative impact measurement is the University of Pennsylvania's Global Go To Think Tank Index, which polls individuals around the world and asks them to rank think tanks based on a given set of criteria.[166]

---

of Expertise"; Clark and Roodman, Measuring Think Tank Performance; Lerner, "Getting the message across"; and McGann, Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US.

160 See Clark and Roodman, Measuring Think Tank Performance; Thunert, "The Development and Significance of Think Tanks in Germany"; Rashid, "Efficacy of Think Tanks"; Alcázar et al., Learning to monitor think tanks impact; Shlozberg, How do you measure a think tank's impact?; and Weidenbaum, "Measuring the Influence of Think Tanks."

161 The OECD notes that an analysis of effectiveness involves taking account of the relative importance of the objectives or results. The term effectiveness is also used as an aggregate measurement of the extent to which an intervention has achieved or is expected to achieve relevant and sustainable impacts efficiently and co-herently. See OECD, Applying Evaluation Criteria Thoughtfully, 2021, accessed October 8, 2022, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/543e84ed-en/1/3/4/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/543e84ed-en&_csp_=535d2f2a848b7727d35502d7f36e4885&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book#section-d1e4269.

162 OECD, Applying Evaluation Criteria Thoughtfully.

163 Workshop with think tank employees in Berlin, spring 2022; interviews.

164 See, for example, Abelson, Do Think Tanks Matter?; Bellettini, "The Role of Public Policy Centers"; and Tsui and Lucas, Methodologies for measuring influence.

165 Interview.

166 See TTCSP, TTCSP Global Go To Think Tank Reports, accessed September 6, 2022, https://repository.upenn.edu/think_tanks/. Notably, a number of scholars and practitioners consider this ranking's methodology highly

In many cases, think tanks employ both quantitative and qualitative approaches to varying degrees, using a collection of different indicators.[167] In fact, there are hundreds of different indicators think tanks can use to measure their effectiveness and impact (see Annex II). A useful way to structure these indicators is to categorize quantitative and qualitative indicators based on different think tank objectives:

- **Organizational indicators** can be used to track the organization's effectiveness. Examples include: improvements to internal processes, such as the number and quality of strategic discussions; funding sustainability and/or the diversification of funding sources; and the quality of the organization's reflection on and uptake of effective means of achieving greater impact.

- **Activities indicators** can be used to track the outputs and outcomes of a think tank's activities, such as the number of publications, feedback received, and the number of workshops convened, as well as the number and/or quality of the participants. They can also serve to track the extent to which the ideas the think tank put forward made their way into policy documents or the policy discourse more generally.

- **Reputational indicators** can be used to track an organization's relevance in the wider ecosystem of think tanks or among other similar organizations. Examples include the number of citations in academic journals or other publications, requests for input from the media or governmental bodies, or requests to participate in joint projects or research consortia.

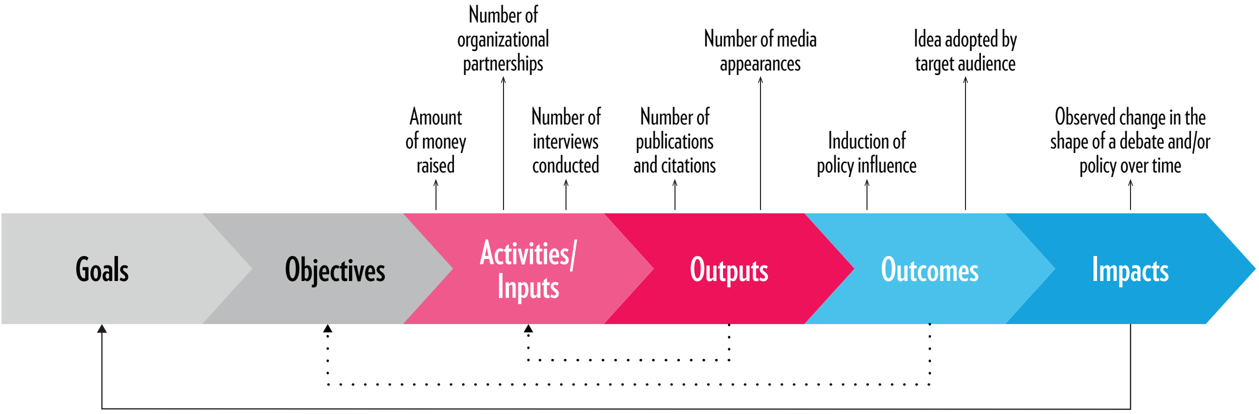
- **Reach indicators** can be used to gauge the breadth and depth of the organization's outreach activities, including social media metrics and website statistics, or the extent to which the audiences included in the organization's distribution activities are relevant.

However, most of the think tanks interviewed for this study primarily – if not exclusively – track indicators at the input and output level. As such, measurement indicators at the outcome and particularly the impact level remain rather rare. To illustrate this, Figure 11 builds on the linear theory of change model presented above and includes information on the point in this process at which think tanks tend to conduct measurements.

subjective and thus unreliable, among other criticisms. See Clark and Roodman, Measuring Think Tank Performance; interviews.

167 Shlozberg, How do you measure a think tank's impact?

Figure 11: Linear Theory of Change Model with Measurement Indicators



Challenges to Measuring Impact and Effectiveness

Achieving impact is particularly difficult when it comes to influencing policy, given the variety of actors involved and the often long timeframes and complex decision-making processes inherent in policymaking. Measuring effectiveness and particularly impact is also notoriously challenging, and think tanks often struggle to find an approach that is useful, consistent and sustainable. Many think tanks try to approximate their impact as much as they can with the resources they have available – often through semi-structured reflection processes or tracking systems – but they rarely use indicators that actually measure results at the outcome or impact levels. As such, approaches to measuring effectiveness and approximating impact in the think tank sector are still rather basic compared to the much more structured, professionalized and often well-resourced approaches to measuring and evaluating in fields such as health, development or education policy. After analyzing the existing literature and speaking with think tank representatives from around the world, the six key challenges below emerged as the most significant ones.

Complexity and the Attribution Problem

When it comes to measuring effectiveness and particularly impact, the requirements are high – and think tanks universally struggle to do so effectively and consistently. Such measurement efforts require solid evidence and thorough assessment, ensuring that the observed outcome would not have happened without the intervention (e.g., a think tank's output or other activities) by applying a counterfactual.[168] Tracing the causal connection between ideas introduced to policymakers and the adoption

168 OECD, Outline of Principles of Impact Evaluation, n. d., accessed October 8, 2022, https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/dcdndep/37671602.pdf.

The "attribution problem" refers to the difficulty of establishing causality with regard to a think tank's influencing activities, and this difficulty often leads think tanks to make weak assumptions regarding their outcomes and impact.

and implementation of a policy proposal, especially when a proposal may reach policymakers via different channels simultaneously, is a complex and often impossible task.[169] Nevertheless, this does not prevent some researchers from claiming policy influence despite having no direct evidence, simply because they happened to be in the room with a policymaker when a decision was made, for example.[170]

The so-called "attribution problem" refers to the difficulty of establishing causality with regard to a think tank's activities, outputs or other approaches to exerting influence, and this difficulty often leads think tanks to make weak assumptions regarding their outcomes and impact.[171] For example, one think tank representative highlighted a case in which their institution had organized a debate with one of the less popular candidates in a local election. This candidate ended up winning the election, but since there was no concrete, measurable evidence that this think tank's effort was the main reason for this outcome, it could not take full credit for the shift.[172] Measurement efforts are further complicated by the fact that some governments are not transparent regarding their policymaking activities and processes, either by design or because these activities and processes involve many different individuals from different institutions or departments as well as complex administrative procedures.[173]

Limited Resources

Depending on the scope of the efforts, measuring effectiveness and impact can be tedious and resource-intensive. It requires an organization-wide approach and buy-in from staff, systematic processes to design and track relevant indicators for different types of work, skilled individuals to lead these processes and to conduct evaluations, as well as processes to reflect on how to achieve and measure effectiveness and impact across all levels of a think tank's work. Doing this correctly requires staff time, financial resources and planning, and all of the think tank representatives interviewed for this study stressed that they struggle to find the necessary resources to measure their impact. Ultimately, the benefits of the measurement approach must be worth the cost in order to be sustainable, and for some think tanks this is not the case.

