SCHOOL for
THINKTANKERS

BACKGROUND NOTES 2025

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INTRODUCTION

APPROACH TO THE BACKGROUND NOTES

Welcome to this collection of Background Notes designed for the School for Thinktankers. Each note delves into one of the six main topics covered during the School: introduction to think tanks; governance and management; policy-relevant research; monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL); communications; and fundraising and financial management. An additional note on evidence-informed policymaking has also been included in this edition.

These notes, crafted by different subject experts in the OTT community and referencing OTT resources, provide user-friendly introductions, essential definitions, and key questions to stimulate reflection and discussion. As such, they are part of the larger ecosystem of knowledge and ideas that have been developed over the last few years by thinktankers, practitioners and researchers from around the world.

The notes are not organised in any particular order; instead, you are free to dive into any section, at your own pace, and engage with the content. The presentations and sessions during the School for Thinktankers will provide an independent and complementary approach to the concepts and issues presented in this collection.

We encourage participants to:

- Read the notes and reflect on how the content relates to your own work.
- Explore related articles on the OTT 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 YOU WILL FIND IN THIS COLLECTION

Introduction to think tanks: Here you will find an introduction to think tanks and discussions on what defines them. You will also find information about the think tank sector which draws from our annual publication, Think tank state of the sector, and the Open Think Tank Directory.

Policy-relevant research: This note presents a guiding framework on how to align research with public policy, principles for cultivating a policy-driven mindset, and an approach to better understanding policy problems.

Evidence-informed policymaking: Step into the world of evidence-informed policymaking and explore the link between policymaking and evidence, the practical realities of evidence use, and the challenges associated with incorporating evidence into policymaking.

Strategic governance and management: Discover the power of impactful boards, explore their diverse types, and get an overview on how to effectively manage research teams.

Communications: This note is your guide to navigating the modern think tank communications scene. It explores the power of impactful messaging, diverse

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channels and outputs, and mastering the art of effective writing to influence policy change.

Fundraising and financial management: This note explores the realm of budgets and finances by looking at diverse funding models, allowing think tanks to create a reliable, revenue base to support their core programmes and services.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL): Discover the importance of MEL in the complex realm of generating policy change. This note encourages think tanks to establish clear reasons for MEL, explores the intricacies of assessing policy influence, and introduces a six-key-area framework for effective MEL.

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1. INTRODUCTION TO THINK TANKS

DEFINING THINK TANKS[1]

What's in a name?

Thinks tanks go by many names: think tank, policy lab, investigation centre and policy research institute/centre, to name just a few. 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 organisations with diverse characteristics depending on their origins and 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. Think tanks also vary by country, according to the context in which they originated, and how they operate.

Their business models and organisational structures also differ greatly: for-profit consultancies, university-based research centres, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public policy bodies, advocacy organisations, membership-based associations, grassroots organisations, one-off expert fora and more.

Despite this diversity, they all share the same objective of influencing policy and/or practice based on research and evidence. But we also need to acknowledge that the term was coined in the United States, with an Anglo-American model in mind. 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 to influence policies. Stone (2001) defines them as 'relatively autonomous organisations 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.

In his 2008 paper Think Tanks as an emergent field, Medvetz argues that the above definition is limited because it:

- Privileges the independence emphasised in US and UK traditions, which may not apply universally.
- Forgets that the earliest 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 political significance of adopting/not adopting the 'think tank' label, which varies depending on the organisation's political context.

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1. 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

