SCHOOL for THINKTANKERS

BACKGROUND NOTES

On Think Tanks

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INTRODUCTION[1]

APPROACH TO THE BACKGROUND NOTES

Welcome to the 2021 School for Thinktankers and to this package of background notes. Each note focuses on issues within each of the six main topics that the school will cover: defining think tanks and evidence-informed policy; governance and management; policy-relevant research; monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL); communications; and fundraising and financial management.

These documents do not follow a textbook approach. Rather, they aim to provide an overview of the key issues in each topic by offering essential definitions and highlighting fundamental questions. They seek to trigger reflection and discussions and help you embark on your learning journey. The presentations and live sessions during the 2021 School for Thinktankers will provide an independent and complementary approach to the concepts and issues presented in this document.

These notes have been developed for the 2021 School for Thinktankers from On Think Tanks materials and other references. A such, they are part of a larger ecosystem of knowledge and ideas that have been developed over the last few years by thinktankers, practitioners and researchers from around the world.

We encourage participants to:

- Take the time to read the notes and reflect how the concepts relate to your own work.
- Explore the articles on the On Think Tanks website.
- Note down any questions or thoughts, which might be useful for discussions at the school and/or for your personal learning journals.
- Post on Slack any questions, comments or resources you would like to share with others.

WHAT WILL YOU FIND IN THE IN THIS DOCUMENT?

Think tanks and evidence-informed policy: Here you will find an introduction to think tanks and an overview of the discussion about what defines them. Also featured is a discussion on policymaking – the strengths and weaknesses of existing policymaking processes and the opportunities that exist to improve them, as well as a description of the fundamentals of evidence-informed policymaking.

Strategic governance and management: This is an elusive issue in think tank practice. This note will provide an overview of the terms *governance* and *management*, explain the importance of boards and the different types that exist, and briefly discuss management of research teams. These discussions can be the cornerstone to long-term success for a think tank.

Policy-relevant research: An introductory discussion on how to reconcile methodological questions with a contextualised approach to research. This note presents a set of principles for policy-relevant research, and an approach to understanding policy problems.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL): This note focuses on MEL centred on policy influence, and reflects on whether the efforts needed to measure it are

1. All background materials have been developed by On Think Tanks (either by team members, associates, or consultants).

worthwhile. It argues that even small organisations can incorporate MEL into their working practices, and that this can help them achieve their goals.

Communications: The introduction to research communications note offers an alternative view from conventional research communications and suggests that greater attention should be paid to a think tank's key audiences. It presents publications as knowledge hubs and influencing vehicles, but also as a branding tool. A key point is that each publication should be specifically written and designed for its intended audience. Finally, it provides an overview of data visualisations as a way of conveying complex information to help identify the 'bigger picture' and to support research and communication efforts.

Fundraising and financial management: This note offers a comprehensive introduction to funding models, which allow think tanks to create a reliable revenue base that supports its core programmes and services.

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1. THINK TANKS AND EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICY

DEFINING THINK TANKS

What's in a name?[2]

Thinks tanks go by many names: think tank, research centre, idea factory, investigation centre, laboratory of ideas, policy research institute, to name just a few, and if we add other languages and their definitions, the list is even longer: centro de pensamiento, groupe de réflexion, gruppo di esperti and many more.

The concept covers many different types organisations, with different characteristics depending on their origins and their development pathways. Think tanks set up in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century are different from those set up in the latter part of the century. And they vary by country as well, according to the context in which they originated and now operate.

Their business models and organisational structures also differ greatly. Organisations that call themselves think tanks include for-profit consultancies, university-based research centres, international and national nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), public policy bodies, foundations, advocacy organisations, membership-based associations, grassroots organisations, one-off expert fora, and so on.

Despite this diversity, they all share the same objective of influencing policy and/or practice based on research. But we also need to acknowledge that the term was coined in the United States, with an Anglo-American model in mind. And this model permeates, and influences, think tanks in different locations in various ways. So, let's start by reflecting on the classical definition of think tanks.

Traditional definition

Think tanks are commonly defined as organisations that conduct research and use it to influence policies. Stone (2001) defines them as 'relatively autonomous organizations engaged in the research and analysis of contemporary issues independently of government, political parties, and pressure groups'. This definition is widely used by think tank scholars and it characterises them as a clearly defined type of organisation, separate from universities, governments, or any other group. But the reality is fuzzier, and think tanks that actually fit this description, like The Brookings Institution and Chatham House, are less common.

And there are inevitably other points of view. In the 2008 paper Think Tanks as an emergent field, Medvetz, argues that the definition given above is limited because it:

- Privileges the US and UK traditions, in which think tanks assert their independence more than in other regions.
- Forgets that the first organisations to be recognised as think tanks, in the Anglo-American context, were not independent, but the offspring of universities, political parties, interest groups, etc.
- Excludes many organisations that function as think tanks.
- Does not recognise the importance of the concept and label in itself. Using the label (or not) is a political choice made by organisations embedded in a specific political context.

2. This section draws from the following articles by Enrique Mendizabal: Setting up a think tank: step by step; On the business model and how this affects what think tanks do ; Different ways to define and describe think tanks; Think tanks: research findings and some common challenges.

Functions

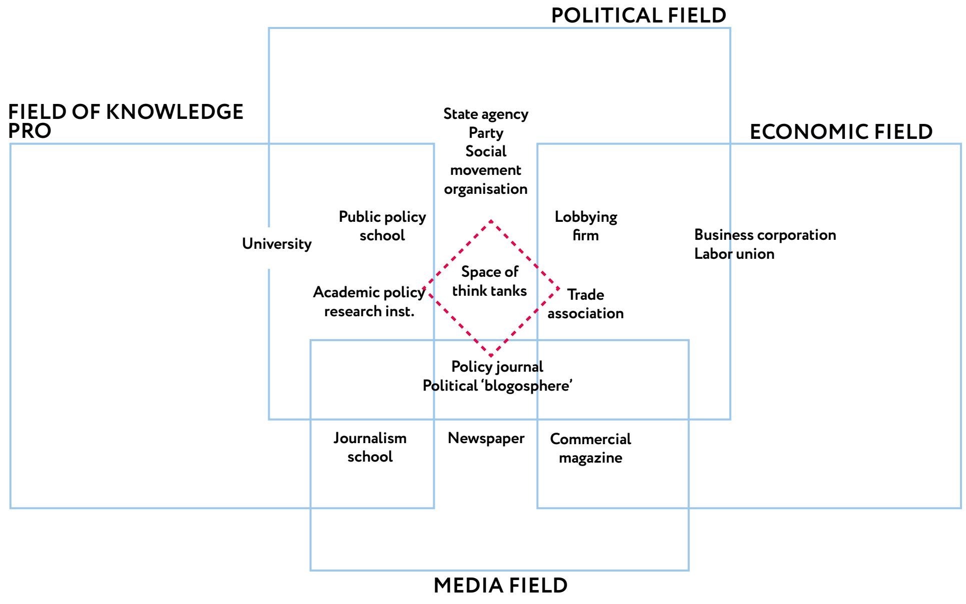
Rather than seeking to pin down a strict definition, it is perhaps better to explore the roles and functions that think tanks tend to play. Think tanks have many roles and functions, which vary based on their context, their mission and aims, organisational structures, business models, and even the resources they have access to. Mendizabal (2010, 2011) summarises their main functions:

- They are generators of ideas.
- They can provide legitimacy to policies, ideas, and practices (whether ex-ante or ex-post).
- They can create and maintain open spaces for debate and deliberation – even acting as a sounding board for policymakers and opinion leaders. In some contexts, they provide a safe house for intellectuals and their ideas.
- They can provide a financing channel for political parties and other policy interest groups.
- They attempt to influence the policy process.
- They are providers of cadres of experts and policymakers for political parties, governments, interest groups, and leaders.
- They play a role in monitoring and auditing political actors, public policy, or behaviour.
- They are also boundary workers that can move in an out of different spaces (government, academia, advocacy, etc.), and, in this way, foster exchange between sectors.

Think tanks may choose to deliver one or more of these functions at different times in their existence. At times of political polarisation, it might make more sense to create new spaces for plural engagement; during political campaigns, think tanks can help develop ideas for political parties; during national or global crises, think tanks may be called upon to reflect on the causes of the problem to help focus future efforts.

Medvetz (2008) hypothesised and sketched out the positions of think tanks in the social space to show that they are boundary organisations. They assert their independence from other actors while also maintaining links with them. This representation reinforces the observation that think tanks' functions are not static and are often exercised in relation to the functions adopted by others (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Thinks tanks in social space



Source: Medvetz (2008)

Towards a definition

In summary, a strict and constraining definition of think tanks is of little help. Instead, think tanks are better served by a broad definition that emphasises the many forms, ties, ideologies, functions, and roles that organisations can hold and play, and still be considered a think tank.

In this spirit, we can therefore say that think tanks are a diverse group of organisations that have as their (main) objective to inform – directly or indirectly – other political actors with the ultimate intention of bringing about policy change and achieving explicit policy outcomes. While they inform their choice of objectives, strategies and arguments with research-based evidence, they are not independent from the influence of values. They may perform different functions, from aiming to set or shift the public agenda and monitoring how specific policies are carried out, to building the capacity of other policy actors. Think tanks should also be understood based on the context in which they operate: a think tank in China need not be the same as a think tank in Bolivia – and we should not expect them to be.

Think tanks as a sector

A 2019 state of the sector report prepared by On Think Tanks, based on analysis of 2019 data of 2,802 active think tanks from the Open Think Tank Directory, provides an overview of the sector and uncovers underlying trends. The findings (representative at the sample level) help answer questions such as: What are the most common topics think tanks work on? What's the average age, or the median staff size, or the annual turnover of a think tank? How many female versus male think tank founders and leaders are there? How does this vary between regions and business models?

We encourage you to explore both the Open Think Tank Directory and the Think Tank State of the Sector Report, but here are some of the key findings:

- Think tanks exist across the world. They take many forms, have different structures and turnovers, focus on different topics, and so on – but they are everywhere. The average number of think tanks per country in the database is 19, but there is great variability between regions, and some regions have a higher concentration of think tanks in some countries and lower in others. The think tank sector is bigger (based on staff and turnover) in the USA and Canada, western and northern Europe, and eastern Asia.
- During the twentieth century there was a large increase in the number of think tanks across the world. Think tanks in the USA and Canada are the oldest on average (37 years) and reached their peak around the 1980s. Think tanks in western and central Asia, Africa and southern and eastern Europe are the youngest on average (22, 23 and 24 years respectively). The last decade has seen a slow decline in the number of think tanks being founded across all regions
- Most think tanks focus on up to three topics, the most prominent being 'social policy', 'trade/economic/finance', 'governance/transparency', and 'environment/natural resources/energy'. Regionally, some issues are more prominent than others. For instance, 'food/agriculture' is a high priority in Africa (44%) but not often the focus of think tanks in Europe.
- In terms of the gender of founders and leaders, across the world think tanks have mostly been founded by men (58%) and are mostly led by men (76%). The percentage of male-founded think tanks has slowly decreased, giving way to some female-founded think tanks (but mostly to male- and female-cofounded think tanks). Latin America and the Caribbean and Africa have a higher-than-average percentage of think tanks with women founders, particularly in recent years. Western & northern Europe has the highest percentage of female leaders (26%), followed by Oceania (24%) and the USA and Canada (22%).

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POLICYMAKING[3]

What is 'public policy', and how is it made?

Public policy, directly and indirectly, explicitly and implicitly, impacts people and communities every day, shaping the world around us. Policy studies have a 'long history and a short past' (De Leon, 1994), meaning that while the study of government and governance has been a focus over the past millennia, the systematic examination of policies themselves as a discrete discipline dates back only a few decades. In fact, while the study of public policy and policy analysis itself has evolved, similarly too has the definition of *public policy*. For example, Dye in 1972 defined it as 'whatever governments choose to do or not to do', while in 2003, Anderson called it 'a relatively stable, purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern'.

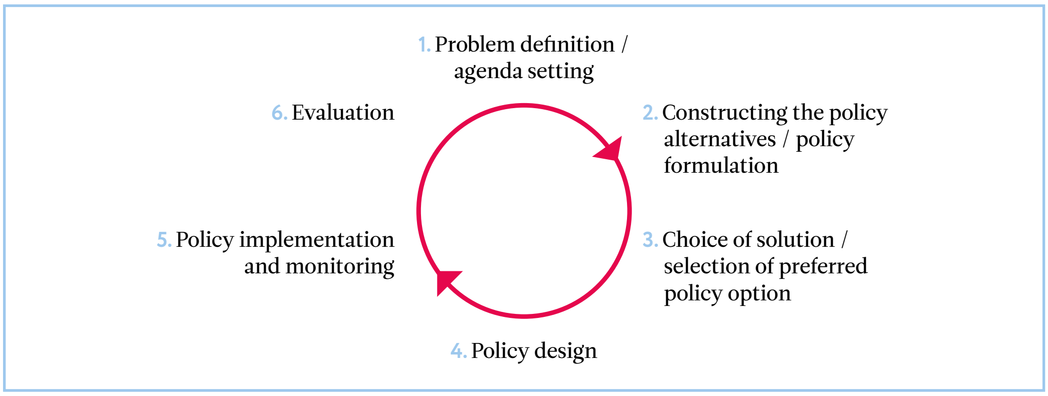
Building upon Anderson (2003), Young & Quinn (2002), in a handbook intended to support emerging policy advisers in the early 2000s, sought to consolidate the definition into key elements, summarised below:

- *Authoritative government action.* Implemented by a government body with legislative, political, and financial authority to do so.
- *More than an intention or promise.* Policy is an elaborated approach, comprised of what governments actually do, rather than what they intend to do (Anderson, 2003).
- *Reaction to real world needs or problems.* Reacts to the concrete needs or problems of a society or groups within a society. Such needs or problems can be articulated as policy demands by other actors (e.g. citizens, group representatives, or other legislators) (ibid).
- *Goal-oriented.* Seeks to achieve an objective or set of objectives
- *Carried out by a single actor or set of actors.* May be implemented by a single government representative or body, or by multiple actors

Models of the policymaking process

Schematic models of the policymaking process also emerged, to describe in general the ways in which policy is formed and develops, often assuming linearity and parsimony. One conventional model, the policy cycle, presents policymaking as a staged, sequential process. Figure 2 models a typical (ideal) policy cycle.