The main challenge in this respect is time, particularly since meaningfully measuring or reporting on impact requires considerable effort and often takes place in addition to ongoing tasks rather than being "priced into" a think tank employee's work time.[174] Given the funding pressures many think tanks face, there is often little – if any – time available between projects to reflect on a completed project's successes and failures.[175] Furthermore, staff members who specialize in research, consulting or advocacy may find this type of work boring – it is often open-ended and does not offer

169 See, for example, Abelson, Do Think Tanks Matter?; Jones, "A guide to monitoring and evaluating policy influence"; also interviews.

170 Interview.

171 See, for example, Reisman et al., A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy; and Jones, "A guide to monitoring and evaluating policy influence."

172 Interview.

173 Interview.

174 Interview.

175 Interviews.

clear results – and in consequence, they either do not make time for it or do the bare minimum necessary to satisfy organizational and/or funder requirements.

A key challenge is maintaining consistency in how indicators are developed and how staff members – who often do not specialize in this kind of work – collect and analyze data.

In addition, newer trends such as remote or hybrid work models have made it even more difficult for think tanks to create the necessary space to encourage knowledge sharing among staff members who may not be in the same physical location.[176] For larger think tanks with a number of programs or departments, a key challenge is maintaining consistency in how indicators are developed and how staff members – who often do not specialize in this kind of work – collect and analyze data. Such organizations can struggle to apply a uniform and thus meaningful approach.[177] For smaller think tanks, however, it often is not financially feasible to hire a dedicated monitoring and evaluation officer, or alternatively to price this activity into existing staff members' work time.[178]

The significant resources required to measure impact comprehensively have led to a situation in which (good) practices regarding how to achieve and measure a think tank's effectiveness and impact come from think tanks with the institutional resources to both design and implement an approach as well as to share their reflections in a formalized way. As such, measurement approaches and lessons learned are skewed toward well-financed, primarily US-based think tanks and are less relevant for think tanks facing acute resource shortages or operating in different social or political contexts. Yet even comparatively well-funded think tanks struggle to expand and professionalize their monitoring and evaluation activities due to a lack of good practice examples in the think tank sector. For example, the organization of one think tanker we interviewed has developed a streamlined internal reporting system and an impact tracker (see Case 2 above) that help to inform its strategic planning, to regularly report to its oversight bodies and funders, and to share impact stories on its website. However, these approaches are still in their infancy, and they are not always well suited to inform a think tank's efforts to achieve the high levels of direct impact their funders often desire, which are particularly hard to measure.[179]

Turnover and Non-Replicable Circumstances

The pathways to influencing policymakers and the public are constantly changing.[180] For example, turnover in government institutions and think tanks can sever carefully curated and trusted relationships between think tank staff and policymakers. Furthermore, influence pathways are often unique to specific situations and evaluators can rarely predict with confidence the actual or potential policy consequences of a set of activities. As such, it is difficult to replicate successes or to draw broadly relevant conclusions about what did or did not work with respect to influencing policy processes.[181]

176 Interview.

177 Interviews.

178 Interview.

179 Interview.

180 McGann, The Fifth Estate.

181 Reisman et al., A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy.

Impact Timeframes and Long-Term Implications

Impact is rarely linear and hardly ever proceeds as originally planned. What is more, the timespan between a think tank's influencing activities and the implementation of certain policies is often long.[182] Defining and monitoring indicators for activities with long timeframes is particularly challenging and can require additional (often scarce) human and financial resources.[183] Together with the attribution problem – which makes it increasingly difficult to track how an idea may or may not have moved through the policy process over time – this creates even more uncertainty. In addition, whereas it may be less challenging to measure influencing activities and their impact in the short term, it is decidedly more difficult to measure their longer-term implications, which are not always positive and may include unintended consequences or externalities.

Unique Operating Environments and Good Practice

When assessing influencing strategies, it is important to take into account a think tank's operating environment.[184] Such contexts vary considerably and depend on political, economic and social realities. Relevant characteristics include institutional stability, the type of party system, bureaucratic and civil service characteristics, as well as the think tank's own internal factors.[185] Unique operating contexts may render good-practice advise moot: what might be considered best practice when it comes to measuring impact in a Western European or US-American context may not be relevant for a think tank operating in sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America. For example, in some contexts, meeting directly with a government official to inform their policymaking activities is one of the clearest indicators of impact.[186] In other contexts, think tank representatives purposefully avoid meeting with government officials because being seen with them may jeopardize their reputation as an independent researcher.[187] In addition, as mentioned above, some governments' lack of transparency regarding their policymaking processes makes it difficult, if not impossible, to monitor these processes and thus meaningfully measure impact.

Inadequate Indicator Selection

The indicators used to measure effectiveness and impact are often inadequate or even misguided. With the exception of direct feedback from a target audience confirming that a particular idea or piece of work influenced their decision-making process, most of

182 Interview.

183 Interview.

184 C. H. Oh, "Explaining the Impact of Policy Information on Policy-Making," in Knowledge and Policy 10, no. 3 (1997).

185 Alcázar et al., Learning to monitor think tanks impact.

186 Interviews.

187 Interview.

the indicators think tanks use – primarily those focused on inputs and outputs – at best serve as proxies for determining impact (see Figure 10 above). Such proxy indicators can be valuable in helping to determine a think tank's effectiveness to some degree, but they rarely yield definitive insights on outcomes or impact.

Achieving impact is rarely a matter of the quantity of people exposed to an idea or a piece of work, but rather of the quality of the actors reached.

Among the think tanks represented among the interviews we conducted for this study, the most commonly cited approach to measuring effectiveness and impact was tracking website and social media metrics – for example, the number of unique website visits, of publication downloads, and of social media followers and engagements. While such reach indicators can provide some insight into how widely or deeply a particular output has permeated the discourse, they cannot provide definitive insights regarding a think tank's outcomes or impact. Ultimately, and perhaps with the exception of advocacy-related think tank activities, achieving impact is rarely a matter of the *quantity* of people exposed to an idea or a piece of work, but rather of the *quality* of the actors reached – namely, the relevant target audience. For example, one think tank representative pointed out that their team had conducted a two-year project and produced a number of policy recommendations which, according to the quantitative indicators, were not widely read upon publication. Nevertheless, it turned out that the right people read the report: following the 2020 presidential election in the United States, the incoming Biden administration adopted these recommendations as a part of its governing platform.[188]

In addition, some indicators might be useful for one type of measurement but detrimental to another. Think tank work encompasses a host of different activities (e.g., research, consulting or advocacy) and disciplines (e.g., political science, international relations, law, or economics), as well as different outputs (e.g., opinion pieces, policy briefs, books, or in-person briefings). Measuring the reach indicators of an economist's work, for example, would likely yield less insight on impact than tracking reputational indicators, such as the number of citations in academic journals. As another example, tracking activities indicators – such as the number of publications or workshops – can be useful in measuring effectiveness and perhaps getting some insight into how well a think tank is shaping the debate on a particular issue, but such indicators are less relevant when it comes to determining whether or how a think tank's outputs are reaching the right audiences and having the intended results or impact.