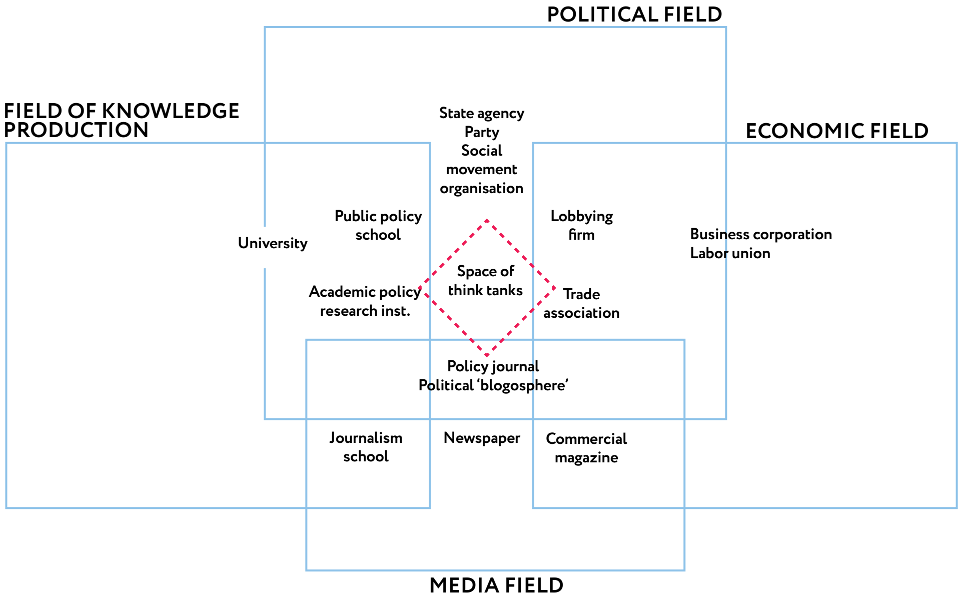
Rather than pinning down a strict definition, it is perhaps better to explore the roles and functions that think tanks tend to play. Think tank roles and functions can vary based on their context, mission and aims, organisational structures, business models, and available resources. Mendizabal (2010, 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. They create spaces for engagement during polarised political climates, generate ideas for political campaigns, and offer insights during crises.

Medvetz (2008) sketched out the positions of think tanks in the social space to show that they are boundary organisations, balancing independence and connections with various actors. This dynamic view reflects how their functions evolve in response to others' roles (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Thinks tanks in the social space


POLITICAL FIELD
FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION
State agency
Party
Social movement organisation
ECONOMIC FIELD
Public policy school
Lobbying firm
University
Business corporation
Labor union
Space of think tanks
Academic policy research inst.
Trade association
Policy journal
Political 'blogosphere'
Journalism school
Newspaper
Commercial magazine
MEDIA FIELD

Source: Medvetz (2008)

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Others, like Anne-Marie Slaughter (2021) have argued that the ‘think tank’ concept is outdated, covering functions no longer reflective of this century. Today, think tanks are in the problem-solving space, developing responses to social, economic and political issues. Slaughter invites us to consider a new term that reflects these functions: the change hub. Unlike a closed-off tank, a hub connects diverse actors with the shared goal of initiating ideas and action to effect change.

Towards a definition

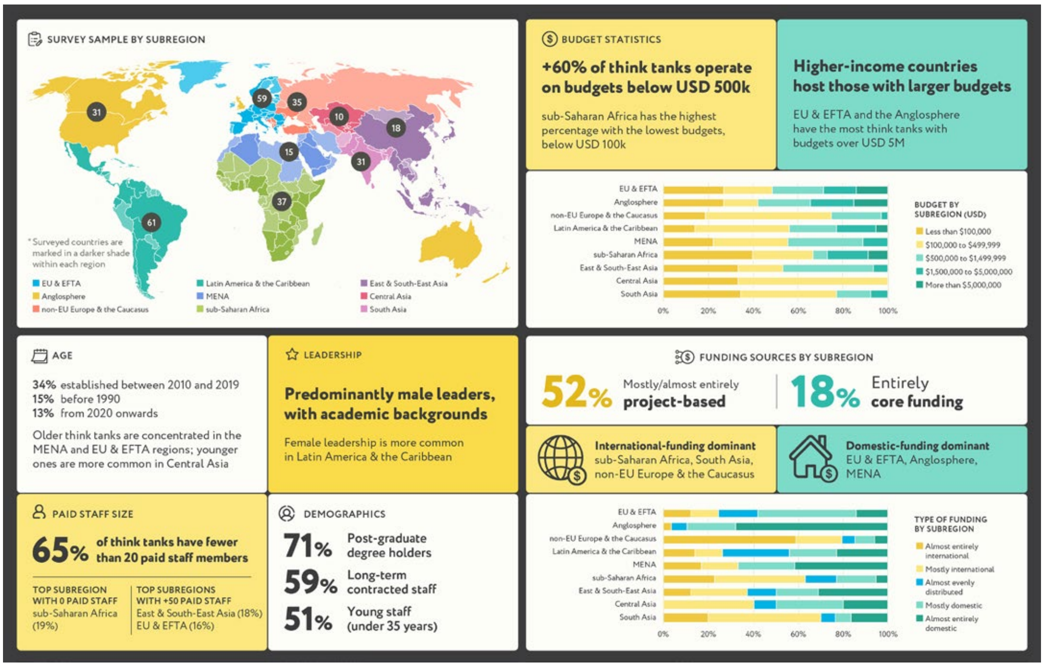
A strict and constraining definition of think tanks is of little use. Instead, it’s more practical to embrace a broad definition that recognises the diversity in forms, affiliations, ideologies, functions, and roles within think tanks.