Figure 2. Policy cycle

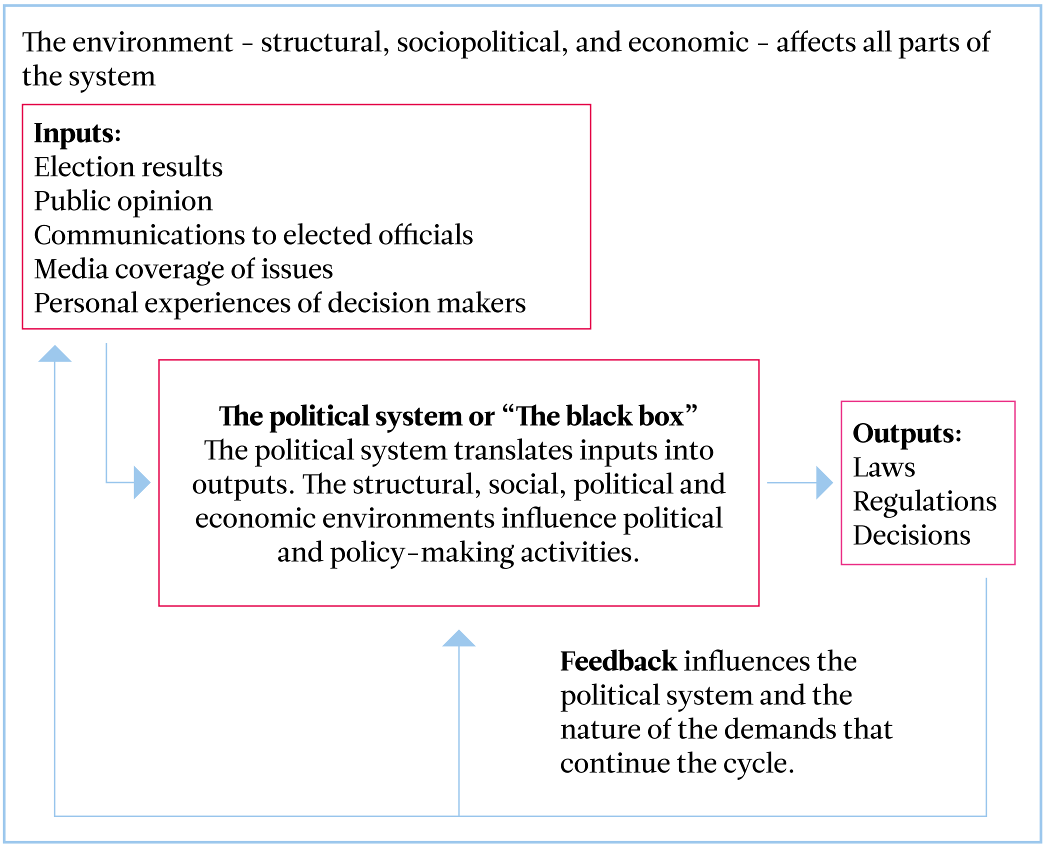


Adapted from Young, E. and Quinn, L. (2002) Writing Effective Public Policy Papers: A Guide for Policy Advisers in Central and Eastern Europe. Budapest: Open Society Institute.

3. This section was put together by Cristina Bacalso, On Think Tanks associate, and edited by Andrea Baertl.

Another common model, also seen in international relations, formulates the process as one where policymaking occurs in an opaque 'black box' that translates inputs (e.g. elections, public opinions, media coverage) into outputs (e.g. laws, regulations, decisions). This can be seen in figure 3.

Figure 3. Policymaking process as a black box



Adapted from Birkland, T.A. (2011) *An Introduction to the Policy Process: Theories, Concepts, and Models of Public Policy Making*, 4th ed. New York: Routledge.

Theory versus reality: Policymaking in the real world

While such models and frameworks may be useful for analysing public policy in the abstract, they are less helpful for understanding how public policy is made in practice and, in some cases, are completely divorced from reality. In 2011, the Institute for Government, a UK-based think-tank focusing on how to improve the effectiveness of government, undertook an empirical study, *Policy Making in the Real World: Evidence and Analysis*, to understand how policymaking works in practice in the United Kingdom.[4] Here are a few key insights from the report, that could potentially apply to all policymaking processes, regardless of context:

> *Policymaking does not take place in distinct stages.* In 2003, the Treasury set out guidance on policymaking that was built around a ROAMEF policy-cycle (ROAMEF standing for Rationale, Objectives, Appraisal, Monitoring, Evaluation, Feedback), similar to the conventional policy cycle presented above. However, the study discovered that not only do these 'stages' of policymaking overlap – they are often inseparable. For example, policy problems and solutions often emerge together. In these cases, ministers present a plan of action for a problem

4. The research relied on an extensive methodology including a literature review, interviews with 50 senior civil servants, 20 former ministers, an analysis of 60 policy evaluations, a survey of the Political Studies Association on the 'most successful policies of the past 30 years', and workshops to test the findings (Hallsworth, Parker, & Rutter, *Policy Making in the Real World: Evidence and Analysis*, 2011).

that has not yet been clearly understood, or the relationship of which to the problem is unclear. They also do not allow for modifications or challenges to the plan. Ideally, policy problems should be clearly understood, and options to respond to them tested properly, before selecting a course of action (Institute for Government, 2011, p. 5).

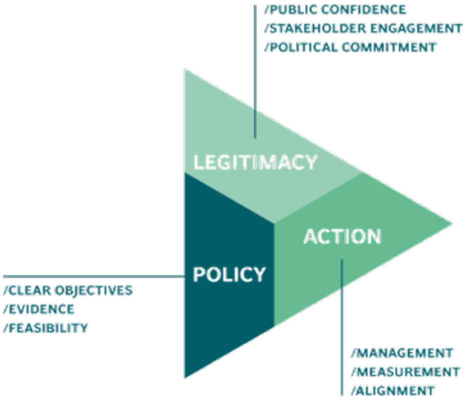
Policies need to be designed, not just conceived. Policy design is just one step in the policy cycle, and in reality it requires much fuller consideration. The report compares it to manufacturing: 'In business, there are quality control phases where new products are prototyped and stress-tested, before being trialled and finally going to market' (Ibid., p. 6). Similarly, policy proposals should be extensively and rigorously tested, with a design that allows some flexibility to adapt them to local or changing circumstances when they are implemented (Ibid.).

Policymaking is often determined by events. In contrast to the systems model, policymaking does not take place in a 'black box' or vacuum, where the structural, sociopolitical and economic environment is exogenous to policymaking, and where the government is in total control of the process. Instead, government plans are often side-tracked by events that cause sharp discontinuities or illogical actions to be taken, many of which are self-generated, such as a desire to make headlines or to be 'seen to be acting' (Ibid.).

The effects of policies are often indirect, diffuse, and take time to appear. In conventional policy guidance, policies are treated as discrete interventions to specific problems, from which effects can be reliably monitored and evaluated in the policy cycle. But the effects of public policies are complex, wide-ranging, and, at times, unintended, meaning that measurement and attribution can be difficult. Current models underestimate the non-linearity and difficulty of attributing cause-and-effect in the public sphere. Instead, they need to be sensitive to the impact of other, interlinked, policies, or begin to grapple with policymaking as a wider system of processes (Ibid.).

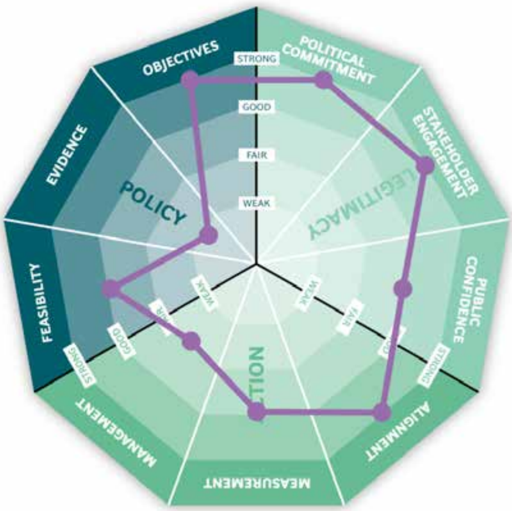
Existing approaches neglect politics or treat it as something to be managed. Most approaches focus only on the technocratic aspects of policymaking (e.g. how to use evidence, design policy, build an implementation plan) – and little on the political aspects (e.g. how to mobilise support, manage opposition, present a vision, set strategic objectives). These two poles largely comprise the work of (unelected or appointed) civil servants, on one hand, and (elected) ministers, on the other. Typically, both are treated as separate realms of working, with little understanding that they are intertwined. Ideally, good policy processes need to manage this tension and create good working relationships that recognise both roles and the contributions they can bring (Ibid., p. 12).

BOX 1. THINKING ABOUT POLICY AND IMPACT



The Centre for Public Impact (2019) also emphasises the relationship between the technocratic and the political, in their Public Impact Fundamentals framework. This identifies legitimacy (public confidence, stakeholder engagement, and political commitment); policy (clear objectives, evidence, feasibility); and action (management, measurement, alignment) as drivers of what they call 'public impact', or 'what governments achieve for their citizens' (ibid.).

The website offers a variety of tools and resources relating to their Public Impact Fundamentals framework, including a diagnostic tool that allows users to evaluate a particular policy across the nine drivers, each on a four-point scale from 'weak' to 'strong'. They also have a Public Impact Observatory, a database of more than 350 case studies of public policies from around the world that are assessed using the diagnostic tool, providing a snapshot overview of the policy challenge, the initiative, the public impact, and their evaluation for each of the nine drivers.



Adapted from The Centre for Public Impact (2019), *Decoding Government Effectiveness: The Centre for Public Impact's Public Impact Fundamentals framework*, PowerPoint presentation. Creative Commons Copyright.

What happens when policy goes wrong?

While it is useful to examine instances where policymaking is successful, there is much to be learned from the opposite case – when policymaking goes very wrong. The study of policy failures is not new (Bovens & Hart, 1995; Bovens & Hart, 1996; Dunleavy, 1995). In 2014, Anthony King and Sir Ivor Crewe released a book, *The Blunders of Our Governments*, that outlined what they considered to be among the most egregious of government failures – 'policy blunders'.

What is a blunder?

Crewe (2003) defines a policy blunder as 'a government initiative to achieve one or more stated objectives which [not only] fails totally to achieve those objectives, but in addition: Wastes very large amounts of public money; and/or causes widespread human distress; was eventually abandoned or reversed; and was foreseeable' (Crewe, 2013).

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Crewe distinguishes blunders from two other (lesser) types of policy failures: 'policy disappointments' and 'wrong judgement calls'. A policy disappointment is where the impact of a policy ends up being smaller, slower, weaker, or costlier than anticipated. A wrong judgement call is what can happen in conditions of extreme uncertainty and lack of evidence (which can often be the case in public policymaking), and despite choosing a line of action that makes sense at the time, it turns out to be the wrong one. Policy blunders, meanwhile, are 'sins of commission' rather than sins of omission (Ibid.).

Causes of policy blunders can be both structural and behavioural. Structural causes relate to poorly designed processes or structures, which produce or are more susceptible to mistakes. In the British political system, Crewe (2013) identified a 'deficit of deliberation', meaning a lack of consultation with a range of experts and stakeholders, including those most directly affected by the policy either as recipients or implementers. Rather than arriving at a decision after a careful weighing of pros and cons of policy options provided through consultation, British policymakers, argued Crewe, favour 'decisiveness rather than deliberation'. This leads them to overlook issues or problems that a consultation could have unearthed.

Behavioural causes relate to an inadequacy of skills and knowledge, or even the delinquent behaviour of government officials and policymakers. One such behavioural cause is what Crewe calls 'operational disconnect', where ministers have little or no operational experience or knowledge, leading them to give little thought to practical implementation when designing policies (Ibid.).

How to make policies better

While disappointment or wrong judgement calls are likely to be unavoidable in the messy world of policymaking, there are certain steps that can be taken to help reduce the risk of large-scale, foreseeable, policy mistakes or blunders. Taking lessons from *Policy Making in the Real World: Evidence and Analysis* (2011), the Institute for Government identified certain fundamentals of what a 'good' approach to policymaking looks like, and a checklist for how to operationalise it:

- *Goals:* Has the issue been adequately defined and properly framed? How will the policy achieve the high-level policy goals of the department – and the government (referencing their plans)?
- *Ideas:* Has the policy process been informed by evidence that is high quality and up to date? Have evaluations of previous policies been taken into account? Has there been an opportunity or licence for innovative thinking? Have policymakers sought out and analysed ideas and experience from others (including regional administrations and external actors)?
- *Design:* Have policymakers rigorously tested or assessed whether the policy design is realistic, involving implementers and/or end users? Have the policymakers addressed common implementation problems? Is the design resilient to adaptation by implementers?
- *External engagement:* Have those affected by the policy been engaged in the process? Have policymakers identified and responded reasonably to their views?
- *Appraisal:* Have the options been robustly assessed? Are they cost-effective over the appropriate time horizon? Are they resilient to changes in the external environment? Have the risks been identified and weighed fairly against potential benefits?
- *Roles and accountabilities:* Have policymakers judged the appropriate level of central government involvement? Is it clear who is responsible for what, who will hold them to account, and how?