Moreover, a number of think tank activities are intangible. For example, a few of the think tank representatives we interviewed stressed the importance of network building and strong personal or organizational connections, yet the value of such activities is very difficult or even impossible to measure using either quantitative or qualitative indicators.[189] Relatedly, measuring progress on particular goals, such as improving societal equity or reducing corruption, or tracking progress on longer-term objectives – such as those in, say, education – is also difficult and requires a lot of resources.[190] As a result, think tanks either do not measure progress in the more intangible areas of their work or, when they do, they are compelled to use imperfect indicators that provide little if any direct insight into the effectiveness and especially the outcomes and impact of their activities.

188 Interview.

189 Interviews.

190 Interviews.

A Framework for Achieving and Measuring Effectiveness and Impact

The steps required to achieve effectiveness and impact, and to overcome the challenges discussed in the previous section, are different for each think tank. There are a number of factors at play in this, including the type of think tank, its operational and funding models, its theory of change, its other objectives, as well as its operating environment. There is no one-size-fits-all indicator framework or measurement approach for think tanks and each organization needs to take a unique approach to designing the appropriate indicators to track its impact and effectiveness.

Moreover, think tanks are more than simply a singular organizational entity; they are also a collection of different people, projects, activities, and objectives. For this reason, it is helpful to break the organization that is a think tank down into different levels and to use this breakdown to guide considerations while proceeding through each of the steps outlined below. We suggest conceptualizing a think tank as an entity with four distinct levels:

- The **organizational level** provides the institutional direction and mission and also lays the foundation for achieving and measuring impact, for example by: developing strategies; creating and reassessing the theory or theories of change; fostering a healthy, constructive and productive organizational culture; and ensuring resource availability.

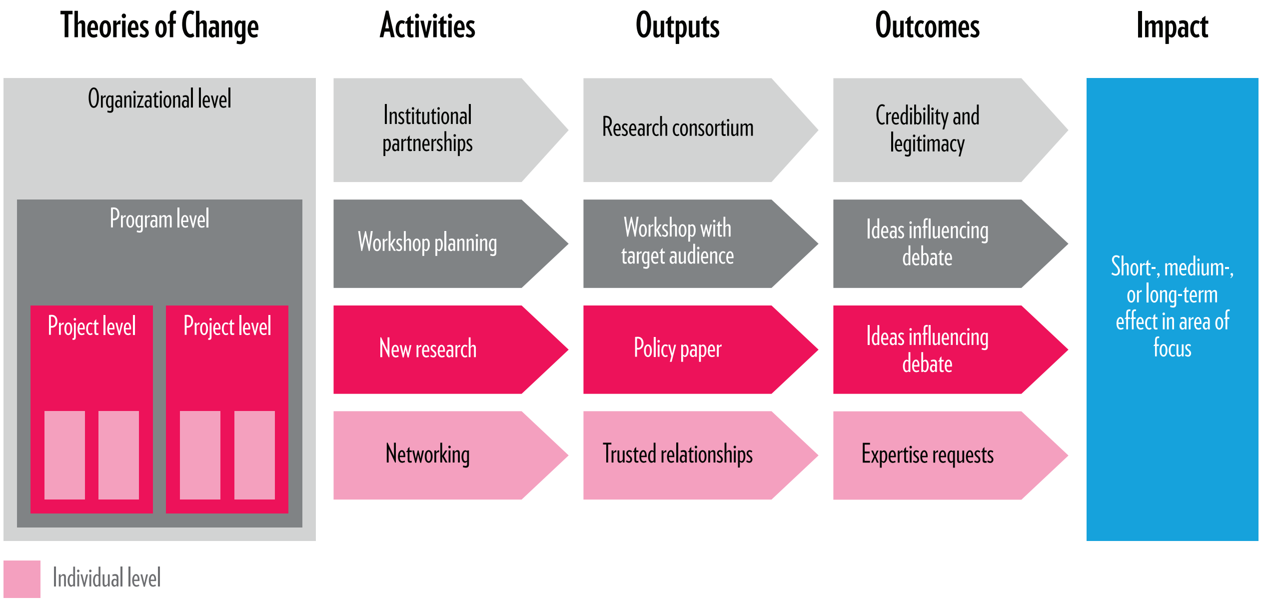
- The **program level** (which many but not all think tanks have) offers some autonomy in defining a think tank's objectives. This level may serve as a kind of umbrella for multiple projects with the same overarching goal or theory of change, such as making the world more peaceful.

- The **project level** is the primary level at which think tank activities take place. Each project has its own objectives, target audiences and different outputs aligned with these objectives, such as studies, policy briefings, podcasts, testimonies, infographics, and books.

- The **individual level** is made up of all the members of a think tank's staff. These individuals position themselves in various ways, build their own networks, implement their own outreach strategies, and at times define their own personal theories of change.

Taking these different levels into account, Figure 12 illustrates a potential organizational impact strategy. It clearly shows that there is room for a number of different or corresponding theories of change at various organizational levels, as well as for different activities, outputs and outcomes that contribute to achieving the main goal of influencing political outcomes.

Figure 12: An Organizational Impact Strategy



This section aims to collate the empirical information presented above, particularly the success factors and good practices, into a practical guide for think tanks. This guide includes an indicator framework to illustrate potential measurement approaches as well as a step-by-step guide with tips on how to implement this framework. This guide is also designed to be broadly relevant for think tanks operating in different regions and with different characteristics. Where certain suggestions are more or less relevant for particular think tanks – for example, those in certain regions or those with particular operating models – we have indicated this accordingly.

Given that each think tank has its own unique set of characteristics – in terms of size, theories of change, operating environment, and funding model, for example – it is not possible to present a one-size-fits-all approach. Figure 13 below takes the different theories of change used by the think tanks we interviewed for this study (as presented in Chapter 2) as a starting point and uses them to construct a framework that think tanks – as well as funders and other evaluators – can use to consider how to achieve, measure and evaluate their effectiveness and impact.

This framework is not meant as a prescriptive approach. Rather, it hopefully serves as a guide for think tanks to begin to consider or to adapt their thinking about approaches to measuring their effectiveness and impact. Furthermore, this framework is not exhaustive: a number of other indicators (see Annex II for potentially relevant examples) could be used to measure progress toward achieving these theories of change.

Figure 13: A Framework for Achieving, Measuring and Evaluating Impact

Theory of Change	Examples from Think Tanks	Indicator Examples	Measurement Level	How to Measure
Evidence-based research influences policy.	Rigorous, independent, innovative, and policy-relevant research can improve governance and public policies. Collecting data and showcasing rigorously conducted and accessibly presented research can influence policy conversations.	**Activities Indicators**		
		Idea directly adopted by the target audience (e.g., the policy community)	Outcome	Follow up with policymakers to inquire about impact
		Induction of policy influence (no direct evidence of impact, but attribution is reasonable)	Outcome	Conduct discourse analysis to track how relevant ideas and debate language change over time
		Reputational Indicators		
		Access to (key) decision-makers and other policy elites	Output	Document number of meetings
		Number of requests from institutions seeking expert advice	Input	Document number of requests
		Reach Indicators		
		Number of citations in academic research publications, news media, government proceedings, etc.	Output	Use a tool such as Google Scholar to set up notifications of new search results linked to outputs
	Collecting new or rethinking existing evidence can inform all aspects of a think tank's operations, including research activities, organizational culture, and distribution strategies.	**Organizational Indicators**		
		Improvements in internal think tank processes, such as hiring processes or quality of strategic discussions on impact	Input	Document number and types of job applicants Create and critically examine strategic meeting protocols on a regular basis to observe change over time
Influencing the discourse (agenda setting) is key.	Providing the right people with research in the appropriate formats can increase attention to a particular issue and lead to policy influence.	**Reputational Indicators**		
		Access to key decision-makers	Output	Document number of meetings and/or requests from decision-makers for input
		Strength of partnerships and network	Input	Document number and quality of project partners, researcher partnerships, (non-resident) fellows, board members, etc.
		Access to (influential) media outlets	Output	Document number of publications or other outputs placed in media outlets Document number of media requests for outputs or interviews