With this perspective, think tanks can be described as diverse entities that have as their main objective to inform political actors (directly or indirectly) with the aim of facilitating policy change and achieving explicit policy outcomes. While their decisions rely on research-based evidence, they are still influenced by values. They may perform different functions, from shaping the public agenda to monitoring policy implementation and enhancing the capabilities of other policy actors. The nature of think tanks depends on their operational context; a think tank in China won’t mirror one in Bolivia, and we shouldn’t expect them to.

THINK TANKS AS A SECTOR

The annual Think tank state of the sector report prepared by On Think Tanks and the Open Think Tank Directory –a publicly accessible repository of over 3800 think tanks and policy-focused or boundary organisations—provide an overview of the sector. We encourage you to explore these resources to understand the sector’s growth and trends. Would you like to add your think tank to the directory? Register it here.

Figure 2: Think tank landscape in 2024



BUDGET STATISTICS

+60% of think tanks operate on budgets below USD 500k

sub-Saharan Africa has the highest percentage with the lowest budgets, below USD 100k

Higher-income countries host those with larger budgets

EU & EFTA and the Anglosphere have the most think tanks with budgets over USD 5M

AGE

34% established between 2010 and 2019
15% before 1990
13% from 2020 onwards

Older think tanks are concentrated in the MENA and EU & EFTA regions; younger ones are more common in Central Asia

LEADERSHIP

Predominantly male leaders, with academic backgrounds

Female leadership is more common in Latin America & the Caribbean

FUNDING SOURCES BY SUBREGION

52% Mostly/almost entirely **project-based**

18% Entirely **core funding**

International-funding dominant
sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, non-EU Europe & the Caucasus

Domestic-funding dominant
EU & EFTA, Anglosphere, MENA

PAID STAFF SIZE

65% **of think tanks have fewer than 20 paid staff members**

TOP SUBREGION WITH 0 PAID STAFF
sub-Saharan Africa (19%)

TOP SUBREGIONS WITH +50 PAID STAFF
East & South-East Asia (18%)
EU & EFTA (16%)

DEMOGRAPHICS

71% Post-graduate degree holders
59% Long-term contracted staff
51% Young staff (under 35 years)

Source: González, M (2024)

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2. POLICY-RELEVANT RESEARCH

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC POLICY

Introduction[2]

Research is at the heart of what think tanks do. But understanding the relationship between research and policy can be a bit of a puzzle. By aligning our research design and implementation with the political landscape, we can maximise the impact of think tanks' efforts.

In this section, we will explore a guiding framework and a set of principles for conducting policy-relevant research. We will also discuss various policy problems and how to approach them.

What is public policy?

Policy studies have a 'long history and a short past' (De Leon, 1994); while government and governance have been studied over the past millennia, the systematic examination of policies themselves as a discrete discipline dates back only a few decades. Young & Quinn (2002) sought to consolidate the different definitions of public policy into a list of key points, which are summarised below:

- *Authoritative government action.* Implemented by a government body with the legislative, political and financial authority to do so.
- *More than an intention or promise.* Policy is an elaborated approach which comprises 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.

There are various models of the policy-making process which broadly describe how policy is formed and developed. These models, such as the Policy Cycle (Figure 3) or the Black Box (Figure 4),[3] often assume the policy process to be linear and simple. While such models are helpful to analyse public policy in the abstract, they can be detached from reality.