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- *Feedback and evaluation:* Is there a realistic plan for obtaining timely feedback on how the policy is being realised in practice? Does the policy allow for effective evaluation, even if central government is not doing it? (Hallsworth & Rutter, 2011)

The opportunities to improve policymaking

Policies shape the world around us, and touch nearly all areas of our lives: from the cost of taxes, to the length of our roads and highways; to the quality of our air and water, and the countries with which we choose to trade (or with whom we go to war). As is their statutory responsibility, it falls on policymakers – government officials, civil servants, ministers – to take steps to make policy better. However, 'legitimacy' is a key driver of effective policies, which includes public confidence and stakeholder engagement (The Centre for Public Impact, 2019). In this way, stakeholders outside of government – including civil society, think tanks, media, the private sector, and citizens themselves, including young people – all have an interest in demanding better policy, for themselves, and for society-at-large.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICY[5]

What is evidence-informed policymaking?

Any discussion about think tanks is located within the space of evidence-informed policy. At first glance, questioning whether governments should craft policy based on evidence seems senseless. Why wouldn't we want programmes to be tested before we spend millions on them? How can we disagree with the idea of using the most recent scientific findings and innovations to inform policy interventions? Isn't this just the norm? Also, nowadays it is generally acknowledged that nearly all policy challenges have some scientific dimension to them and that every field of science produces usable knowledge.

But strange as it may seem to people outside government, the emphasis on applying scientific standards of proof to policymaking is a recent and still disputed phenomenon.

Genesis of the term

While the notion can be traced as far back as ancient Greece,[6] a general search for the concept of 'evidence-based policy' almost systematically leads one to references from the field of medicine or health. The concept of 'evidence-based medicine', and later 'evidence-based practice', emerged in the 1980s, and is defined as 'the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the best scientific knowledge available to decide how to care for their patients' (Sackett et al., 1996).

Over the years, growing recognition of the need to extend such principles to other spheres of decision-making has given rise to the notion of 'evidence-based policymaking'.

The prominence and spread of evidence-*based* discourse (which we will refer to in its most contemporary form of evidence-*informed* policy) rose in popularity in Britain in the late 1990s, and spread to multiple sectors across the developing world. Initially aided by the policies of the UK Department for International Development (DfID) (Du Toit, 2012), it was later adopted by other prominent public and private international development agencies.

5. This section was put together by Cristina Bacalso, On Think Tanks associate, and Andrea Baertl.
6. Aristotle put forward the notion that different kinds of knowledge should inform rulemaking. This would ideally involve a combination of scientific knowledge, pragmatic knowledge and value-led knowledge (Sutcliffe & Court, 2005).

BOX 2. WHAT IS EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING?

Evidence-based policymaking is a discourse or set of methods that informs the policy process, rather than aiming to directly affect the eventual goals of the policy. It advocates a more rational, rigorous and systematic approach. The pursuit of evidence-based policy is based on the premise that policy decisions should be better informed by available evidence and should include rational analysis. This is because policy based on systematic evidence is seen to produce better outcomes (Sutcliff & Court, 2005).

From evidence-*based* to evidence-*informed*

Informing policymaking with research-based evidence is important and commendable, but its underlying assumptions need to be considered (and dealt with). Cairney (2016) argued that the idea underestimates the complexity of policymaking and misconstrues the way that policy decisions are usually made. Du Toit (2012) critiqued the evidence-based policy model and argued that it erroneously understands policymaking as a process that should only concern itself with instrumental rationality (what works) and that policy decisions are based on impartial, objective and rational assessment of available evidence (the right kind, or best kind) and devoid of any values. It thus assumes that there is a right way and wrong way to do something. But social science, and science more broadly, is not a neutral field. There are values involved in what gets researched and how, as well as how findings are communicated and to whom. Evidence-informed policy is a political terrain (Du Toit, 2012).

Du Toit (2012) went on to argue that while research findings are important, 'we need to look at how policy narratives work with it; how it is used; and how it is alternately marginalised or seized on, ignored or imbued with significance'. This is a key role that think tanks can play: they both provide the evidence *and* develop a coherent and adequate analysis of social processes.

The growing literature on the topic generally agrees that when it comes to influencing policy, scientific evidence:

- Will never be more than one of the inputs to the policy process – alongside ethical, fiscal, political, and other considerations, and therefore it is not the only source of information that a policy analyst needs to consider.
- Does not necessarily need to be derived from experimental methods to be considered a valid input for policymaking.
- Always carries a certain degree of uncertainty, even in the best of all worlds, whether on the conclusions of a study or on how to interpret results and adapt them to a different context.

Moreover, the development and implementation of public policies require important knowledge of both the actors involved and the political and legal contexts, but also the expected impacts and the mechanism by which the intervention delivers its effects.

In short, the development of public policies is an area that, by nature, requires the mobilisation of a variety of knowledge types, and the purpose of promoting this approach is not to reduce the policy process to a scientific problem-solving exercise. Recognition of these realities has led to a language shift towards the use of 'evidence-informed' to replace 'evidence-based' when referring to policymaking.

Academic studies of the politics of evidence-based policymaking suggest that policymaking can never be 'evidence-based'; rather, policy can only be strongly evidence-informed if its advocates act effectively (Cairney, 2016).

BOX 3. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO ADVOCATE FOR EVIDENCE USE IN POLICYMAKING?

Despite the critiques, using evidence to inform for policymaking is beneficial, as the use of evidence in public policy is fundamental to reducing the risk of errors – errors that can have significant societal or financial consequences (IRPP-CAE, 2016).

> **Because science is designed to be disinterested, if a policy question involves [...] 'what will happen if one policy is implemented instead of another', science is generally a more dependable and defensible guide than informed hunches, analogies, or personal experience.**
> Prewitt et al., 2012

How is evidence assimilated into the policy process?

Uses of science in policy

Although the term 'evidence' is frequently encountered as claims about predicted or actual consequences – effects, impacts, outcomes or costs – of a specific action, that is only part of the story. Science can be used as evidence for early warning of a problem to be addressed, for target setting, for implementation assessment, and for evaluation (effectiveness, efficiency, unexpected outcomes).

Science has five tasks related to policy: (1) identify problems, (2) measure their magnitude and seriousness; (3) review alternative policy interventions; (4) assess the likely consequences of particular policy actions (intended and unintended) (5) evaluate what, in fact, results from policy. Evidence therefore has the potential to influence the policymaking process at each stage of the policy process – from agenda-setting to formulation to implementation. However different evidence and mechanisms may be required at each of the policy stages. In the end, whether it is data analytics, behavioural insights, horizon-scanning, or research from the 'hard' sciences, all these types of evidence are valid, as long as they are trustworthy and useful for governments (Breckon, 2016).

However, as explained in the previous section, the policymaking process is anything but linear, and across all of these tasks there is a wide range of political, stakeholder and value considerations that are outside the scope of science, and that must be incorporated by the (multiple) actors involved in the policy advisory process.[7]

In almost all decision-making situations, the use of science takes place in 'systems characterized by high levels of interdependency and interconnectedness among participants. No single decision maker has the independent power to translate and apply research knowledge. Rather, multiple decision makers are embedded in systemic relations in which use not only depends on the available information, but also involves coalition building, rhetoric and persuasion, accommodation of conflicting values, and others' expectations. Evidence use is less a matter of straightforward application of scientific findings to discrete decisions and more a matter of framing issues or influencing debate. (NRC, 2012)

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7. For more on this read Sir Gluckman, P. (2019). *Principles of science advice & understanding risk within that context*. International Network for Government Science Advice, Vilnius workshop, June 2019.

Barriers to the use of scientific evidence to inform policy
Results from a review of empirical data from seven different countries[8] (Morestin, 2017) suggest that the vast majority of individual public servants and policy advisors only rarely consult scientific literature and research data, and the main reason cited (for not doing so) is that they 'do not feel they have the skills required either to assess quality/credibility and methodological aspects, to interpret contradictory data, nor to translate scientific knowledge for policy use'. According to the same study, the top sources of knowledge used by advisors are 'other people' (mostly colleagues), newsletters, government documents, raw data and the media.

Beyond the issues related to internal capacity and institutional arrangements, there is also a range of practical and systemic constraints that can prevent or limit the use of scientific evidence in policymaking. Systemic constraints are generally associated with the idea of a metaphorical dichotomy of **the 'two communities': the 'scientific community' (or academia) and the 'policy community'.**

One the one hand, some of the systemic constraints arise from, or are inherent to, the academic environment, such as the lack of interest, time, or capacity of researchers to ensure the smooth dissemination of their work to political institutions and other potential users. Inadequate research objectives and interests are often cited in relation to the needs of the policy.

However, most of the systemic constraints identified by the main literature on the issue are generally derived from, or inherent to, the policy environment. In general, the constraints associated with the policy or political environment can be summarised as follows:

- Gaps or inadequacies in terms of resources and capacities (individual and organisational) to support or stimulate evidence-informed policymaking practice.
- Political economy factors that prevent decision-makers from supporting their decisions on scientific knowledge – crises, culture, commitments, etc.
- Timeliness (or response time): either decision-makers do not seize the appropriate windows of opportunity to assimilate scientific knowledge into the decision-making process, or the data is not available in time for decision-making.
- Lack of awareness or low value given by decision-makers, or within the organisation, to scientific knowledge as an input to decision-making (no 'demand' from the top = no 'incentives' for the advisors).
- Structural issues, such as a lack of clear planning systems, procedures or practice guidelines, as well as no reinforcement mechanisms.

Finally, although most acknowledge that efforts are made on both sides to mitigate their respective flaws or constraints, it is above all the **lack of coordination between the efforts and activities of the two communities** – which often results from a lack of mutual awareness – that is considered to be the most important obstacle to the use of scientific knowledge in policymaking

Therefore, we can conclude that those who wish to promote evidence-informed policymaking can expect to be more successful when investing in actions and advocacy efforts **in favour of institutional arrangements aimed at systemising this coordination and the use of science advice in policy design.**

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SCHOOL for THINKTANKERS

2.STRATEGIC GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

DEFINITIONS

The governance and management of think tanks and policy research organisations is a complex matter. There are many aspects to consider; for example the context in which a think tank operates and the business models that it operates under. And, unlike disciplines of policy research and communications, where universal best practices may exist, there isn't a single model for effective governance. Nonetheless, there certainly are some lessons that organisations in all contexts can benefit from.[9]

Although governance and management concerns are often at the top of the list of challenges for any think tank leader, few efforts are aimed at strengthening them; rather, think tanks (and funders) often pay greater attention to fundraising, research quality and communications. Governance and management issues are not usually considered until a big crisis arises – usually because of not having invested in these areas before or not noticing the symptoms early enough. Without an appropriate governance arrangement and management competencies, think tanks are unlikely to be able to deliver sustainable funding strategies, high quality research, and effective communications.

What forms of governance and management exist? How do they affect a think tank's work? How can they drive high-quality research and policy influence? This note provides an outline of the topic and suggests several resources to engage with the issue further.

What does governance and management involve?

The governance of a think tank refers to its organisational arrangement and how decision-making processes take place. It involves the rules and norms of the interactions within the organisation that affect how different parts are brought together. Management, on the other hand, involves the practical aspects of the organisation's functioning: team and project management, staffing, line management and so on (Mendizabal, 2014).

A think tank's set-up can mark the difference between success and failure – a proliferation of outputs and success in influencing policy is only temporary if the internal structure of an organisation is not strong. For instance, think tanks need a strong, competent and committed board to steer them through choppy waters. A weak board will miss the tide, it will not be able to support its director (it may not even be able to appoint the most appropriate director), won't be able to invest in long-term initiatives or in new skills for future challenges. Even a well-funded and very visible organisation is at risk if it has a weak board.

This note will address two crucial elements of governance and management: *boards* and *management for research*.

THINK TANK BOARDS

To address the characteristics of each type of board, one must first acknowledge that there are different kinds of think tanks: from independent civil society think tanks established as non-profit organisations, through governmentally created or state-

9. This section was originally developed by Enrique Mendizabal for the On Think Tanks School's 'Strategic governance and management for think tanks' short course in 2017, and adapted for the School for Thinktankers.

or party-sponsored think tanks, to policy research institutes located in or affiliated with a university and corporate-created or business-affiliated think tanks.

The nature of each think tank can say a great deal about their governance structure. For example, state-sponsored think tanks most probably will not have, nor need, the same type of board that an independent civil society think tank or a political party think tank has. Think tanks can all also have secondary boards such as advisory boards or management committees. Think tanks with a strong academic foundation might not need an advisory board, but others may use them to gain academic credentials.

Several factors such as the legal, economic, political and social context of a nation can also influence the way a think tank's board is set up.