		Reach Indicators		
		Quality/relevance/number of social media followers	Output	Track social media metrics over time
		Number of publication downloads	Output	Use website analytics software, such as Google Analytics
		Activities Indicators		
		Success in shaping debates around a particular issue	Impact	Conduct discourse analysis to track how relevant ideas and debate language change over time
		Number of (peer-reviewed) publications produced	Output	Track number of publications released by listing them on organization's website, for example
	Consultations with policy entrepreneurs and other influential people who are open to change and new ideas can positively drive policy agendas.	**Reputational Indicators**		
		Access to (key) decision-makers and other policy elites	Output	Document number of meetings and/or requests from decision-makers for input
		Activities Indicators		
		Idea directly adopted by the target audience (e.g., the policy community)	Outcome	Follow up with policymakers to inquire about impact
	Preparing high-quality, credible, forward-looking research can enable faster decision-making on key policy challenges when the policy environment is ready for change.	**Activities Indicators**		
		Language or ideas from outputs used in new legislation, budgets, political platforms, speeches, etc.	Outcome	Follow up with policymakers to inquire about impact Use text analysis software to compare output language with government documents or other relevant texts
Think tanks are a platform for open debate.	Think tanks can promote a better understanding of the need for evidence to drive better decision-making.	**Activities Indicators**		
		Understanding of issues deepens among relevant target groups, such as decision-makers or other policy influencers	Outcome	Conduct surveys or polls
		Reputational Indicators		
		Access to (key) decision-makers and other policy elites	Output	Document number of meetings and/or requests from decision-makers for input
		Activities Indicators		
		Number of (policy) workshops held	Output	Document number of workshops organized

	Strategically convening stakeholders, offering trainings and technical support, and providing open space for exchange can lead to more relevant and better-tailored policy options.	Understanding of issues deepens among relevant target groups, such as decision-makers or other policy influencers	Outcome	Conduct surveys or polls
	Networks and partnerships between think tanks, the broader research community, (inter) governmental organizations, citizen interest groups, and other stakeholders can enhance an organization's ability to drive change.	**Reputational Indicators**		
		Strength of partnerships and network, including the reputation and quality of organizations that (want to) work with a particular think tank	Input	Document number and quality of project partners, researcher partnerships, (non-resident) fellows, board members, etc.
		Number of applications to participate in the think tank's programs, such as fellowship programs	Input	Track number of applicants to organizational programs
		Number of times the think tank is directly approached to collaborate or join a research consortium, for example	Input	Track number of partnership requests
	Helping to inform citizens, civil society organizations, and other interest groups on the importance of key issues can act as a strong lever for influencing policy.	**Activities Indicators**		
		Induction of policy influence (no direct evidence of impact, but attribution is reasonable)	Outcome	Conduct discourse analysis to track how relevant ideas and debate language change over time Conduct surveys or polls
		Marked impact on the trajectory of a particular global, regional, national, or local issue related to the think tank's mission and activities over time	Impact	Conduct discourse analysis to track how relevant ideas and debate language change over time
		Reach Indicators		
		Number of publications adopted in university and other higher education courses	Output	Conduct a targeted search of curricula on university websites
Individuals can drive change.	Think tanks can build individuals' capacities to drive policy changes – both through their own work and in other organizations later in such individuals' careers.	**Organizational Indicators**		
		Staff members' skill levels	Input	Document feedback discussions and improvement progress
		Reputational Indicators		
		Number of former staff members in government roles ("revolving door")	Output	Contact and/or track career paths of former staff members

In addition to this indicator framework, below we present seven steps for setting up an organizational approach to achieving, measuring and evaluating impact. It includes the most useful tips we came across in our research for this study. These tips are not exhaustive, but they illustrate a number of good practices and other issues to consider.

Step 1: Build the conditions for an effective, impactful and sustainable organization.

In order for individuals, projects and programs to be effective and impactful, the organization itself should either fulfil or constantly work toward fulfilling a number of conditions. It should:

- Ensure a sustainable funding model, both with respect to keeping the think tank in businesses and providing the necessary financial and human resources to implement the effectiveness and impact measurement process.
- Hire high-quality staff, continuously build new skills through, for instance, trainings and good feedback processes, and build relationships with other experts and organizations.
- Understand the political environment and its key actors as well as their positions within it and use this knowledge to help define strategic niches – for example, thematic focus areas that fill gaps in the research field or other activities as well as research or dialogue methods and communications strategies.
- Set high expectations in terms of quality and put in place processes to ensure that all activities and products meet these expectations.
- Ensure that organizational leadership is effective and that management actively promotes and communicates impact orientation and cultivates a culture of open, honest debate around new ideas and perspectives.
- Build constructive relationships with funders and jointly develop realistically achievable effectiveness and impact measurement strategies as well as meaningful indicators.
- Hold regular strategic discussions to reflect on the organization's goals in achieving impact. At the same time, ensure that the necessary leadership, will and processes are in place to follow up on these discussions with concrete action.

Step 2: Define theories of change to achieve impact and set concrete objectives.

Theories of change are an excellent tool for framing a think tank's key objectives as well as how to achieve them. Theories of change tailored to specific operating environments

Theories of change are an excellent tool for framing a think tank's key objectives as well as how to achieve them.

and areas of work help to articulate goals and channel the required resources in an impact-oriented way. To bring these theories to life, think tanks should look at achieving impact both from an organizational perspective – namely, considering which enabling factors need to be in place for an organization to achieve impact – and in terms of the activities they want to utilize to push their ideas. Think tanks could consider the following suggestions:

- Define at least one theory of change at the organizational level to provide an overarching framework for the think tank's work. This theory of change can be one or more of those discussed in Chapter 2, or another theory entirely.
- Define theories of change at the individual, project and program levels (provided the latter exists and as illustrated in Figure 11 above). These theories should align with or complement the organizational theory of change.
- Use the theory of change as a tool to guide various aspects of the think tank's work (see Figure 7 on page 24 for more detailed information on the theory of change logic).
- Consider using non-linear theory of change models to provide a more detailed means of structuring a think tank's work and to help place it in a broader systems context.

Step 3: Design the right activities to achieve objectives.

To implement the change envisioned in their theories of change, think tanks need to undertake specific activities at different organizational levels. Such activities can vary greatly and some may be more relevant than others, depending (for example) on whether the organization focuses primarily on research, consulting or advocacy, as well as on the region or environment in which it operates. Characteristic think tank activities include conducting evidence-based research and producing corresponding outputs, building policy expert networks, conducting advocacy campaigns to influence public opinion, creating debate spaces in which to discuss policy options, convening people (e.g., at conferences), writing for or appearing on popular media channels, or offering trainings. To design the right activities for their objectives, think tanks should:

- Identify research or policy gaps and other policy-influencing windows of opportunity and design activities around these. A classic example of this would be writing policy prescriptions for an incoming government following an election and subsequently conducting outreach activities, such as setting up bilateral meetings or writing newspaper opinion pieces targeted toward specific government actors to influence their policy platforms.
- Clearly define key objectives and target audiences for their activities.

- Reach out to stakeholders such as target audiences, institutional partners, personal contacts, and funders to ensure the feasibility and (policy) relevance of activities, and to readjust, address gaps or take advantage of particular opportunities.

Step 4: Define realistic and achievable indicators and measurement processes.

Define indicators for tracking different types of inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact at all organizational levels.