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[2] This background note combines two notes that were separately drafted by Cristina Bacalso, and Andrea Ordoñez and Leandro Echt for the On Think Tanks School's 'Designing policy-relevant research agendas' short course in 2017. It has been revised by Stephanie Nicolle.

[3] 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).

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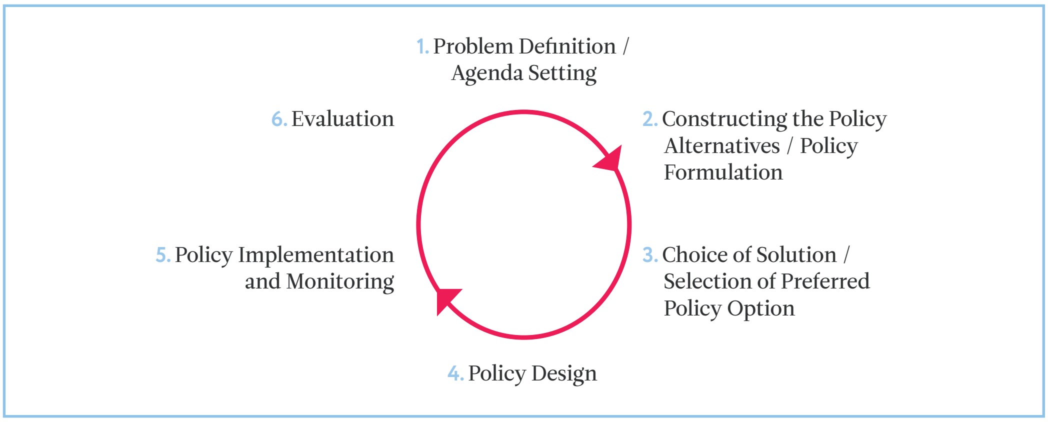
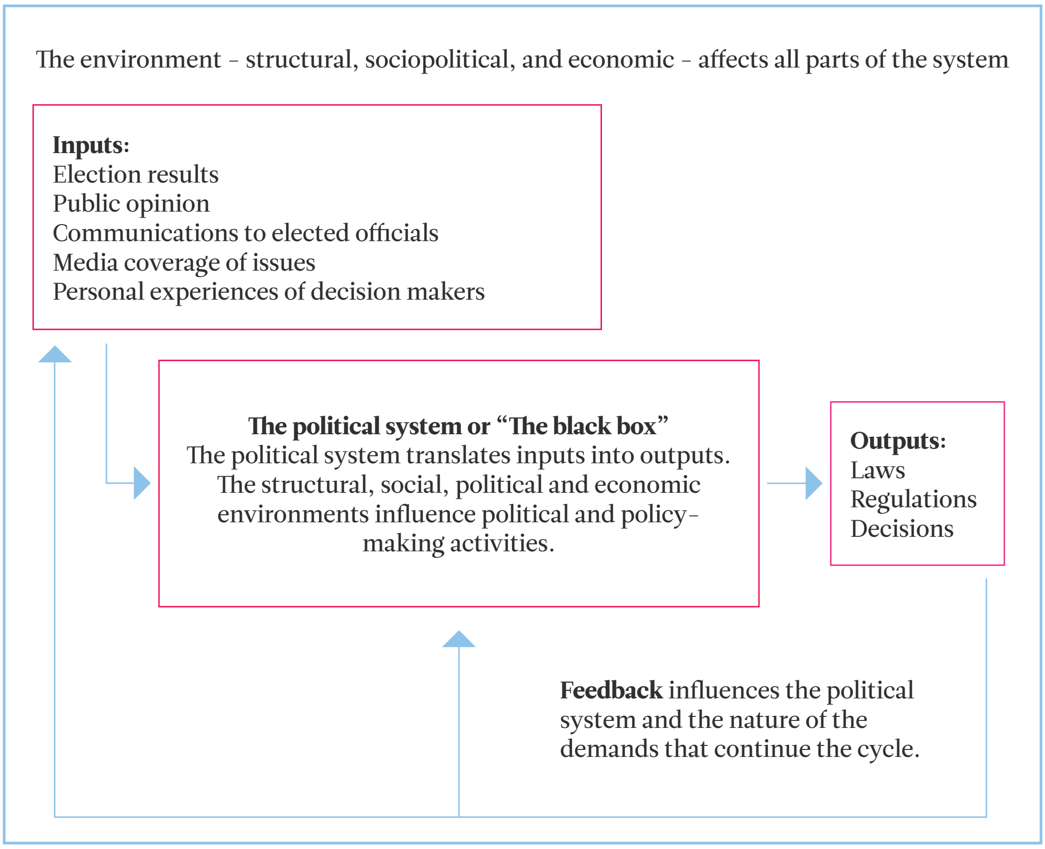
Figure 3. The policy cycle