On Think Tanks identifies three main types of boards (Mendizabal, 2014): *corporate boards, membership boards,* and *secondary boards.*

> *Corporate boards:* A corporate board of directors is in charge of mainly two tasks: defining and maintaining the think tank's original goals and values, and determining and ensuring its finances. According to Struyk (2012), a corporate board's role has three aspects: legal, functional and symbolic.
>
> These are described as corporate boards because they are quite similar to those of for-profit organisations. They can also be referred to as legal boards, as their responsibility for the finances and appropriate functioning of the think tanks they govern is determined by their country's legislation.
>
> This type of board of directors usually has the responsibility of appointing an executive director, who in turn has the responsibility of appointing and overseeing the staff and all the think tank's day to day activities. The Overseas Development Institute in the UK and Grupo FARO in Ecuador have corporate boards.
>
> *Membership boards:* Some think tanks establish assemblies consisting of all associates of the organisation, usually its researchers and founding members. This assembly is the highest governing body and periodically meets and chooses an executive council, either from within the members or from the outside.
>
> The assembly then delegates many executive responsibilities to the executive council, which acts as a management committee in charge of the organisation's day to day activities. In some cases, the executive council appoints an executive director and in other cases it chooses one from among its own ranks. The Instituto de Estudios Peruanos in Peru has a membership board.
>
> The membership board is often referred to as a political body, as the leaders are elected by the members rather than interviewed for a job.
>
> It is possible for both models to be combined, dividing 'political' responsibilities (membership boards) from 'executive' ones (corporate boards).
>
> *Secondary boards:* Think tanks may have a board of directors, either corporate or membership, and a second body that supports it. They may, for instance, have a management committee made up of members of the board in the form of a sub-committee to advise and monitor the executive director, or in some cases even be in charge of managing the think tank. Secondary boards differ from the board of directors because they have a more day-to-day role in the organisation's activities.

There are also advisory boards. These are usually made up of highly specialised individuals who have experience in in an issue that the think tank wants advice on, for example the public sector or academia. These boards give guidance, for example, on the types of research that the organisation should undertake. Unlike the board of directors, advisory boards do not have fiduciary responsibility and so are not responsible for the institution's audit or the state of its finances. Advisory boards that are comprised of eminent scholars and professionals may even add prestige to the organisation.

Figure 4. What are the pros and cons of these types of boards?

CORPORATE	MEMBERSHIP	SECONDARY
+	+	+
Clear roles and responsibility	Well acquainted with the think tank	Can address specific needs
Independence from staff	Promotes ownership	Flexible
External (professional) help and support	Decisions 'stick'	External (professional) help and support: skills and funds
-	-	-
Can be too removed from the think tank	Hard to balance individual researchers' interests	Can add to complexity and cost
Hard to manage	Decisions take time	Low accountability
Risk in third-party affiliations	Hard to bring in external (professional) help	

MANAGEMENT FOR RESEARCH TEAMS

Management overlaps with governance in that it reflects the nature of the organisational arrangement that the think tank has established for itself. It is affected by, and affects, for example, the presence of a senior management board, middle-management roles (for example, department or programme leaders), and the degree of responsibility awarded to the executive director.

This section discusses management for research, that is, the roles and responsibilities that research teams may be awarded, including line management considerations.

Management for research involves at least two key elements: *research team structures* (how the think tank organises its research teams and how the teams themselves are organised) and *line-management within research teams and projects*.

Research team structures: According to Struyk, think tanks can choose from one of two extremes: team or solo star. The 'solo star' model is based on the presence of notable and influential researchers who work on their own with the support of research assistants; the team model is very much what it sounds like – research conducted by teams.

Each model has consequences on the kind of work the think tank is able to deliver. The solo star model is likely to involve shorter or single research projects, while the team model is likely to involve longer-term and larger-scale programmes.

In practice, think tanks organise their research teams in various ways. Four approaches have been identified:

- Associates on short-term contracts from the think tank.
- Researchers working on their own policy research agendas with or without thematic coordination and with the support of assistants and associates.
- A central and permanent pool of researchers with specialist senior researchers who focus on one or more policy research agenda or project.
- Research teams, departments or areas organised by discipline or policy issue with clear line management.

The choice of model, according to Struyk, is likely to be influenced by several factors, including the type and size of projects, variability of the workload, flexibility of the staff, tax and social fund consequences, and institutional reputation.

Similarly, think tanks that group their researchers in teams may prefer to organise them along disciplinary or policy lines. For instance, some think tanks have departments that reflect the disciplinary background of their researchers: economics, political science, natural resources, etc. Others prefer departments focused on policy issues or challenges: housing reform, corruption, urban poverty, etc.

Line management: Line management arrangements and processes are crucial to guarantee the effective functioning of teams and think tanks. They refer to the chain of command and relations of hierarchy within a think tank and a team. Even in circumstances in which researchers act rather independently from each other or from the organisation, or in horizontal business models, a minimum degree of leadership and line management are necessary.
Line management should focus on the most effective allocation of human resources to deliver the organisation's mission, on supporting those resources, and on enhancing their capabilities. Good practice and literature on the subject suggest some of the following considerations in developing appropriate line management arrangements to lead and support teams and projects:

- Guidelines at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) suggested that no manager should line manage more than five people.
- Line management roles should be adequately resourced with enough time allocated to managers to work with and support their teams.
- Line management choices should not be driven by seniority imperatives but by the most effective use of talent to deliver project, programme and organisational objectives. Often senior and experienced researchers can play important roles as members of a team, and not necessarily as their leaders.
- Line management tools such as staff performance assessments should be used, primarily, to support staff development and overall team performance rather than for accountability purposes.
- Depending on the composition of teams, line management arrangements could include multiple management hierarchies. For example, a young researcher could be line managed by the leaders of more than one project (in a solo star model) and, similarly, a communications officer could be line managed by a research programme leader and the head of communications.

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3. POLICY-RELEVANT RESEARCH

POLICY-RELEVANT RESEARCH

Introduction[10]

Researching (and researchers) is at the heart of what think tanks and research centres do. However, how often do we reflect on how research is carried out, or on our assumptions about the relationship between research and policy? Are the rules and frameworks of academic research appropriate and useful when you are doing research for policymaking? Is research for policy the same as academic research, just communicated differently? Research skills are of course necessary but need to be complemented with new perspectives on policy and influence. Sharpening focus on how to better align the design and implementation of research endeavours with the political environment can increase the impact of think tanks' work.

This note approaches these questions with the premise that researchers and think tanks who undertake good research for policymaking have a set of unique skills that distinguishes them from those who carry out purely academic work. These skills are not only communicational but involve capacities to strategically choose and design topics linked to policy problems and challenges, plan research projects and gather data in specific ways that pave the way to policy alternatives. They have specific and deliberate ways of linking the world of research with the world of policymaking.

This section will:

- Present a framework for the planning, design and implementation of research projects that have policy relevance.
- Describe different types of policy problems.
- Explore the role of research in different types of problem and its relationship with policy influence.

Principles of policy-relevant research

While there are no clear-cut recipes that will work for all, below we present a set of principles for policy-relevant research identified in the current literature and through best practice. These principles can help researchers develop both the right mind-set and the practical skills for their work, and create an enabling environment for relevant research to flourish.

Policy research must be:

1. *Embedded in policy context:* Instead of talking about rules and standards for policy-relevant research, approaches must be contextualised. This means that no particular type of research is in itself better than the rest, but rather that it is important to make choices in light of the context where research is being carried out.
2. *Internally and externally validated:* Policy-relevant research needs to be meaningful within and outside the organisation. Acquiring the perspective of others will strengthen the research agenda, and each research project. This note does not go into detail about how to approach the variety of actors a think tank works with; nonetheless it's important to consider that any project entails reaching out to a variety of actors.

10. This note was originally developed by Andrea Ordoñez and Leandro Echt for the On Think Tanks School's 'Designing policy-relevant research agendas' short course in 2017, and adapted for the School for Thinktankers.

3. *Responsive to policy questions and objectives:* It is often believed that policy research must be instrumental and hence the key is to include a section for concrete 'policy recommendations'. However, policy problems are in reality very diverse and the expected contribution of research for each type of problem varies accordingly. Rather than including standardised policy recommendations, carefully consider each policy problem and identify each think tank's potential contributions.
4. *Fit for purpose and timely:* Once the type of policy problem faced and the questions that research can answer have been identified, the most appropriate research methods can begin to be defined. In other words, a pragmatic approach to research design based on the specific policy problem, the time one has, and the capacities of the think tank will help to produce a more relevant research output.
5. *Crafted with an analytical and policy perspective:* Policy-relevant research goes beyond the obvious and beyond a narrative description of the situation. Doing the necessary homework before starting the research project and having a good sense of the policy issues in practice will help in bringing a unique perspective to the problems at stake.
6. *Open to change and innovation:* as it interacts with policy spaces and policymakers: Innovating in research is critical for a think tank to maintain its relevance in the policy process. However, it is important to balance both the capacity to create new things and to take advantage of the existing capacities of the think tank. This is an important topic for further discussion: finding ways to innovate and choosing wisely where and how to do so in the organisation.
7. *Realistic about institutional capacity and funding opportunities:* Last, but not least, think tanks need to be realistic about what they can achieve. They should be aware of their limitations: time, resources and capacities. A well-done modest project can have more impact than an unfinished over-ambitious one.

Embracing these seven principles is both a personal and institutional commitment. It is important to find the tools and advice that can help transform these principles into processes that will push the think tank towards relevance and influence. Yet, it is also important to hold frequent discussions with fellow researchers and other colleagues from the organisation about their views on these issues.

How to think about policy-relevant research?

This note proposes to ground the research process on concrete policy problems and the context in which think tanks are working. Research manuals usually recommend beginning any project with a well-defined research question. However, in the search for policy relevance and influence, it may be better to take a few steps back and begin by doing a brief analysis of the type of policy problem faced and identify the role that the research can play given the context. Only then should research questions be drafted and methodological and design choices made.

Here is a useful framework to follow:

> *Define a policy problem and describe it in both technical and political terms:* 'A policy problem is usually defined as a gap between the existing and a normatively valued situation that is to be bridged by government action'. However, not everyone sees the same gap, and what is undesirable to some, may not be so to others. Therefore, any policy problem is constructed not just on information or facts, but also on values and beliefs.

Identify the purpose that research can play in each specific case: Once the problem has been defined it is time to ask: how will the research tackle the policy problem? Will research be used to find a solution? To introduce an issue onto the public agenda? To facilitate a political negotiation? Research can play several roles and researchers should be goal-oriented in choosing them.

Formulate a meaningful research question: Only once the policy problem has been clearly stated is it time to specify research questions that are sharp, focused and grounded on the sound understanding of the policy problem. It is important that the questions go beyond a simple description. They must be analytical and relate to a policy. For instance, an initial question on education could be what is the distribution of the national budget in education? But better questions could be: how efficient is the allocation of the educational budget? Or, what rules can be used to decentralise the national budget to the provinces?

Design your research project, that makes more sense in your context, and with your purpose in mind: Think about research methods as a collection of tools, each one with a particular strength. Researchers focused on informing policy should develop a variety of methodological skills to choose from, depending on the specific need of each occasion.

Understanding policy problems

Hisschemöller and Hoppe (1995) offer a simple but powerful categorisation of policy problems (Figure 4) in which two dimensions are used:

- *The relevant and available knowledge*: whether or not there is certainty in regard to the knowledge available about the problem.
- *The norms and values at stake:* whether there is agreement in relation to the values linked to the problem.

This classification refers to both a technical and a political (or cultural) perspective of policy problems. With these two categories in mind, four possible types of problems emerge:

- *Structured problems.* These are cases where there is a high degree of consensus and certainty on a problem. It is clearly defined, there is someone in charge of solving it and there is a general agreement of what this solution would entail. These are often considered technical problems where experts can play an important role in providing a solution. Examples of these problems could include regulations of health services, and road maintenance.
- *Unstructured problems.* These problems are the opposite of the former.[11] These are complex, have no clear boundaries, and no specific actor responsible for solving them. There are conflicting values and knowledge that are part of an extensive debate. Examples of this type include the consolidation or separation of states, negative impacts of new technologies, climate change, or complex democratic reform processes.
- *Moderately unstructured problems (knowledge certainty).* In these problems, there is a general confidence about the technical aspect of the problem, meaning certainty in relation to the knowledge, but no agreement on the values involved in the problem. These include, for example, issues such implementing programmes to support entrepreneurs or sexual education in public schools.
- *Moderately unstructured problems (value agreement).* In these problems, there is agreement on the values, but no certainty about the knowledge or the

11. Unstructured problems are sometimes referred to as *wicked*, *ill-structured* and *messy*.

technical aspect of the problem. An example of this problem is how to tackle HIV-AIDS, or the problem of significant brain drain from a country. The general opinion is that this should be stopped, but there is not a clear understanding of why it is occurring or how to tackle it.

Figure 5. Types of policy problem

		On norms and values at stake	
		Far from agreement	**Close to agreement**
On relevant and available knowledge	Far from certainty	Unstructured problems	Moderately structured problems (value agreement)
	Close to certainty	Moderately structured problems (knowledge certainty)	Structured problems

Source: Hisschemöller & Hoppe, 1995

Research work will vary dramatically depending on the problem being tackled. Here are some important points to keep in mind:

- **Problems are not static.** In the process of understanding problems through this or other lenses you should maintain a dynamic perspective. 'Policy problems are social and political constructs' (Hisschemöller & Hoppe, 1995, p. 58). As such they are in constant flux.
- **Decision-making involves structuring problems.** For a policy to be needed, a problem must be structured. Often, policymakers are seeking how to frame and understand a problem that would justify intervention by the government. This means having a problem stated as clearly stated as possible.
- **Researchers tend to problematise an issue.** This means that researchers tend to keep finding new sides and perspectives on an issue. This, however, may paralyse decision and action. It is important to be able to handle the tension between the need for a structure and the need for keeping an open perspective.

BOX 4. REFLECTING ON HOW PROBLEMS ARE FRAMED

Before trying to generate alternative solutions to address policy problems, it is good to take some time to reflect on how problems are being framed and understood (and the degree of consensus between the think tank and others in the way of doing so).