Think tanks that wish to measure their effectiveness and impact should define indicators for tracking different types of inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact at all organizational levels. A variety of indicators are available (many of which can be found in Annex II), and think tanks should:

- Take an informed and realistic approach to selecting the appropriate quantitative or qualitative organizational, activities, reputational and reach indicators to track different activities' effectiveness, outcomes and impact.

- Utilize and track many types of indicators during different phases of an activity – for example, by tracking inputs (e.g., the number of hours spent researching an issue), outputs (e.g., the number of publications), outcomes (e.g., observable changes in a policymaker's language or voting behavior), or impact (the short-, medium- or long-term effects of activities). Figures 11 and 12 above can be helpful in this respect.

- Use only those indicators that the organization has the capacity to track. For example, using polling information to gauge impact requires that an organization has staff members with the right skills or the necessary resources to follow this approach in the medium to long term.

- Define indicators at the beginning of a new activity, because monitoring indicators over the course of an activity's implementation is more efficient in terms of resources and also much more effective than trying to define and monitor indicators retroactively.

- Be realistic about what a particular indicator can actually track. It is key to understand and accept that some indicators, such as social media engagements, can only assess effectiveness and rarely if ever provide insights into outcomes or impact. Relatedly, given the attribution problem and other challenges involved in measuring impact, think tanks must accept the fact that it may not be possible to ascertain a particular activity's or output's impact at all.

Step 5: Monitor the indicators.

Once indicators are defined at the various organizational levels, think tanks should monitor and collect data on these indicators. Chapter 3 presents a number of approaches think tanks commonly use to achieve this, such as impact trackers or (self-)reporting. Regardless of the selected approach, think tanks should:

- Ensure that the monitoring system – including the monitoring timeframe and milestones as well as the selected approach – is in place before an activity begins. For organizational-level indicators, monitoring (and evaluation) timelines may be linked to the fiscal year, annual strategy meetings or five-year strategic plans, for example.

- Ensure that the time required to monitor indicators is built into the respective staff members' work time and that staff members have the necessary skills and experience to do this effectively. If the approach cannot be implemented effectively and consistently, it should be scaled down to make it more manageable.

- Where monitoring relies on gathering data from external stakeholders such as target audiences, funders or partners, think tanks should invest in developing deep, open and mutually beneficial relationships with these actors, thus making them much more likely to provide honest input on a regular basis.

Step 6: Evaluate your activities.

With indicators and monitoring approaches in place, think tanks can evaluate both how effective they are at achieving their objectives on different organizational levels and their desired impact.

With indicators and monitoring approaches in place, think tanks can evaluate both how effective they are at achieving their objectives on different organizational levels and their desired impact. Think tanks should consider the following factors:

- Learning should be the primary emphasis in evaluating think tank activities. If the evaluation focuses too heavily on measuring individual performance in achieving impact, then the think tank risks creating the wrong work incentives and generating backlash from staff.

- Evaluation approaches should rely on adaptive learning and ask critical questions about where the think tank invests its resources to achieve effectiveness. As such, evaluations can assess whether the organization is basing its theory of change and its activities on a solid understanding of the political, economic and social contexts, the respective policy area, and the relevant actors and their positions and/or limitations, among other factors. This approach enables think tanks to better identify which activities are likely to have the greatest impact and to evaluate whether these activities are being implemented. Such evaluation questions could include the following: Are the activities filling a research or policy gap? Are the activities relevant, that is, do they focus on an area of priority and/or a pertinent problem? Have critical actors been identified, and were the activities targeted to reach them?

- Evaluating policy influence and whether activities have been effective in achieving it is extremely difficult, and think tanks must remain conscious of the fact that some activities may be extremely important, very impactful and also impossible to measure in terms of effectiveness and impact, whereas other activities that are easy to measure may be meaningless in terms of impact.[191] It is important for both think tanks and funders to acknowledge this and not fall into the trap of thinking "whatever can be counted counts." Acitivites with long-term impact chains that are hard to trace and measure can still be worthwhile and important.

Step 7: (Re)assess and adjust.

Think tanks should reflect on successes and failures.

Following the evaluation process, think tanks should reflect on successes and failures – what worked and what did not – before beginning the process again. Think tanks should:

- Not only adapt their theories of change and adjust their activities, but also reflect on the evolving challenges think tanks face (see Chapter 2). These include trends such as new actors in the policy-influencing industry, changes in the information environment, and questions around credibility. Similarly, keeping abreast of new research on think tanks can also provide organizations with a sense of how the sector is evolving and offer insights on emerging good practices.

- Related to the above point, share information and network with other local and/or international think tanks to discuss new trends, anticipate changes in the operating environment, and potentially cooperate to help mitigate negative developments, such as shrinking civil society spaces.

- Take this opportunity to reflect once again on whether the necessary success factors are in place to achieve effectiveness and impact (see Chapter 2) – and then adjust accordingly. For example, an evolving communication environment may require staff with new or upgraded skillsets, e.g., with regards to digital communication.

- Reach out to key stakeholders – such as partners, funders and/or target audiences – to find out how they think the organization fits into the broader policy landscape as well as what they perceive as the key strengths and weaknesses of its approaches. This can also be helpful in reassessing priorities with an eye to improving effectiveness and impact.

- Apply these lessons to a forward-looking approach, considering how to react to or proactively shape new trends or policy requirements.

191 An interesting recent example of this was the MacArthur Foundation's decision to end its long-standing funding program on nuclear risk reduction and arms control in 2021. According to a recent article, "the Foundation declared that 'assessment of the articulated Nuclear Challenges strategy established that there is not a clear line of sight to the existing theory of change's intermediate and long-term outcomes'." See N. H. Barma and J. Goldgeier, "How not to bridge the gap in international relations," in International Affairs 98, no. 5 (2022).

Conclusions

An obsession with metrics has not saved other organizations I have worked for.[192]

This statement, taken from an interview we conducted for our research, illustrates a key overarching message of this study: attempting to **quantify** all or even certain aspects of a think tank's work is no substitute for the real success factors for achieving **impact**, such as producing high-quality outputs, attracting and developing talented staff, and building a credible and sustainable organization. The increasingly pervasive idea in the think tank sector that only those activities which can be quantitatively measured are worth doing is not only mistaken, it can potentially deter think tanks from doing truly impactful work. On the one hand, an increased focus on quantifying and qualifying a think tank's work is a positive development, as it is drawing much-needed attention to the fact that many, if not most think tanks struggle to do this effectively, if at all. This can and should lead to **more and more nuanced discussions** on how different types of think tanks – in different regions and operating environments, with different theories of change, undertaking different activities – can better achieve and measure their impact. On the other hand, think tanks are increasingly subjected or increasingly subject themselves to impact and effectiveness measurement schemes that are often poorly designed, overly burdensome and ultimately ineffectual.

It is clear that most, if not all think tanks find it important to consider how they can be more effective and impactful, as well as how to measure this. The reasons for this include the ambition to be more competitive in a **challenging influencing environment** or a desire to counter trends such as a backlash against expertise. However, there is no consensus on the best approach – and even think tanks with a strong discussion culture around impact **struggle to implement a more formal measurement system.** This should come as no surprise: there is no one-size-fits-all approach to measuring impact – and it is difficult to know where to start.

Measuring effectiveness and particularly impact is difficult for a number of reasons. **Causal chains and influence timelines** are often long, and it can be difficult or even impossible to isolate the influence of one actor among many who advocate for political change or policy solutions. None of the think tank representatives interviewed for this study claimed to have a fully considered, well-implemented system. In fact, very few have a system they find useful across the board, and most questioned the value of some of the things they are monitoring.