1. Problem Definition / Agenda Setting
2. Constructing the Policy Alternatives / Policy Formulation
3. Choice of Solution / Selection of Preferred Policy Option
4. Policy Design
5. Policy Implementation and Monitoring
6. Evaluation

Source: Young and Quinn (2002)

Figure 4. The policy-making process as a black box


The environment – structural, sociopolitical, and economic – affects all parts of the system
Inputs:
Election results
Public opinion
Communications to elected officials
Media coverage of issues
Personal experiences of decision makers
The political system or "The black box"
The political system translates inputs into outputs. The structural, social, political and economic environments influence political and policy-making activities.
Outputs:
Laws
Regulations
Decisions
Feedback influences the political system and the nature of the demands that continue the cycle.

Source: Birkland (2011)

How to align research with public policy

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. A useful framework to conduct policy-relevant research involves: (1) understanding the type of policy problem and (2) identifying the aim or purpose of conducting research. 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 an existing and a normatively valued situation that is to be bridged by government action (see for example, the Areas of Research Interest platform which shows researchers the key issues that the UK government is interested in). However, not everyone sees the same gap. And what is undesirable to some, may be desirable to others. Therefore, policy problems are not constructed by only considering information or facts, but also by considering values and beliefs.

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

Formulate a meaningful research question: Once the policy problem has been clearly stated, then it's time to draft research questions that are sharp, focused and grounded in a profound understanding of the policy problem. It is important that the questions are 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 a better question 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 a research project with your context and 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.

Seven principles of policy-relevant research

In the previous section, we explored a framework which provides a step-by-step guide for how to conduct policy-relevant research. In this section, we present a set of principles for policy-relevant research which draw on both current literature and good practices. These principles offer overarching guidelines to cultivate the right mindset and practical skills for effective policy research.

Policy research must be:

1. *Embedded in the policy context:* There are no clear-cut recipes, rules and standards for conducting policy-relevant research. This means that no particular type of research is in itself better than the rest. Instead, it's important to make strategic choices by considering the context where the research is being carried out.
2. *Internally and externally validated:* Policy-relevant research should garner acceptance both within and outside the organisation. Seeking the perspectives of others enhances the research agenda and the overall quality of each research project.
3. *Responsive to policy questions and objectives:* Being responsive to policy questions and objectives is essential in policy research. Thus, it's crucial to tailor research contributions to align with the specific questions and objectives of each policy problem, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all model when providing policy recommendations.

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4. *Fit for purpose and timely:* To ensure that research is 'fit for purpose and timely', it's crucial to first identify the nature of the policy problem and the research questions it can address. This entails adopting a pragmatic research design approach that considers the unique characteristics of the policy problem, the available time and a think tank's capabilities.
5. *Crafted with an analytical and policy perspective:* Policy-relevant research goes beyond the obvious and beyond a general description of the situation. Doing the necessary homework before starting the research project and having a good sense of policy issues 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:* Embracing innovation in research is crucial for a think tank to sustain its relevance in the policy process. Yet, it's essential to strike a balance between the ability to generate new ideas and leveraging the existing capacities of the think tank.
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.