- Whose perspective is most important when it comes to a problem? The think tank's, other stakeholders (the private sector, NGOs or the government)?
- How does the think tank balance these different perspectives?
- Does the think tank usually prioritise the technical dimension of a problem or a political one?
- Does the think tank consciously or unconsciously shy away from certain types of problems?

Research for policy influence for different problems

It is not feasible to tackle all different types of policy problems with the same strategies. For example, tackling a well-structured problem such as the best way to implement a vaccination programme is quite different from reaching an international agreement on climate change (an unstructured problem). Also, the policy influence and impact that you are likely to achieve might look very different in each case.

Researchers may use the policy problem framework described above to help understand their own programmes and initiatives. For each type of problem there are two key questions to ask:

- What type of policy influence is likely to occur? What can the think tank realistically expect to achieve?
- And what is the role of research?

The framework summarised in Table 1 presents a practical way of connecting a clear objective with the specific context and the type of research to carry out. There is a direct link between the type of problem, what is feasible to achieve in terms of policy influence, and how research can help. The framework presented is a suggestion and can be adapted, but what is important is to keep the relationship between problem-policy influence-research.

Table 1. Summary of types of policy problems and implications for research

	Structured	Moderately structured problems (value agreement)	Moderately structured problems (knowledge certainty)	Unstructured
Description	Stakeholders are ready to tackle the issue.	Stakeholders share values, but have opposing knowledge.	Stakeholders do not agree on their values or priorities.	Wicked: stakeholders do not know where to start.
What policy influence is likely?	Concrete implementation of a policy is possible.	There is more certainty about the existing knowledge, or less asymmetries of information.	'Second best' options are more likely. Ideal solutions might not have sufficient support.	Setting agenda, and structuring a problem is feasible.
What is the role of research?	Show clear options for policy design and how an idea can be implemented.	Make sense of existing knowledge.	Bring stakeholders together, find common ground among stakeholders.	Structure ('domesticate') or prioritise parts of the problem to move forward.
Keep in mind	Beware of "wrong problems": oversimplifying a complex problem	Not enough knowledge or not everyone shares the same confidence on existing knowledge.	Quicksand – difficult environment for independent think tanks.	All stakeholders, including you, are still learning about the issue.

Source: Ordoñez and Echt (2016) based on Hisschemöller & Hoppe (1995)

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4. COMMUNICATIONS

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND TOOLS

This section introduces the broad (and important) topic of communications for think tanks. We begin by outlining an approach to communications as an orchestra, and discuss the main communication channels and tools available for think tanks, along with a suggested approach to use them effectively.

Communications as an orchestra[12]

This approach suggests that each communication channel (namely: publications, media, events and digital) should have a coordinator or leader (who could cover more than one channel, in cases where communications teams are small or if there are no dedicated communications staff) with the head of communications (if there is such a department and role in the centre) or the lead researcher (if the project or an organisation does not have a communications team) acting as a conductor and strategically deploying the various communications outputs produced by each channel. This has clear implications for research centre's organisational arrangements as well as on individual roles and responsibilities – but it is perfectly applicable at the organisational, programme or project levels.

This approach, too, places the idea of the *policy argument* at the centre, rather than the research communication outputs themselves. In other words, one needs to think about the best channels and tools to reach and convey the ideas and findings to your audiences.[13]

What channels and tools are available?
Have a look at the article Communication channels and tools for think tanks. This brings together various resources to provide an outline of these channels and tools. Think tanks and research centres have several communication options at hand. These can be roughly organised into channels: publications, media, events and digital, each aligned to an instrumental group in the orchestra analogy introduced above.

This is summarised in the table in the following page (with some examples).

Once a think tank has defined their own portfolio of communication channels and tools, it must decide how to use them strategically.

Traditional communication strategies and communication capacity development efforts tend to take a project-based approach. However, think tanks are better off thinking of their communications as an organisation-wide effort to maximise their chances to inform practice and policy process – directly and indirectly – over the long term. The communications as an orchestra approach (Mendizabal, 2015) allows think tanks to take advantage of all the communications channels and tools at their disposal.

12. This section was originally developed by Enrique Mendizabal for a communications workshop for the Evidence and Lessons from Latin America (ELLA) Programme and adapted for the School for Thinktankers.

13. See overview of audience mapping techniques for an analysis of different audience mapping tools.

Table 2: Communications channels and tools

Publications	Online/digital
Academic journal, academic paper, semi-academic magazine, working paper series, research report, background note (on a policy issue or methodology), project briefing, policy brief, draft legislation, opinion, workshop or event report, reading list, annotated bibliography or literature review	Emailed newsletter, organisation's website, blog, Twitter account (plus staff accounts), Facebook page, LinkedIn for staff profiles and recruitment, Youtube channel for videos and MOOCs, Facebook Live of Youtube for 'webstreaming', Flickr or Picassa, ITunes for podcasts, Scribd for documents, Google Drive or Dropbox for intranet and sharing documents, SurveyMonkey, Eventbrite, Wikipedia, data visualisation
Media	**Events**
Op-eds, press release, media 'Q&A's, media awards, media training, media partnerships/subcontracts for features and analysis, media face-to-face briefings	Workshops and trainings, seminars (and participation in seminars), webinars, public events (debates and presentations), public event series, private meetings with key stakeholders, MOOCs

Summary of the approach

In summary, the approach involves the following steps:

1. Set-out the think tank's portfolio of communications channels and tools.
2. Establish a communication team (or communication responsibilities) with clear ownership over each of the channels.
3. Develop a set of rules or tactics to use these resources in the most effective manner possible. Many of these rules or tactics are common across think tanks and countries (for instance, combining the publication of a report with a blog or op-ed and social media dissemination), but others will be organisation-specific and policy-specific (Mendizabal, 2014).

Insights on research communication channels

Having established the basics of the approach, the next step is to learn more about each communication channel and its tools. This section provides a brief introduction to some of the most recent ideas on each channel.

Publications

Publications remain the most popular and recognisable channel for think tanks. But more than being simple repositories of the organisation's knowledge or an influencing vehicle, publications are a powerful branding tool. Few organisations, however, invest in developing style guides.

A style guide is a reference point that sets standards for writing documents within an organisation. The focus of the style guide is not usually a matter of 'correct' or 'incorrect' grammar or style, but rather provides guidance for instances when many possibilities exist. Style guides make it possible for think tanks to develop and present their brands in a consistent way – across publications as well as across channels (Blenkinsop, 2016).

With this in mind, the choice of publications at think tanks is changing. Shorter and more specific outputs are preferred – policy briefs being one of the most popular – over longer ones. However, as Knezovich argues in *A policy brief is a piece of paper. It doesn't DO anything on its own* (Mendizabal, 2012), although policy briefs are useful and powerful communication tools, they must be seen in context and as part of a wider communications strategy.

The presentation of publications is changing too. In *Finding Home: How The Century Foundation Took Its First Small Step Beyond the PDF,* Miller (2014) looks at how to move beyond the PDF as a communications output.

This view is shared across regions, too. In Finding Digital Publishing Solutions for Research Organizations Osterman (2013) reflects on the role of the digital in new publications for think tanks, drawing from the experience of 30 DC-based institutions.

Events
Public events are one of the most powerful tools for think tanks. They make it possible, like no other channel, to engage their audiences directly in a manner that allows for substantive and critical reflection. Events, however, are rarely used effectively and think tanks fail to take full advantage of the opportunities they offer.

The article How to produce a public event? (Mendizabal, 2014) outlines lessons and recommendations for producing public events for maximum impact. It emphasises the importance of developing a narrative for the events themselves and choosing the format and participants accordingly.

Media (mostly, traditional media)
Working with the media presents significant challenges for think tanks. Despite the rise of social media, traditional media remains one of the most effective channels to reach the greatest number of people and to influence the public agenda. Significantly, though, most of the shortfalls in communicating with and through the media can be explained by poor understanding of how the sector operates.

Think tanks rarely pay attention to the rules that govern the media – and fail to make an impact as a consequence. In the article, Welcome to the media – these are the rules, Tanner(2015), from the Tony Blair African Governance Initiative, outlines a few rules and some advice when working with the media: read, share, and talk.

Investing in getting to know the media is important. In the article, Thinking strategically to 'Catch' the Media's Attention Sen (2015) argues that the media still matters. She argues that the media is a political and economic player and that a think tank's strategy towards it must take this into account.

Digital communications
Many authors claim that think tanks need to re-evaluate their digital strategies to keep up with the times. In The Digital Think Tank, Connery (2015) argues that think tanks have to re-evaluate their digital strategies to meet the demands and opportunities offered by digital tools. And ODI's award-winning online strategy offers a way forward: (Scott, 2012). In it, Scott argues that think tanks must:

- Follow a 'being there' approach to reaching their audiences: focus on placing the content in spaces audiences already visit (e.g. media, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) rather than trying to attract them to the think tank's own website.
- Avoid reinventing the wheel: use existing tools and services whenever possible (e.g. use YouTube to host videos, Eventbrite to organise events, etc.)
- Ensure their outputs are visible from 'cradle to grey': upload and store online to ensure that they will be found in the future – even beyond the lifetime of the project.

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- Learn by doing: experiment with new tools by making small marginal adjustments to their communications.

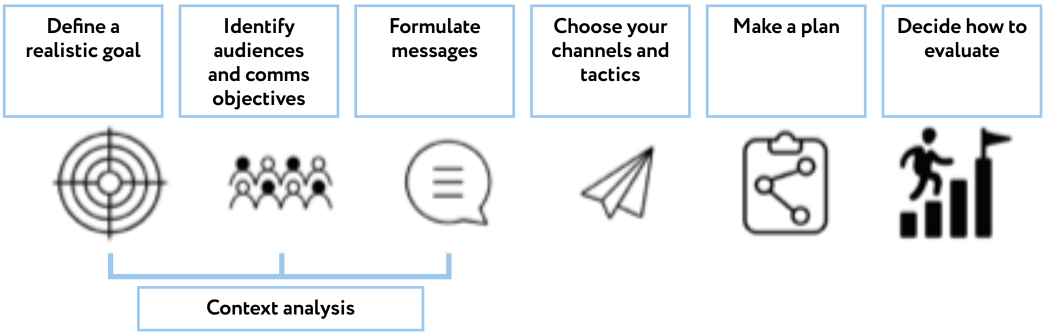
Digital communications offer think tanks a great deal of advantages that traditional media and communications in general do not. And it is not just about blogs, Facebook or Twitter. Infographics and data visualisation are an important part of this ecosystem and they require new skills – which new digital tools are making increasingly accessible. The challenge think tanks face is how to choose between and manage multiple tools.[14]

This webinar discusses how think tanks use timely and compelling digital content to build their brands and drive engagement.

Communications strategies

Communications strategies are living documents that express the objectives, audiences, messages and channels that will be used for a particular outreach activity. They can be pitched at the organisational or campaign level and should specify the resources (human and financial) that will be needed to get to where you want to go. They are useful for coordinating tasks, with clear timescales and designated task 'owners'. They should also have defined measures for success and mechanisms for monitoring, evaluating and learning from the process.

Figure 5. Communication strategy development



Adapted from: Hovland, ODI (2005)

Monitoring, evaluation and learning from communications

Monitoring, evaluation and learning from communication activities is useful for a number of reasons. It can support accountability, whether that's to donors or other funders, or to managers. At a fundamental level, it can also help to demonstrate the impact of effective communications planning and help build support for communications activities with researchers and other staff. And, importantly, it can help to start conversations about what's working and what could be improved.

Most monitoring, evaluation and learning focuses on understanding inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts. Yet, most communications monitoring focuses only on reach, in other words how many people had the opportunity to view a communications output. But just as important are measures of usefulness and use. See the diagram below (from Sullivan, 2007) for an overview of monitoring communications projects.

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14. For resources on visualisations: www.ttdatavis.onthinktanks.org

Figure 6. Framework for monitoring, evaluating and learning from communications activities

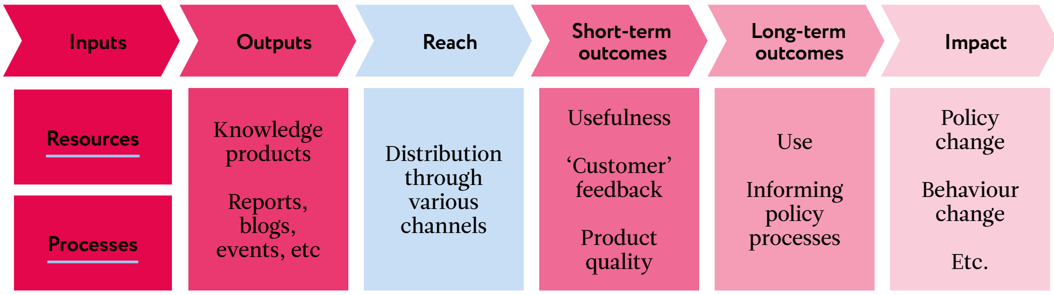


Figure 7. Relevant indicators for tracking different levels of communication outcomes for selected channels.

	Reach	Usefulness	Use
Reports	• Copies printed / distributed • Page views • Downloads	• Scroll depth/time • Comments (online, in person, via email) • Feedback survey	• Citations and mentions
Blogs	• Page views • Networks accessed from	• Scroll depth/time • Comments on blog • Organic shares • Re-shares	• Citations and mentions • Inbound links
Social media	• Impressions • Expands • Clicks	• Re-shares • Replies	• Embedding
Events	• Number of attendees • Number of online attendees	• Comments and discussion at event • Feedback forms	• Citations and mentions

DATA VISUALISATIONS

Introduction[15]

Although think tanks use a wide variety of research techniques, recent technological advances have put a focus on working with big data. But working with large data sets – not just so-called 'big data' – can be challenging. For example, it's often difficult to make sense of that much raw data. It's a classic 'wood for the trees' problem – having so much detail that it's difficult to see the bigger picture. That's one reason why think tanks are investing heavily in data visualisation capacities and techniques. Not only do data visualisations potentially help support the research process itself, but they can also help to communicate large quantities of information to a wider, less technical audience. But what does this look like in practice for think tanks?