Many think tanks try to approximate impact with their available resources as much as they can, but they rarely arrive at indicators that really measure impact. Thus, attempts at **measuring effectiveness** and approximating impact in the think tank sector are underdeveloped compared to the more structured, professionalized and often well-resourced approaches to measuring and evaluating in other fields,

192 Interview.

such as development assistance. In addition, few of the available approaches and good practices from the field of **monitoring and evaluation** have been translated for and implemented in the think tank sector.

Insistence on measuring may serve to distract think tanks and their individual staff members from working in a forward-looking manner.

However, there are **promising approaches** to working in a more impact-oriented manner, measuring effectiveness and impact, and identifying success factors. Good examples include building a culture of open reflection on these issues, building and maintaining strong relationships with stakeholders and clients to regularly provide feedback on a think tank's activities and impact, taking time to analyze successes and failures, and crafting (and ideally sharing) impact stories. Still, organizations frequently lack the resources to spend on monitoring and evaluation as an area outside their "core work" and struggle to find funders willing to provide the necessary additional resources to do so in a more structured and professional manner.

Of course, think tanks do not operate in a vacuum and have to adjust to challenging **context conditions.** Despite the best efforts of think tanks and advocacy groups, it is often the case that decision-makers are simply not receptive to ideas and proposals for a variety of reasons. For those think tanks doing **cutting-edge** work that may lay the groundwork for long-term change in the decades to come, it is neither realistic nor possible to measure their effectiveness in implementing successful activities or their ultimate impact. As such, any insistence on measuring may serve to distract think tanks and their individual staff members from working in a forward-looking manner and proposing solutions to particularly complex policy problems.

For **funders** and other think tank evaluators, prioritizing learning-based participatory evaluation approaches – in addition to or even instead of logical frameworks – may be more effective. In fact, a number of interviewees highlighted the fact that logframes in particular often incentivize more easily trackable indicators (e.g., quantitative indicators) that provide little to no actual insight into a think tank's effectiveness or impact. Therefore, funders coming from the development perspective would be better off **asking questions** such as: How clear and convincing are an organization's theories of change, and how well do its activities align with these theories? Are its staff members able to identify the greatest opportunities to achieve impact? Do they understand how to strategically position themselves among other actors? Is there a continuous reflection process with substantial, high-quality outcomes? Are other success factors in place (see Chapter 2)? The answers to these questions about **success strategies** and a culture of **reflection** can be much more revealing than other measurement approaches, such as quantitative metrics.

The aim of this study was to provide an overview of how other organizations approach these challenges and to synthesize these findings into a guide. We hope it provides inspiration for fellow think tank employees. Simple **first steps toward more impact-oriented work** may include turning a mission statement into a graphic theory of change model (Chapter 2), which can also be non-linear and complex and/or involve a range of actors and activities. Once think tanks adopt their theory or theories of change to guide their work, they can begin to design the appropriate activities to achieve specific objectives related to that theory and to reflect regularly on the impact of these activities, either via a more formal monitoring process with well-considered indicators or through other semi-formal or ad-hoc approaches, such as retreats, feedback discussions, and ex-post project debriefings (see our proposed framework in Chapter 4). In addition, think tank leaders and managers should send a clear signal that **regularly**

Fostering an organizational culture that encourages reflection and learning on how to improve a think tank's impact is even more important.

considering effectiveness and impact at the institutional, program (if relevant), project and individual levels is important. They should also design the organizational processes and culture so that such approaches can be effectively implemented and make the necessary **resources** available.

With respect to **measurement approaches** specifically, a hybrid approach using both quantitative and qualitative indicators as well as a meaningful combination of organizational, activities, reputational and reach indicators will likely be the most effective one when it comes to painting a clearer picture of the organization's impact and effectiveness in a way that is tailored to its needs (see Chapter 4, Figure 13). Think tanks also need to be **realistic**, both with regard to the value an extensive measurement approach can offer and the extent to which even an ideal measurement system can be feasibly implemented in the light of resource and skills constraints, consistency issues, and dynamic political environments, among other challenges. While these indicators should be different for each think tank, and a well-designed system for tracking indicators and evaluating effectiveness and impact can offer a number of benefits, fostering an organizational culture that encourages reflection and learning on how to improve a think tank's impact is even more important.

When it comes to the question how a think tank can become more effective and impactful, a good self- or external evaluation – one that is based on realistic expectations and takes into account some of the findings from this study – can provide deep and fair insights that are helpful for both the think tank in question and other stakeholders, such as funders or particular target audiences.

References

Abelson, D. E., Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009.

Abelson, D. E., "Is Anybody Listening? Assessing the Influence of Think Tanks," in Think Tanks and Public Policies in Latin America, eds. A. Garcé and G. Una, Buenos Aires: Fundación Siena and CIPPEC, 2010.

Ahmad, Mahmood, "US Think Tanks and the Politics of Expertise: Role, Value and Impact," in The Political Quarterly 79, no. 4 (2008).

Alcázar, L., M. Balarín, W. Dushni, and E. Eboh, Learning to monitor think tanks' impact: Three experiences from Africa, Asia and Latin America, 2012, accessed June 21, 2022, https://tti.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/Learning%20to%20monitor%20think%20tanks%20impact%20final%20report%20july%202012_0.pdf.

Balfour, R., What are think tanks for? Policy research in the age of anti-expertise, London: LSE Ideas, 2017, accessed October 8, 2022, https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/LSE-IDEAS-What-are-think-tanks-for.pdf.

Barkhorn, I., N. Huttner, and J. Blau, "Assessing Advocacy," in Stanford Social Innovation Review (Spring 2013).

Barma, N. H. and J. Goldgeier, "How not to bridge the gap in international relations," in International Affairs 98, no. 5 (2022).

Baumgartner, F. R. and B. D. Jones, Agendas and Instability in American Politics, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Bellettini, O., "The Role of Public Policy Centers in Public Reforms Implemented in Latin America," in Think Tanks and Public Policies in Latin America, eds. A. Garcé and G. Una, Buenos Aires: Fundación Siena and CIPPEC, 2010.

Bressan, S., J. Friedrich, and M. Wagner, Governing Evaluations – Internationally Shared Challenges in Evaluating Preventive Measures Against Extremism, 2021, accessed October 16, 2022, https://www.gppi.net/2021/07/08/governing-evaluations-preval.

Clark, J. and D. Roodman, Measuring Think Tank Performance. An Index of Public Profile, Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2013.

Collins, H., R. Evans, D. Durant, and M. Weinel, Experts and the Will of the People: Society, Populism and Science, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Connell, J., A. Kubisch, L. Schorr, and C. Weiss (eds.), New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives. Concepts, Methods, and Contexts. Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families, Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 1995.

De Boer, J., What Are Think Tanks Good for?, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, 2015, accessed June 21, 2022, https://collections.unu.edu/view/UNU:3239.

Domhoff, G. W., The Power Elite and the State: How Policy is Made in America, New York: Routledge, 1990.

Ford, S., "Facebook Organic Reach Decline Called 'Catastrophic' for Nonprofits as News Feed Visibility Vanishes," America's Charities, 2015, accessed June 26, 2022, https://www.charities.org/news/facebook-organic-reach-decline-called-%E2%80%98catastrophic%E2%80%99-nonprofits-news-feed-visibility-vanishes.

FP Analytics, "Navigating Through Turbulence. Think tanks' Impact on Policy in a Rapidly Changing World," in Foreign Policy, 2021, accessed June 21, 2022, https://navigatingthroughturbulence.com/.

Friedman, D., "A Top DC Think Tank Took Millions from Foreign Governments. Now Lawmakers Want Answers," Mother Jones, October 3, 2022, accessed October 4, 2022, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2022/10/brookings-institution-elizabeth-warren-chuck-grassley-ted-cruz-qatar/?utm_source=mj-newsletters&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=daily-newsletter-10-03-2022.

Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, GIZ's Evaluation System: General Description, Bonn: GIZ, 2018.

Impact Consulting, Monitoring and Evaluation Framework: Are You Making an Impact?, accessed September 12, 2022, https://impact-consulting.net/en/monitoring-and-evaluation/#page-content.

Jenkins-Smith, H. C. and P. Sabatier, "The Advocacy Coalition Framework: An Assessment," in Theories of the Policy Process, ed. P. Sabatier, Boulder: Westview Press, 1999.

Jones, H., "A guide to monitoring and evaluating policy influence," ODI Background Note, 2011, accessed June 22, 2022, https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/6453.pdf.

Kingdon, J. W., Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies, New York: Longman, 1995.

Klopfer, F., D. Cantwell, M. Hadzic, and S. Stojanovic (eds.), Almanac on Security Sector Oversight in the Western Balkans, Belgrade: BCSP and DCAF, 2012.

Kruntz, F., "Communications and Impact Metrics for Think Tanks," Center for International Governance Innovation, 2013, accessed October 8, 2022, https://www.cigionline.org/articles/communications-and-impact-metrics-think-tanks/.

Lerner, J. Y., "Getting the message across: Evaluating think tank influence in Congress," in Public Choice 175 (2016).

Linden, P., "Powerhouses of Policy: A Guide to America's Think Tanks," in Town and Country (January 1987).

Lomofsky, D., "Monitoring, evaluation and learning for think tanks," On Think Tanks, 2016, accessed October 8, 2022, https://onthinktanks.org/articles/monitoring-evaluation-and-learning-for-think-tanks/.

McGann, J. G., "Academics to Ideologues: A Brief History of the Public Policy Research Industry," in PS: Political Science & Politics 25, no. 4 (December 1992).

McGann, J. G., Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2005, accessed June 22, 2022, https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7_dokument_dok_pdf_7042_1.pdf/720e9151-74aa-8525-7ff8-ffcacde0cc5c?version=1.0&t=1539665881457.

McGann, J. G., The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks, Public Policy, and Governance, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016.

Mendizabal, E., "On the definition of think tanks: Towards a more useful discussion," On Think Tanks, 2010, accessed October 8, 2022, https://onthinktanks.org/articles/on-the-definition-of-think-tanks-towards-a-more-useful-discussion/.

Mendizabal, E., "Facing complex contexts? Five strategies for impact," On Think Tanks, 2017, accessed June 22, 2022, https://onthinktanks.org/articles/facing-complex-contexts-five-strategies-for-impact/.

Niblett, R., "A History of Think-Tanks: 12 Things You Should Know," Chatham House, November 22, 2018, accessed May 30, 2022, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/11/history-think-tanks-12-things-you-should-know.

OECD, DAC Criteria for Evaluating Development Assistance, accessed October 13, 2022, https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/39119068.pdf.

OECD, Outline of Principles of Impact Evaluation, n. d., accessed October 8, 2022, https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/dcdndep/37671602.pdf.

OECD, Applying Evaluation Criteria Thoughtfully, 2021, accessed October 8, 2022, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/543e84ed-en/1/3/4/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/543e84ed-en&_csp_=535d2f2a848b7727d35502d7f36e4885&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book#section-d1e4269.

Oh, C. H., "Explaining the Impact of Policy Information on Policy-Making," in Knowledge and Policy 10, no. 3 (1997).

Ohomeng, F., "Civil Society and Policy Making in Developing Countries: Assessing the Impact of Think Tanks on Policy Outcomes in Ghana," in Journal of Asian and African Studies 50, no. 6 (2015).

Patton, M. Q., Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use, London: Guilford Press, 2010.

Rashid, A. K., "Efficacy of Think Tanks in Influencing Public Policies: The Case of Bangladesh," in Asian Journal of Political Science 21, no. 1 (2013).

Reinertsen, H., K. Bjørkdahl, and D. McNeill, "Accountability versus learning in aid evaluation: A practice-oriented exploration of persistent dilemmas," in Evaluation 28, no. 3 (2022).

Reisman, J., A. Gienapp, and S. Stachowiak, A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy, Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2007.

Rich, A. and K. Weaver, "Think Tanks in the Political System of the United States," in Think Tanks in Policy Making – Do They Matter?, eds. A. Rich, J. McGann, K. Weaver, M. Garnett, M. Thunert, R. Speth, R. Traub-Merz, and Y. Yang, Shanghai: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2011, accessed October 8, 2022, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/china/08564.pdf.

Shlozberg, R., How do you measure a think tank's impact?, Mowat Centre, 2015, accessed October 8, 2022, https://mowatcentre.munkschool.utoronto.ca/how-do-you-measure-a-think-tanks-impact/.

Smith, J. A., The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite, New York: The Free Press, 1991.

Start, D. and I. Hovland, Tools for Policy Impact: A Handbook for Researchers, Overseas Development Institute, 2004, accessed October 8, 2022, https://odi.org/en/publications/tools-for-policy-impact-a-handbook-for-researchers/.

Stoffel, S., J. Steets, and F. Westphal, The Logic of Protection Approaches: Four Models to Safeguard Civilians from Harm, Global Public Policy Institute, 2022, accessed October 7, 2022, https://gppi.net/2022/06/08/the-logic-of-protection-approaches.

Stone, D., "Think Tanks, Global Lesson-Drawing and Networking Social Policy Ideas," in Global Social Policy 1, no. 3 (2001).

Stone, D., Think Tank Traditions: Policy Research and the Politics of Ideas: Policy Analysis Across Nations, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.

Stone, C. N., Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946–1988, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989.

Thunert, M. W., "The Development and Significance of Think Tanks in Germany," in German Policy Studies 3, no. 2 (2006).

Tsui, J. and B. Lucas, Methodologies for measuring influence, GSDRC, 2013, accessed June 21, 2022, http://gsdrc.org/docs/open/hdq905.pdf.

Van Es, M., I. Guijt, and I. Vogel, Theory of Change Thinking in Practice: A Stepwise Approach, The Hague: Hivos, 2015, accessed November 21, 2022, https://hivos.org/assets/2021/02/Hivos-ToC-guidelines-2015.pdf.

Weidenbaum, M., "Measuring the Influence of Think Tanks," in Society 47, no. 2 (2010).

Weiss, C., "Nothing as Practical as Good Theory: Exploring Theory-Based Evaluation for Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families," in New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives, Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 1995.

Annex I: Think Tank Models Not Included in This Study

In addition to the models of think tanks covered in this study, there are other organizations that label themselves think tanks which we purposely excluded from our analysis for various reasons (see the section on limitations). We list these and provide some of their characteristics below in order to briefly illustrate their model and contrast them with the think tanks covered in our analysis.

Sector	Key Entities	Primary Purpose	Think Tank Model
Research and (higher) education	Universities, research institutes	Basic and applied, but not predominantly policy-oriented research and education	Certain segments of research institutes and universities are devoted to policy-oriented research and advice, and their number has increased in recent years.
Government	Public-sector entities and political bodies (parliaments) that belong to a political system	Governance	These are public-sector affiliates funded by a single government or multiple governments, and their activities follow or serve the agenda or interests of these governments. These include think tanks located within international organizations or think tanks in authoritarian contexts which are effectively an extension of the public sector and are not independent.
Politics	Political parties	Interest- and ideology-based organization of political representation	These are political party affiliates who perform think tank work and are not to be confused with independent think tanks focusing on ideologically driven political advocacy that are not directly affiliated with a single political party.
Private sector	Companies, corporations, etc.	Activities in a market economy not under direct state control	These are (parts of) private-sector companies including (public-sector) consultancies that perform similar work to think tanks and are not to be confused with think tanks that conduct for-profit activities or operate exclusively with private-sector funding.