UNDERSTANDING POLICY PROBLEMS

Types of policy problems

Hisschemöller and Hoppe (1995) offer a simple but powerful categorisation of policy problems (Table 1) in which two dimensions are used:

- *The relevant and available knowledge*: whether or not there is certainty with regard to the knowledge available about the problem.
- *The norms and values at stake*: whether or not 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 well-defined issues which often require technical expertise. They involve a high degree of consensus and clear responsibility for their resolution. Examples include regulating health services and road maintenance.
- *Unstructured problems*. These problems are the opposite of the former.[4] They 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 include the consolidation or separation of states, negative impacts of new technologies, climate change, or complex democratic reform processes.
- *Moderately structured problems (knowledge certainty)*. In these problems, there's a certain amount of confidence regarding the technical aspect of the problem. This means that there's certainty in relation to the knowledge needed to understand the problem. But there's no agreement on the values associated with the problem. These include issues such as sex education in public schools.

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[4] Unstructured problems are sometimes referred to as wicked, ill-structured and messy.

- *Moderately structured problems (value agreement).* In these problems, there is consensus on the values, but no certainty about the knowledge or the technical aspects of the problem. An example of this type of problem is how to tackle the spread of HIV-AIDS or brain drain from a country. The general opinion is that these should be stopped, but there isn't a clear understanding of why they occur or how to tackle them.

Table 1. Types of policy problems

		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 and 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 the lenses discussed above or other lenses, you should maintain a dynamic perspective. 'Policy problems are social and political constructs' (Hisschemöller and Hoppe, 1995). As such, they are in constant flux.
- **Decision-making involves structuring problems.** For a policy to be seen as a 'need', the problem being faced must be structured. Often, policymakers want to know how to frame and understand a problem that would justify government intervention. This requires ensuring that the problem is communicated as clearly as possible.
- **Researchers tend to problematise an issue.** Researchers tend to keep finding new sides or perspectives to an issue. While that's helpful to understand how problems are multifaceted, it may result in paralysing decision and action. It's important to be able to handle the tension between the need to 'structure a problem' and the need to keep an open perspective.

BOX 1. REFLECTING ON HOW PROBLEMS ARE FRAMED

Before generating alternative solutions to address policy problems, it's good to reflect on how problems are framed and understood (and the degree of consensus between the think tank and others involved).

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

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How to approach different policy problems

Abraham Maslow once said, ‘If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.’ If we apply this to the policy context, we can gather that different policy problems require different solutions and strategies. For each type of policy problem there are at least two key questions we can ask:

- What can a think tank realistically expect to achieve or how does a think tank seek to influence policy?
- And what is the role of research in this process?

The framework summarised in Table 2 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 given below is not meant to be prescriptive. While different aspects of it can be adapted, it’s important to understand the relationship between these three elements: problem–policy influence–research.

Table 2. Summary of the 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 their is a lack of certainty about knowledge.	Stakeholders do not agree on their values or priorities.	Discomfort with the status quo, but no agreement on 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.	Difficult environment for independent think tanks.	All stakeholders, including you, are still learning about the issue.

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

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BOX 2. THINKING ABOUT POLICY AND IMPACT

The Centre for Public Impact (2016) emphasises the relationship between the technocratic and the political in their Public Impact Fundamentals framework. They identify 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 (www.centreforpublicimpact.org/) offers a variety of tools and resources. They also refer to a Public Impact Observatory, which is a database of more than 350 case studies of public policies from around the world and provides a snapshot of the policy challenge, the initiative, the public impact, and their evaluation of each across nine drivers.

POLICY BLUNDERS AND IMPROVEMENTS

What happens when a policy goes wrong?

While it's useful to examine instances where policymaking is successful, there's 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 outline what they considered to be among the most egregious of government failures – 'policy blunders'.

Crewe (2013) 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 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 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?
- *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).

Final thoughts: making policies more inclusive

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 with (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, 2016). 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.

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3. EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING

WHAT IS EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING?[5]

Introduction

Any discussion about think tanks is located within the space of evidence-informed policy. Especially since COVID-19, many governments have indicated their commitment to science/research/evidence use in policy; it shows up in many national policies and national development plans. But devising and implementing evidence-informed policies tend to be complex. The policy environment is permeated by challenges, uncertainties, competing agendas and trade-offs, all of which make the area of evidence-informed policy an ongoing area of study and practice.