This note discusses how to produce effective data visualisations to support research and communication. It looks at what types of visualisations exist, and what makes a good data story. Most importantly, it considers different tools for developing visualisations.

Data versus information

Data, by definition, is the lowest level of abstraction[16] – the bits that make up the byte. That means that data is often incomprehensible or useless on its own. In order

15. This section was originally developed by Jeff Knezovich for the On Think Tanks School's 'Creating effective data visualisations' short course in 2017, and adapted for the School for Thinktankers 2021.

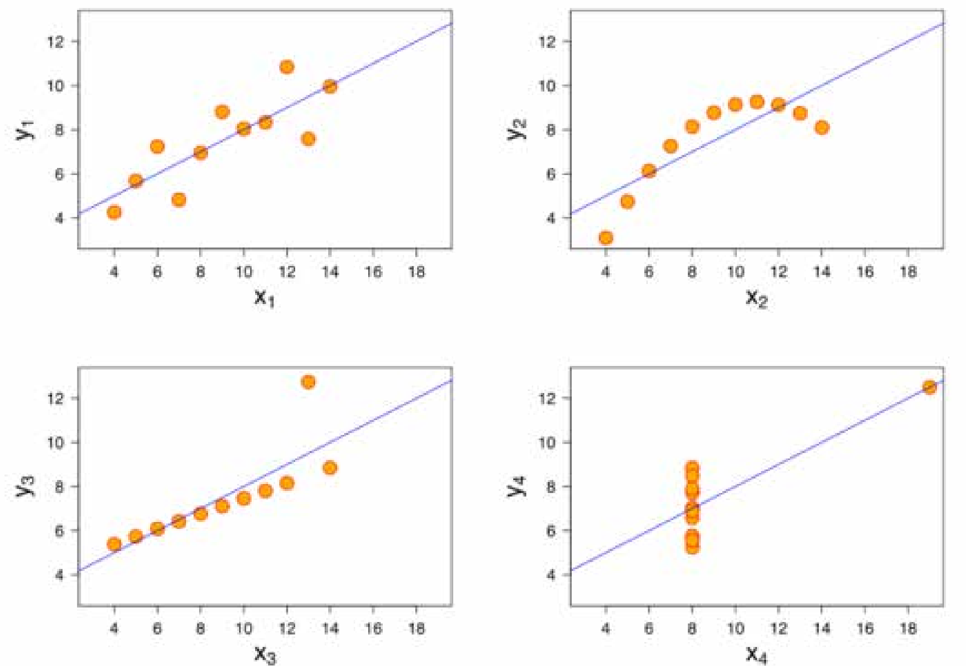
to understand data – to turn it into information – it is usually important to abstract it further, to read across multiple data points, possibly even multiple data sets.

One way of doing this is through statistics. Looking at a data set, you might start describing it by looking at the average value. You might compare that to the median value to see how data are distributed. And may even add standard deviations to gain a better understanding. But these descriptors still only give one part of the picture. Consider these four data sets:

I		II		III		IV	
x	y	x	y	x	y	x	y
10	8.04	10	9.14	10	7.46	8	6.58
8	6.95	8	8.14	8	6.77	8	5.76
13	7.58	13	8.74	13	12.74	8	7.71
9	8.81	9	8.77	9	7.11	8	8.84
11	8.33	11	9.26	11	7.81	8	8.47
14	9.96	14	8.1	14	8.84	8	7.04
6	7.24	6	6.13	6	6.08	8	5.25
4	4.26	4	3.1	4	5.39	19	12.5
12	10.84	12	9.13	12	8.15	8	5.56
7	4.82	7	7.26	7	6.42	8	7.91
5	5.68	5	4.74	5	5.73	8	6.89

In each case, the mean of x is 9 and the mean of y is 7.50. And if one wants to get into fancier statistics, the correlation between x and y is 0.816. They also share similar variance. All these statistical descriptors are the same, so they must all be the same data set, right?

Absolutely not. Known as Anscombe's quartet,[17] when visualised, the differences among the data sets become immediately apparent:



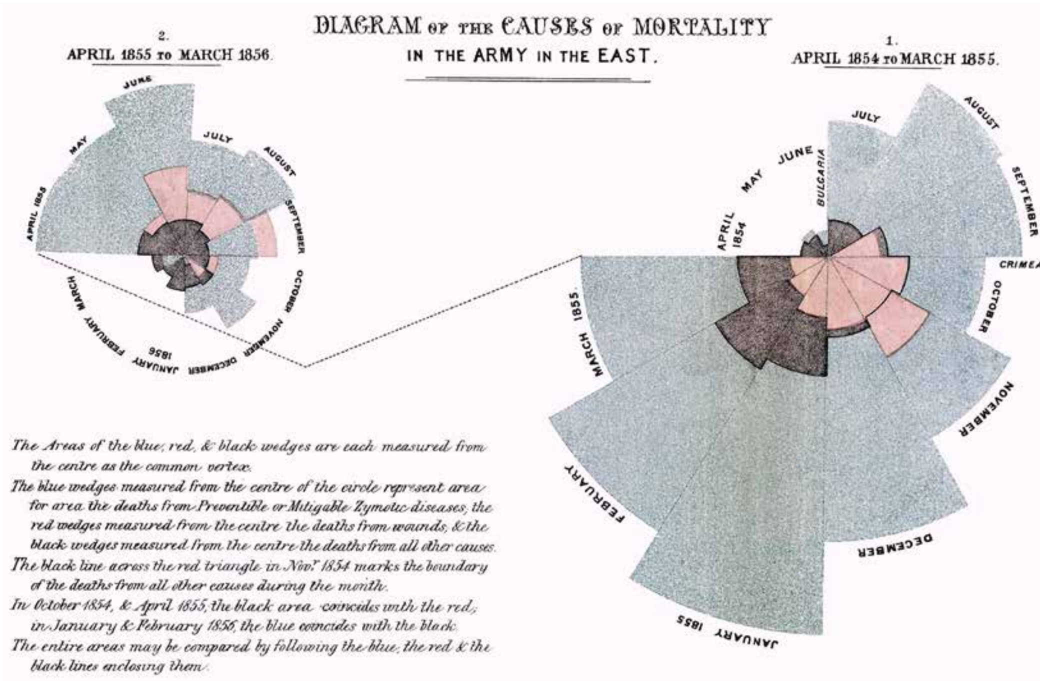
16. See Principle of abstraction in Wikipedia.
17. See Anscombe's quartet in Wikipedia.

That is the power of data visualisation – they are a very high level of abstraction that allow us to immediately understand relationships between data points. Visualisations help spot patterns, trends and outliers. They put the data into context by presenting them at the same scale. More advanced visuals can help associate data through colour and shapes too.

Data visualisations and policy influence

The ability of data visualisations to effectively communicate data make them a powerful tool for think tanks. Indeed, some big changes have been attributed to the power of data visualisation. Take, for example, Florence Nightingale's 'coxcomb', or 'rose' diagram of the causes of British military deaths during the Crimean War (figure 8).

Figure 8. Florence Nightingale's diagram of the causes of British military deaths during the Crimean War



The diagram shows that most of the deaths were caused by preventable disease, and not battle wounds. She used it as a lobbying tool with British parliamentarians to argue for better sanitary conditions – initially in the army, but eventually back on the home front, too. It contributed to the establishment of modern nursing and better sanitary conditions across the UK, as codified in the Public Health Acts of 1874 and 1875. One example of many of data-driven policy influence.

What kinds of visualisations are there?

The term 'data visualisation' refers to the process of creating graphical representations of data, both quantitative and qualitative in nature – although quantitative data lend themselves particularly well to visualisation. But the type of the data doesn't necessarily dictate what format these visualisations ultimately take.

One way to think of different types of data visualisations is by the format they take and by their level of user interactivity – either static, motion or interactive.

Static visualisations: These visuals don't have any interactive elements, and therefore tend to be thought of as some of the simplest forms of visualisation. Static representations of quantitative information tend to be charts of some sort – for example pie charts, line charts or bar charts usually present in traditional papers. But a static visualisation may not be limited to a single chart. They may include a set of charts in a panel. Or they may be sets of icons, especially for more qualitative data. Or they may be a combination thereof, which are often referred to as infographics. For an example of a think tank infographic that combines different types of static visualisation, consider Don't limit her possibilities, from JumpStart Georgia.

Motion graphics: Motion data visualisations are designed to tell a specific story with data. They generally walk a user from point a to point b, explaining or interpreting the data as they go along – this is often done with an audio track, but sometimes this may be done through text. These might take the format of videos or animated gifs, which are particularly useful for social media and other web content. A great example of this type of visualisation is *Visualizing the past, present and future of carbon emissions by the World Resources Institute.*

Interactive visualisations: Sometimes it is best to empower users to discover their own story through data – this is where interactive visuals are at their best. As the name implies, these visuals change and react to user input. Clicking on one part of a chart may change another part of a chart – either extending it, zooming in or out, or filtering the data shown. Many think tanks have used this approach to great effect. One good example is Mapping Czech crime, by Otevrenaspolecnost.

The table below gives a high-level overview of the characteristics of these different types of visualisation.

Table 4. Types of visualisations

Static	Motion	Interactive
Tells a clear story	Tells a story	Users 'create/discover' their own story
Linear	Linear	Multiple pathways
Doesn't move or change	Moves/changes by itself	Moves/changes based on user input
Useful for highlighting key facts	Useful for explaining more complex data	Useful for allowing users to explore large data sets
More icon based	Mix of icons/images and charts/maps	Often based on charts or maps
Simple charts are found throughout standard think tank publications. Infographics have been more typical for posters and social media content.	Motion can be employed in different ways to tell a story, but by definition are limited to digital outputs. These are great videos, but can also be a great way to introduce interactive visualisations.	Most often found as a standalone page or microsite for a think tank project or report. These can also be used as dashboards for real-time monitoring.

What goes into an effective data visualisation?

At the heart of any effective data visualisation should always be the end-user and the objective of the visualisation; in that sense, data visualisations are not that different from any other communication output. Data visualisations are targeted at the subconscious mind and are designed to not only be immediately comprehensible but also to be aesthetically pleasing. This can be particularly important when working to engage policymakers, as they tend to have limited time and short attention spans.

Given this, the need to adhere to basic communication principles in data visualisation is perhaps more important than in some other contexts, if only because they try to convey as much information, as simply as possible, using both text and graphics.

Striking the right balance between adding the information and context needed for the intended audience to understand the visualisation and keeping it simple enough to let the data speak for themselves is the key to creating effective data visualisations. And if there are more complicated objectives that require more complex visuals, ensuring that the user interface – the buttons, the sliders, the filters, the input boxes – make sense to the user is critical.

If this all sounds a bit difficult, that is because it is. And to make matters worse, the skills required to create effective visualisations for think tanks are diverse and not often found in the same person.

There are four main skills needed to produce visualisations:[18]

- *Research:* This includes everything from strong data literacy skills to strong understanding of the context from which the data spring. In terms of data literacy, this means being able to merge and tidy data sets, as well as knowing what sorts of statistical analyses are appropriate.[19] And in terms of context, it's about having knowledge about the area of study – whether it be social or cultural context, the political environment (as are more typical in development studies) or the physical, biological or chemical processes at play.
- *Technology:* Technology plays a role in all parts of data visualisation: from collecting and scraping data, to processing and storing data, and straight through to drawing charts and graphics. Some technologies require more skills than others. Some might require mark-up or coding. Some are simple drag-and-drop interfaces that make visualisation easy.
- *Design:* In terms of visual design, it might be about knowing the appropriate types of visuals for the data,[20] or about understanding chart design fundamentals.[21] But it's also about balance and flow, about appropriate use of colour,[22] typography and other visual cues. And as for user experience, there are several elements to get right,[23] from navigation to information structuring.
- *Communications:* The number of visualisations that either don't have a clear message or a clear purpose is staggering. Communicating the right messages, or, in the context of interactive visualisations, understanding how to nudge users in the 'right' direction as they explore visuals is very important. At the same time, it's important not to over-simplify or misconstrue the data.

For think tanks, building the capacity to create effective data visualisations is often about finding and creating teams that collaborate across these four areas. It's difficult to find a single person who is strong at all these skills!

18. See Knezovich (2014) Visualising data: both a science and an art.
19. See Statistical data type in Wikipedia.
20. See The Graphic Continuum. Policy Viz.
21. See Making data visualizations – A survival guide.
22. See: Stone (2016) Choosing Colors for Data Visualization.
23. See User Experience Design in Wikipedia.

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However, one of the benefits of the modern explosion in data visualisation is the tools and technologies that support people to create these visualisations. Don't have a design background? That's OK, some tools like Canva or Carto will make the data beautiful. Don't have lots of money to create fancy visuals? That's OK, there's a lot that can be done with Excel and GoogleSheets. Don't know how to code? That's OK, TableauPublic uses a graphical interface to allow users to explore the data. Already know the fundamentals of visualisation and looking to make bespoke, interactive visuals? There are coding libraries that allow for more refined user engagement.

WRITING TO INSPIRE POLICY CHANGE

Introduction[24]

The way think tanks communicate their research is changing. It is now common to use a range of dissemination techniques, and to showcase findings through a mix of data visualisation, blogs, Twitter content, podcasts and events.