Activism and advocacy	Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), other activist networks, and political movements	Agenda setting, problem identification, and ideologically-driven advocacy,or implementation of political programs and projects	These are activist networks or NGOs whose work goes beyond agenda setting, problem identification, ideologically driven advocacy, and the implementation of political programs and projects. They are not to be confused with think tanks that either focus on ideologically driven advocacy or are predominantly non-profit implementers of public sector projects.

Annex II: List of Indicators for Measuring Think Tank Impact

Below is a list of qualitative and quantitative indicators, organized according to the (not mutually exclusive) categories presented in Chapter 3 above, that various think tanks around the world use to measure their impact. This list is based on the indicators we encountered most frequently – either during interviews or in other practitioner documents or academic literature – and it is not exhaustive. Nevertheless, this list can serve as an initial tool, alongside the indicator framework presented in Chapter 4, to help think tanks consider how they could measure different types of impact.

As discussed in Chapter 4, not all indicators are relevant for all think tanks. Rather, each think tank will likely have its own unique set of indicators for measuring impact. In selecting such indicators, think tanks need to take into account a number of different criteria, including their theory (or theories) of change as well as the type of think tank they are (e.g., research-, consulting-, or advocacy-oriented), their operating and funding models, relevant levels of impact achievement (individual, project, program, and/or institutional), and their geographical and operating contexts.

It is also important to note that some think tanks apply a scale to individual indicators. For example, instead of simply measuring the number of appearances in various news media outlets (e.g., any newspaper or podcast), some think tanks also assign additional importance to appearances in more respected or widely consumed media outlets.

Organizational Indicators

Organizational indicators can be used to track the effectiveness of the organization.

Qualitative:

- Improvements in internal think tank processes, for example in hiring processes or in the quality of strategic discussions on impact;
- Skill level of staff members the organization has hired and/or attracts.

Quantitative:

- Number of donors and/or financial or in-kind contributions;
- Amount of money fundraised;
- Number of grants or tenders won;
- Financial sustainability of the organization;

- Number of job and/or internship applicants;
- Staff turnover and retention rates;
- Number of clean financial audits;
- Annual data on staff diversity and representation;
- Number and type of new cross-program or cross-office collaborative outputs per year.

Activities Indicators

Activities indicators can be used to track the outputs and outcomes of a think tank's activities.

Qualitative:

- Idea directly adopted by the target audience (e.g., the policy community);
- Induction of policy influence (no direct evidence of impact, but attribution is reasonable);
- Quality of meetings with policymakers or other target audiences;
- Language or ideas from think tank outputs used in new legislation, budgets, political platforms, or speeches, among other venues or documents;
- Debates around a particular issue successfully shaped, as measured, for example, by conducting discourse analysis to see whether and how other actors are responding to an idea;
- Marked impact on the trajectory of a particular global, regional, national, or local issue related to the think tank's mission and activities over time;[193]
- Understanding of issues deepens among the relevant target groups, such as decision-makers or other policy influencers.

Quantitative:

- Number of (peer-reviewed) publications produced;
- Number of policy papers, briefings or other specialized or applied outputs produced;
- Number of panels invited to and/or participated in;
- Number of news media appearances;
- Number of congressional or government testimonies;
- Number of hours or days spent conducting research;
- Number of research interviews conducted;
- Number of research surveys conducted and response rates;
- Number of languages studies are published in;
- Number of lectures given;
- Number of countries travelled to for research or other activities;

193 For example, the economic freedom indexes produced by the Fraser Institute and the Heritage Foundation are highly impactful: https://www.forbes.com/sites/alejandrochafuen/2013/04/24/15-ways-of-measuring-think-tank-policy-outcomes/ (accessed July 19, 2022).

- Number of (policy) workshops held;
- Number of event participants;
- Number of policymakers who attended events;
- Number of event participants according to various individual criteria, such as gender, geographic or ethnic origin, or age;
- Number of participants representing different organizations at events or trainings;
- Event evaluations, e.g., participant satisfaction rates;
- Results of public opinion polls on mission-relevant topics;
- For legal defense and advocacy organizations: judicial victories;
- For think tanks that focus on training:
  - Number of training interventions;
  - Number of policymakers or other target audience members trained;
  - Total number of person hours trained.

Reputational Indicators

Reputational indicators can be used to track an organization's relevance in the wider ecosystem of think tanks or other similar organizations.

Qualitative:

- Strength of partnerships and network, including the reputation and quality of organizations that (want to) undertake joint work or activities;
- How other actors view the organization;[194]
- Access to (key) decision-makers and other policy elites;
- Access to (influential) media outlets.

Quantitative:

- Number of people an organization puts into government ("revolving door");
- Number of awards and/or prizes won;
- Number of applications to participate in think tank programs, such as fellowship programs;
- Number of times directly approached to collaborate or join a research consortium, etc.;
- Number of requests from institutions seeking expert advice;
- Number of peer requests from particular countries or regions.

194 See, for example, the Global Go To Think Tank Index produced by the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania: https://repository.upenn.edu/think_tanks/ (accessed October 10, 2022).

Reach Indicators

Reach indicators can be used to track the breadth and depth of organizational outreach activities.

Qualitative:

- Quality/relevance of social media followers;
- Quality/relevance of subscribers to other outputs, such as newsletters.

Quantitative:

- Number of publication downloads, or distribution numbers of printed copies;
- Number of citations in academic research, news media, government proceedings, etc.;
- Number of publications adopted into university and college courses;
- Number of books or other outputs sold;
- Number of newsletters or informational e-mails sent;
- Number of organizational newsletter subscribers;
- Click rates for e-mailed outputs;
- Social media statistics, such as:
  - Number of posts;
  - Number of mentions;
  - Number of (new) followers;
  - Number of "likes" and/or retweets;
  - Number of engagements or views;
  - Number of trending posts (higher weight);
- Web traffic statistics, such as:
  - Number of (unique) visits;
  - Number of different visitor origin countries;
  - Amount of time spent on pages.

Annex III: Interview Partners

We would like to thank the following individuals for sharing their insights with us:

Yuichiro Anzai, Chief Executive Officer, Tokyo Foundation

Natalie Britton, Director of Operations, Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology, Brookings Institution

Thomas Carothers, Harvey V. Fineberg Chair for Democracy Studies and Senior Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Oliver Della Costa Stuenkel, Professor, School of International Relations, Fundação Getulio Vargas

Alexandra Dimsdale, Director of Communications, Foreign Policy Program, Brookings Institution

Bojan Elek, Deputy Director, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

Nizar Ghanem, Director of Research and Co-founder, Triangle

Paul Kariuki, Executive Director, Democracy Development Programme

Joojin Kim, Managing Director, Solutions for Our Climate

Abigail Kramer, Director of Development Operations, International Crisis Group

Ottilia Anna Maunganidze, Head of Special Projects, Office of the Executive Director, Institute for Security Studies

Andrew Moffatt, Chief of Staff, Foreign Policy Program, Brookings Institution

Gilles Olakounle Yabi, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Le Think Tank Citoyen de L'Afrique de L'Ouest

Frank Peter, Deputy Director, Agora Energiewende

Samir Saran, President, Observer Research Foundation (ORF)

Sonja Stojanović Gajić, Former Director, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

Estefanía Terán Valdez, Director, Grupo FARO

Nicol Walker, Director of Programmes, Caribbean Policy Research Institute

Vanessa Zárate Castillo, Vice President, Consejo Mexicano de Asuntós Internacionales

Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi)
Reinhardtstr. 7, 10117 Berlin, Germany
Phone +49 30 275 959 75-0
Fax +49 30 275 959 75-99
gppi@gppi.net

gppi.net