So, why do publications remain such a popular output for thinktanks? Why is so much care and attention given to them? The simple reason is that think tanks need a solid, well-researched paper as a foundation to make all the other communication outputs possible.

Besides imparting knowledge and acting as influencing vehicles, publications are also a powerful branding tool. Therefore, writing, presenting outputs, and disseminating them effectively remains critical for organisations who want to reach decision-makers.

This section will help you to think about publications that have policy impact. We will:

1. Explore the importance of writing clearly and effectively. We also have a brief look at policy briefs and background papers.
2. Emphasise the importance of developing a communications strategy so that all this work is not wasted. Remember, a publication is just a piece of paper, it does not do anything on its own.

Why so much focus on writing clearly and accessibly?

Much has been written about the art of writing clearly, from George Orwell's six rules,[25] published back in 1946, to more contemporary and practical guidelines such as The Guardian's Style Guide,[26] which covers everything from how to present acronyms to how to avoid jargon. Specific strategies for writing to achieve policy impact[27] are also a common topic of discussion among researchers and communications professionals alike.

At its core, an emphasis on strong writing is not about becoming obsessed with grammar. It is about ensuring that think tanks have a very clear message for the audience they are seeking to influence or interact with. As the acclaimed writer and two-times Pulitzer Prize winner, David McCullough, explains: 'Writing is thinking. To write well is to think clearly. That's why it's so hard.'

Maintaining a consistent organisational 'voice' is a skill worth investing in. One of the best ways for organisations to develop and maintain good writing is by

24. This section was originally developed by Carolina Kern for the On Think Tanks School's *Writing to achieve policy impact* short course in 2017, and adapted for the School for Thinktankers 2021
25. See: Johnson: Those six little rules. *The Economist*.
26. See: Guardian and Observer style guide: A. *The Guardian*
27. See: Musandu (2013) How to write actionable policy recommendations.

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developing organisational style guides.[28] And these have the added advantage of ensuring communications are visually consistent, thereby strengthening the think tank's brand.

Style guides explain how the written word should be presented. They include sections on grammar and style (for example should UK or US English be used?) and also provide guidance for instances when many possibilities exist. Style guides make it possible for think tanks and research centres to develop and present their brands in a consistent way[29] – across publications as well as across channels.

As a complement to style guides, publication policies are also crucial tools. Publication policies describe the desired length, tone, audience and branding of different types of publication. They also outline the key components that should feature in each (e.g. recommendations, executive summary, reference). If you are developing a policy see CIPPEC's approach to improving the quality of its publications as inspiration.[30]

Together, publication policies and style guides help an organisation improve its editorial production by setting quality and design standards for published content. For this reason, it is worth putting together solid and well-presented guides and policies, which are updated frequently and systematically disseminated to staff. Think tanks need to make sure a copy is included in the induction pack for new starters, and that it is on the front page of the organisation's intranet. Think tanks can also experiment with web-based style guides.[31]

How research outputs have changed over the last decade

Think tank and research institutes have come a long way over the last decade. They have worked hard to make their outputs more accessible by investing in communications advice and support. Larger organisations have employed editors, digital content specialists and media people. There has also been a move towards communications training across the board.

This represents great progress as it has encouraged researchers to think a bit differently about how they might present their work – to focus on telling a good story. As James Georgalakis, Director of Communications and Impact at the Institute of Development Studies puts it, writing in different formats forces one to 'synthesise complex ideas, reproduce them in plain language and think through their real-world implications.'[32]

Given the amount of information people now have at their fingertips and the new ways they are able to consume it (tablets, phones, etc.), the choice of output at research centres is changing. While longer reports remain important because of the depth of analysis they allow, shorter and more specific outputs – like blogs – have become very popular.

Length aside, even the way publications are presented is changing. In Finding Home: How The Century Foundation Took Its First Small Step Beyond the PDF,[33] Joe Miller outlines how he used Creatavist – a web magazine platform – to transform the

28. See for example: The writer´s house style guide
29. See: Style guide: how to write one? On Think Tanks Manual.
30. Echt (2012) Improving the quality of a think tank's publications outlines CIPPEC's approach to quality control.
31. See: Frontify Style Guide.
32. See: Georgalakis (2015) Never mind the X Factor this is the So What Factor.
33. See: Miller (2014) *Finding Home: How The Century Foundation Took Its First Small Step Beyond the PDF .*

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presentation of a piece of research by using a combination of text, video and data visualisation.

The implications of this move are far-reaching and discussed by Schwartz, Managing Director at Soapbox – the UK's leading research communications consultancy. Among other things Schwartz explains how high-profile organisations like Chatham House and the Institute for Public Policy Research have reduced their focus on hardcopy publications and made digital a central plank of their communications strategies.[34] 'This goes (way) beyond making sure that all reports are uploaded to a website for easy download ... and means that content is uploaded in HTML format, designed to be modular, and it is, all of it, even a single sentence, phrase, word, diagram or picture, shareable..' In this context, writing clearly and concisely is more important than ever. Think tanks might only have one or two lines to capture their reader's attention.

BOX 6. TWO TYPES OF PUBLICATIONS: POLICY BRIEFS AND BACKGROUND PAPERS

Research publications come in different shapes and sizes including books, reports, background papers, policy briefs and blogs. This note focuses on two quite different types – a policy brief and a background paper.

Policy brief
What is it?
A policy brief is a concise (eight pages maximum), standalone document focusing on a particular issue requiring policy attention. It explains and conveys the 'urgency' of an issue and must generally be understandable without additional reading or specialised knowledge.

What is its aim?
A policy brief presents recommendations on (or implications of) an issue and provides suggestions on how to operationalise these recommendations in order to prompt change.

Who is this kind of publication for?
This publication type is specifically aimed at decision makers, but it is also popular among diverse actors including practitioners, the media and the private sector.

Background paper
What is it?
A background paper is a flexible document that provides a channel through which to publish case studies and/or preliminary findings. It varies in terms of length and format and is sometimes not officially published or launched at all.

What is its aim?
A background paper is often produced to 'test the waters' and gauge people's reaction to new research findings. When used to present a case study, which focuses on a particular country, it can be particularly useful to country-specialists.

Who is this kind of publication for?
This publication type is flexible so its target audience can be very diverse. In general, however, it is usually of particular relevance to subject specialists as they are in a better position to comment on initial research finding.

34. See: What does the future of think tanks communications hold? A conversation with John Schwartz, Managing Director at Soapbox

Why a communications strategy is as important as the research itself

Unfortunately, producing a perfect publication is not enough . As Knezovich argues, 'a policy brief is a piece of paper, it doesn't DO anything on its own'.

While useful and powerful tools, publications must be seen in context and as part of a communications strategy . These are important because they force research and communications staff to think through the specifics of how to disseminate their work, and to clearly define what success looks like . In practice, for each piece of research, this involves:

- Defining a set of key messages.
- Mapping and understanding the organisation's target audiences.
- Choosing the correct channel through which to convey the messages .
- Packaging the output appropriately.
- Deciding where, when, and when not to, pitch an idea and get the key messages out there. Crucially, it is worth understanding that this is not a 'one-off' process – policy influence requires a consistent and multipronged approach.
- Measuring the impact of the efforts through monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) tools.

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5.FUNDRAISING AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

RE-THINKING FUNDING MODELS

Introduction[35]

Funding is a key concern for every think tank, effecting its sustainability, the way people work, and the type of research that is conducted, as well as the potential for having sustained policy influence.

Even though there are plenty of capacity-building activities that focus on how to carry out effective fundraising, little has been done in terms of systematising the diverse range of existing funding models, along with their implications and consequences on think tanks' performance, relevance, identity and sustainability.

There is also increasing interest from think tanks in understanding how to develop or strengthen domestic support for their work or create new sources of income, often recognising that they rely too heavily on international cooperation or on conducting isolated projects under a consultancy model.[36] However, very few organisations and individuals in developing countries can allocate time and funds to produce and/or discuss existing knowledge on these issues.

This section helps systematise aspects of different funding models and analyses their implications and consequences. More specifically, it seeks to:

- Raise awareness on the different ways of generating and using funding and their respective implications for the organisation and its members; and
- Share ideas and innovative practices for managing diverse funding models.

What is a funding model?

Let us start with an exploration of what a funding model is. One useful definition holds that 'it is a methodical and institutionalised approach to building a reliable revenue base to support an organisation's core programmes and services' (Kim, Perreault and Foster, 2011). The most important bits of this definition are probably the first two: a methodical and institutionalised approach.

This might seem obvious, but: How many think tanks have developed a sound and thoughtful – a methodical – funding strategy, which guides fundraising efforts and ensures that there is consistency between sources of revenue, quality of research, and policy influence capacity? Are fundraising efforts often guided by strategic planning and long-term thinking? How internally driven are these efforts vis a vis responding to the external demands and opportunities?

Indeed, the second part of the definition, an institutionalised approach, highlights the connection between funding and the organisation's mission, which is pursued through its programmes and services. This is where the concept of business model can become useful, since the think tank needs to clearly understand what it offers to core stakeholders (business model) to then detect who can support this effort (funding model).

35. This note was originally developed by Vanesa Weyrauch and Leandro Echt for the On Think Tanks School's 'Re-thinking funding models' short course in 2017, and adapted for the School for Thinktankers.

36. See On Think Series. Funding for think tanks: domestic funding.

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What does success look like?

In line with the definition provided, a successful funding model is one that creates sustainable revenue in a way that enables the organisation to best pursue its mission. This idea can be broken up into five basic components so that one can assess the current degree of success:

- *Reliability:* Funds that come and go 'randomly' can never help the organisation in the medium and long term. In this light, unusually high growth is no indication of having an efficient funding strategy, nor does some seasonality in revenues mean the opposite.
- *Diversification:* Not surprisingly, putting all the eggs in one basket is not advisable. Diversifying does not only mean trying to have many donors, but also different types of donors, whose downturns should not be expected to coincide.
- *Acceptable conditions:* Whatever administrative, contractual and/or programmatic conditions are attached to funds, they should enable the think tank to do their policy work to the best of their abilities.
- *Independence:* A basic condition of a good funding model is for it to guarantee that a think tank remains independent to govern itself and define its policy research agenda: deciding how to run the organisation, which issues to pursue, etc.
- *Transparency:* A growing concern related to funding models has to do with being able to track the origin of funds that think tanks receive and the main conditions attached to them.

Different funding models and their implications

Think tanks have found unique answers to the question of funding. Among the main sources of funds, the most recurrent ones are core funding and contracts (and grants). It is the specific combination of these sources and how they interact with a think tank's work that ultimately defines a funding model.

It is also important to think about the implications of these funding models on three functions that most think tanks regard as essential to their mission: research, policy influence, and communications. The implications on financial stability should also be considered. Raising awareness on these implications is a first step to assess how appropriate the current funding model is for the way think tanks want to conduct research, communicate with key stakeholders, and influence policy. In fact, not making these links more explicit and avoiding deep organisational discussions about them deters a think tank from the possibility of re-thinking about the viability and soundness of its intended identity (mission, objectives, main attributes and values, etc.).

The table below (table 5) sets out some of these considerations for two main funding models.

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Table 5. Funding model implications

Funding model	Research agenda	Policy influence			Staff	Financial stability
		Allow to conduct relevant research?	Allow to take advantage of policy windows?	Cover communications expenses?		
Core funding	Long term, coherent research agenda. Core issues.	Conduct research on strategic and relevant issues.	Long-term policy influence.	Communications within organisational budget.	Allows to hire researchers and support staff on a permanent basis. Organisation can manage their workload with more stability and certainty. Researchers have more time to concentrate on research.	High on the short and medium term. Low if main donor/s drop/s out.
Grants and contracts	Demand-led and usually dispersed research agenda. Flexibility of issues, donor's trends. Might limit the space a think tank has to develop ideas and research questions about an issue.	Trends among international donors are not always aligned with local demands and priorities. Government contracts increase relevance of research, but carry risk of legitimising decisions.	Can promptly develop a project that responds to an emerging issue on the policy agenda.	Communications left for each project to collect and manage.	Contractual flexibility and multiple tasks (research, fund raising, hiring staff). Less sense of belonging to the organisation.	Irregular revenue but generous fees allow for stability.

Source: Weyrauch and Garzón de la Roza (2015)

The fundraising function: How to organise it and why?

In most think tanks starting out, one is likely to find two scenarios regarding the fundraising function. In both there is a group of policy researchers/entrepreneurs that set up the organisation, often around one or a couple of leaders. In one scenario, incoming projects are found and managed by the leader or main partners in the nascent think tank. The organisation's funding fate is tied to their connections and initiative. In the other scenario, the same group is supported by an endowment or core grant from a single donor. In consequence, fundraising is restricted to managing the practicalities of the grant and the relationship with the donor more generally (based on Telgarsky, 2002).

Some organisations can preserve such schemes for several years without any strong incentive to change. As long as the think tank keeps its founders, partners or key members, approaching funders and deciding how to use funds can remain manageable for this small group. If the organisation grows substantially, however, the fundraising function will probably look different: more formal staffing arrangements, more substantial fixed costs related to facilities and administration (e.g. office space, accounting, and legal procedures), and greater costs for business development. Hence, the organisation increasingly spends time and resources collecting information, writing proposals and raising funds.

The following table compares the funding arrangements that are likely to emerge – centralised versus decentralised.

Table 6: Comparison of funding arrangements

Dimension	Centralised	Decentralised
Skills / Professionalism	Higher	Lower
Cost	Higher	Lower
Administrative Burden	On fundraising team	On senior researchers or programme leaders
Research Consistency	Lower. The fundraising unit has some degree of autonomy to assign funding opportunities.	Higher. Researchers control their funds and their agenda.
Funding Balance (across programmes / topics)	Higher	Lower (senior researchers who are more skilled as fundraisers or have better connections have more benefits: team and budget.)
Coordination with general units (Adm., Comms., etc)	Higher and easier	Lower and more random

Source: Weyrauch and Garzón de la Roza (2015)

Why re-think the funding model?

Even if uncertainty, tensions and questions regarding funding will always be a part of a think tank, it is important to re-think the funding model every once in a while. This entails first making the model clearer and explicit for members of the organisation as well as relevant stakeholders, and then reflect on it. Here are some reasons for clarifying a funding model, and based on that, deciding what changes should be made:

- Ensures that the organisation has a fairly logical and internally consistent approach to its operations and that this approach is clearly communicated to its stakeholders.
- Provides an architecture for identifying key variables that can be combined in unique ways, hence a platform for innovation.
- Develops and strengthens a vehicle for demonstrating the economic attractiveness of the organisation, thereby attracting donors and other resource providers (Zott and Amit, 2010).
- Provides a guide to ongoing organisational operations, including parameters for determining the appropriateness of various strategic or tactical actions that management might be considering.
- Facilitates necessary modifications as conditions change.

Exploring avenues of change

When looking for ideas to introduce changes in a funding model it is better to responds to the challenges of the context (both external and organisational) and begin by exploring these four avenues of change:

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Table 7: Questions and strategies of avenues of change

Avenue of change	Key questions	Strategies
Re-structure	Is the think tank able to support its core programs and services? What is the ratio between secured support and the work the think tank wants to do? Are the think tank main challenges linked to services or programs? Is the think tank savvy about its cost structure? How is the think tank investing in the institution?	Create/eliminate/merge areas Revisit staffing arrangements/more flexibility and higher ownership Strategic partnerships/alliances to focus on the think tank's competitive advantages Work with volunteers/interns/board members Re-distribute roles and responsibilities (share leadership) Think about cross-subsidies
Invest in fundraising	Is the think tank's model centralised/ decentralised or a hybrid? Should it change? Are roles and responsibilities clear and aligned with capacities and available time? Is fundraising capacity enough? Does the think tank need a specific expertise/profile? What stages of the fundraising cycle are most challenging for the organisation? Does the think tank have a funding strategy/plan? Does the think tank monitor and evaluate its fundraising efforts? Are there any crucial actors that currently are not involved in supporting fund-raising?	Create a fundraising unit (centralised or decentralised?) Engage different internal stakeholders and areas (i.e.: actively engage the board) Develop an ad hoc external committee Hire external expertise for strategic interventions Foster alignment between needs from researchers and fundraising objectives Be clear about fundraising roles and responsibilities Do not forget incentives (finder´s fees, consulting on the side, and allocating opportunities)
Develop income generation activities	Are areas/departments self-sustainable? Are they covered with the OH? What is the think tank really good at that others would be willing to pay for? Does the think tank need financial advice to carefully budget new types of activities? Is there a market for the think tank that it might not have detected? Does the think tank have staff with business stamina?	Develop a for profit/consulting firm Create a foundation/set up an endowment Sell services the think tank is good at (training, event organisation, communications, etc.) Rent space/assets Build carefully budget scenarios Seek advice from those with business experience Think about implications for the organisation's image and reputation
Tap into local resources	What is the current situation in the country regarding foreign donors? How has the political environment evolved and how does that affect existing and prospective sources? How do regulations affect taxation and private sector support? How entrepreneurial is the organisation in searching for new funding? How can the think tank develop a 'start-up' culture that helps it find new sources of funding?	Approach public agencies (policy design, implementation and evaluation) Engage private sector and philanthropists Build consortium of companies to support research on core issues Organise fund raising events

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6. MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING (MEL)

MEL AROUND POLICY INFLUENCE

Introduction[37]

Literature on how to monitor, evaluate and learn about policy influence is abundant. However, because influencing policy is such a complex, long-term and unpredictable process, some researchers and practitioners wonder whether it is worth investing energy and resources into a systematic assessment of policy influencing efforts. In addition, some monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) activities often arouse apprehension, especially if they are perceived as an accountability exercise or a control mechanism.

Our view is that incorporating MEL into the daily life of any organisation is well worth it. A smart and proportionate use of MEL tools, and especially a well-thought-out MEL plan, can help organisations to:

- Reflect on and enhance the influence of their research in public policy.
- Satisfy their (and their donors) interest in evidencing the uptake of research in policy.
- Build their reputation and visibility and attract more support for their work.
- Generate valuable knowledge for all members of the organisation.
- Re-organise existing processes for data collection so that they can be useful for real MEL purposes, and discard processes and data that are not useful.

What is policy influence? Can one monitor and evaluate it?

The heart of the question is: what aspects of policy influence efforts can be effectively monitored and evaluated? First, the limitations of any effort to assess the net effects of informing policy with research/evidence must be acknowledged. Many authors have long acknowledged the limitations of what is often called a rational or linear model, in which research has the clearly defined task of producing knowledge and putting forward solutions based on empirical data, which are then expected to be implemented by policymakers. However, there is an alternative and more complex model that recognises the importance of other stakeholders and external factors. In this model, multiple decision-making arenas are juxtaposed.

Consequently, one should not forget that research is just one input among others, and that its impact depends on how the conclusions and recommendations derived from it compete with other prevailing ideas. In this more realistic model, policy influencing efforts play a key yet complex role. This is because communicating with policymakers is important, but not sufficient. Researchers need to acknowledge the ideas, discourses and influencing efforts of others, too.

To determine how to assess policy-influencing efforts, it is also important to scope what success could look like, going beyond the traditional model that solely focuses on achieving policy change. The following discussion points developed by Mendizabal (2013) help define what could encompass policy influence.

> *Research uptake is not always 'up'*. Not all ideas flow 'upwards' to 'policymakers'. For most researchers the most immediate audience is other researchers. Ideas take time to develop and researchers need to share them with

37. This section was originally developed by Vanesa Weyrauch and Dena Lomofsky for the On Think Tanks School's 'Monitoring, evaluation and learning' short course in 2017, and adapted for the School for Thinktankers.

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their peers first. As they do so, preliminary ideas, findings, research methods, tools, and so on flow in both (or more directions). 'Uptake' therefore can very well be 'sidetake' – researchers sharing with other researchers. By the same token, it could also be 'downtake'. Much research is directed not at high-level political decision-makers but at the public (e.g. public health information) or practitioners (e.g. management advice and manuals).

Uptake (or sidetake or downtake) is unlikely to be about research findings alone. If the findings were all one cared about, research outputs would not be more than a few paragraphs long. Getting there is as important as the findings. Methods, tools, the data sets collected, the analyses undertaken, and so on matter as well and are subject to uptake. The process is important too because it helps maintain the quality of the conversation between the different participants of any policy process. Policymakers need to understand where ideas come from.

Replication is uptake too (and so is inspiration). There is also an element of inter-generational transfer of skills that must be considered. Much of the research that goes on in universities and think tanks has the purpose of helping train new generations of researchers or to advance a discipline or idea. Writing a macroeconomics textbook, a new introduction to sociology book, or similar efforts are as important as putting together a policy brief. The students who benefit from these research outputs are likely to have an impact on politics and policy in the future – something that is nearly impossible to measure in the here and now.

It is not just about making policy recommendations. The purpose of research is not only to recommend action. And researchers, even in think tanks, are often more influential in their capacity to help decision makers understand a situation or problem rather than by attempting to inform or inspire a given course of action. Any attempt to understand uptake needs to consider all the functions of think tanks: setting the agenda, helping explain a problem, popularising ideas, educating the elites, creating and maintaining spaces of debate and deliberation, developing critical thinking capacities, auditing public and public institutions, and so on.

Dismissal is uptake too. Uptake is often equated with doing what the paper recommends. But research does not tell anyone what to do: only what is going on (or has been going on or may be going on in the future). It can analyse alternative courses of action and assess their effects. But the choice is for policymakers to make, and researchers (and donors) should not expect that research work alone is enough to change things.

Uptake is 'good' only when the process is traceable. Good uptake happens when good ideas, practices, and people are incorporated into a replicable and observable decision-making process. What one wants is good decision-making capacities, not just good decisions. The latter, without the former, could be nothing more than luck. And in that context, bad decisions are as likely, if not more so, than good ones. Bad decisions one can live with, but poor decision-making processes are unacceptable. And worse still is keeping these decision-making processes out of sight.

To sum up, it should be stressed that it takes time to really understand the contribution an idea makes, because the relationship between ideas and decisions is neither linear nor clear of any other influences. Ideas come out of, are supported by, explained in relation to, and adopted in conjunction with, other ideas. And decisions are made in the same complex manner: within other decisions.

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How to start?

First, it is important to identify one's assumptions about MEL. Most organisations are probably already doing some form of MEL, but don't realise it. Every organisation is likely to be implementing some form of MEL process already (even if it isn't done in a very systematic way), and it is important to identify what is taking place so that new efforts can build on existing ones.

Therefore, it is important to start by reflecting on what the organisation, at different levels, is already doing in terms of MEL: How often are reports about work and projects produced? To whom? In what formats? Do teams or individuals receive any feedback from other stakeholders? From whom? How? What do they do with that feedback?

Moreover, organisations and think tankers need to consider why they wish to invest time and energy in learning about how to monitor and evaluate their policy influencing work. Such exercises involve a great deal of energy, time and resources, so being clear are about why one wants to do MEL will help with deciding which system will work best.

Why develop a MEL system?

According to Mayka (Open Society Institute, 2008) there are five classic reasons why an organisation might decide to monitor and evaluate its policy influencing work:[38]

- *Accountability:* To provide donors and key decision-makers (e.g. board of directors and/or donors) with a measure of the progress made in comparison with the planned results and impact. It can additionally be used as a cost-benefit tool to make funding decisions.
- *Support for operational management:* Producing feedback that can be used to improve the implementation of an organisation's strategic plan. When it comes to putting a strategic plan into practice, a monitoring and evaluation system will help detect, in practice, those elements that are unhelpful, that obstruct work or that simply need to be reviewed and/or readjusted to improve the organisation's operational management.
- *Support for strategic management:* Providing information on potential future opportunities and on the strategies to be adjusted against new information. Given that a MEL system can enhance operations, it can also shed light on aspects that need to improve when thinking of the strategic plan (e.g. aspects not included so far and which might be worth incorporating now). This offers a more specific vision as to where, strategically speaking, to pay greater attention and place the focus.
- *Knowledge creation:* Expanding an organisation's knowledge on the strategies that usually function under different conditions, allowing it to develop more efficient strategies for the future.
- *Empowerment:* Boosting the strategic planning skills of participants, including members of staff engaged in the programme or other interested parties (including beneficiaries). The MEL process increases acceptance of shared objectives and commitment to them and creates a more suitable environment in which future activities have greater chances of causing a positive impact (Woodhill, 2007).

38. The following are taken from: CIPPEC. Toolkit N° 1. Why should we monitor and evaluate policy influence? From the series: How can we monitor and evaluate policy influence? Vippal, CIPPEC.

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These five reasons for MEL can be re-stated in the form of questions that think tankers can ask about their organisations:

1. Does the think tank intend to inform its donors and key stakeholders on the impact it is having?
2. Does the think tank want to strengthen and improve the way in which it implements projects?
3. Does the think tank plan to evaluate its actions to make better decisions on the organisation's strategic direction and/or its programmes?
4. Does the think tank want its staff to have more and better knowledge to improve the way it goes about influencing policy?
5. Does the think tank plan to empower its members through greater consensus and commitment to the objectives?

These options can be more or less applicable to organisations depending on their individual characteristics, experience, evolution in terms of policy influence, interests and values of its leadership, and so on. The important thing is to have clarity on the reasons for the MEL effort, since the strategies and methodology chosen will vary according to the type of knowledge to be acquired and how it will be used.

Who should participate in MEL and who will benefit?

A very rich approach to MEL has been developed and promoted by Michael Quinn Patton, with a framework known as Utilisation-focused Evaluation (U-FE). This approach begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use; therefore, evaluators should facilitate the evaluation process and design any evaluation with careful consideration of how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use.

Thus, it is important to consider not only how others will benefit from the results of the effort but also about how they will be engaged (or not) throughout the whole process, including how they may reflect on it to learn and make different decisions. Hence, the following three questions need to be considered:

1. What types of information and knowledge would allow the think tank to become better when trying to inform policy with its research?
2. What does the think tank need to learn?
3. Who needs this information?

The purpose behind the development of any system will have a strong effect in how this system is received and used later. As such, participation becomes essential. MEL efforts should involve others from the very beginning of conceptualising and designing the approach in the organisation. Unfortunately, the main decisions on what MEL efforts look like and how the data will be used usually rely on a few people who often have accountability as their main goal, rather than the promotion of a culture where learning is valued and rewarded.

Participation also opens up an opportunity to identify current problems and daily challenges experienced by staff, which MEL practices could help solve. It has been argued that staff are less likely to be open to a new system if they have not identified any problems in the first place. People in the organisation need to find meaning in MEL efforts. Doing it just to respond to donor demands or showcase success does not stimulate the required buy-in from staff to adequately maintain the MEL system.

The decision to engage others can have interesting outcomes. For example, after a reflection of how MEL could be conducted, staff in a think tank decided that they needed to introduce changes to the way they design projects. This happens very frequently. When thinking about MEL, people realise that they need to re-think the way they plan as well, including which strategies will bring which type of results and how projects are contributing to the goals of a programme or to the organisation itself.

MEL is not a luxury. It is not a practice that only those with large budgets or with the support of a donor can afford. Each organisation can trace its own unique path. MEL is an intelligent and promising investment, which will no doubt bear fruit sooner rather than later.

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