Systematically informing policymaking with a wide range of evidence is important and commendable, but researchers and practitioners have been increasingly moving away from the idea of evidence use as a purely technical or rational process. Scholars like Jones, Jones, Shaxson and Walker (2013), Cairney (2016) and Parkhurst (2016) have emphasised the political nature of evidence use in policy, the complexity and non-linearity of the policymaking process, and the myriad relationships (both formal and informal) that mediate the use of evidence in policy.

BOX 3. WHAT IS EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING?

‘Evidence-informed policy is that which has considered a broad range of research evidence; evidence from citizens and other stakeholders; and evidence from practice and policy implementation, as part of a process that considers other factors such as political realities and current public debates. We do not see it as a policy that is exclusively based on research, or as being based on one set of findings. We accept that in some cases, research evidence may be considered and rejected; if rejection was based on understanding of the insights that the research offered then we would still consider any resulting policy to be evidence-informed.’ (Neman, Fisher & Shaxson 2012)

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

- Will never be more than one of the inputs to the policy process – alongside ethical, fiscal, political, and other considerations.
- Does not need to be derived from experimental methods to be considered a valid input for policymaking. Jones, Shaxson and Walker (2013) for instance identified four broad and overlapping categories of evidence that are combined in policymaking processes: data, citizen knowledge, practice-informed knowledge, and research.
- 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.
- Is strongly affected and influenced by relationships between knowledge producers, brokers and users as well as relationships within all of these groups.

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[5] This section was put together by Cristina Bacalso. It has been updated by Emily Hayter.

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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' as a replacement for 'evidence-based' when referring to policymaking.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLICYMAKING AND EVIDENCE

Policymaking in the real world

In 2011, the Institute for Government undertook an empirical study, Policy Making in the Real World: Evidence and Analysis to explore how policymaking practically works in the United Kingdom.[6] Here are some key insights from the report, which may have broader applicability across various policymaking processes. These points are useful to consider when locating the role of evidence in policymaking, which is further discussed in the next section.

- *Policy-making doesn't happen in distinct stages.* In 2003, the UK Treasury introduced a ROAMEF policy cycle (Rationale, Objectives, Appraisal, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Feedback). However, the study found that these 'stages' often overlap, making them hard to distinguish. Problems and solutions often arise together, leading ministers to prescribe action for unclear issues without flexibility to make any changes.
- *Policies need to be designed, not just conceived.* Policy design is only one step in the policy cycle, requiring 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' (Institute for Government, 2011). Likewise, policy proposals need extensive testing and a flexible design to adapt to local or changing circumstances during implementation.
- *Policy-making is often determined by events.* Policymaking doesn't happen in a 'black box' or vacuum where the structural, socio-political and economic environments are exogenous to policy-making, and where governments are in total control of the process (also discussed in the background note on *Policy-relevant Research*). Government plans can be disrupted by unexpected events, including self-generated actions driven by a desire for media headlines or the appearance of taking action.
- *The effects of policies are often indirect and take time to appear.* The effects of public policies are complex, wide-ranging, and, at times, unintended – meaning that measurement and attribution can be difficult. Several models underestimate this complexity and the difficulty of tracing cause-and-effect in public affairs. They should consider interconnected policies or view policymaking as a broader systemic process.
- *Existing approaches neglect politics or treat it as something to be managed.* Approaches that overemphasise the technocratic aspects of policymaking (e.g., how to use evidence or build an implementation plan) undermine the

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[6] The research relied on an extensive methodology including a literature review, interviews with 50 senior civil servants, interviews with 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.

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impact of politics on the policymaking process (e.g., how to mobilise support, manage opposition and values, and present a vision). For example, Nicolle's (2023) blog on policy conversations in the movie *Oppenheimer* explores the complex politics of evidence-informed policymaking. She also makes reference to Justin Parkhurst's The Politics of Evidence, which offers a good starting point to understand these complexities.

How is evidence assimilated into the policy process?

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. Evidence can be used in a wide range of cases, for instance, to signal early warning of a problem to be addressed, for target setting, for implementation assessment, and for evaluation (effectiveness, efficiency, unexpected outcomes etc.).

Evidence 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); and (5) evaluate what will result from policy. Thus, evidence has the potential to influence the policymaking process at each stage of the policy process – from agenda-setting to formulation to implementation. However, different forms 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).

Yet, as explained previously, 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 evidence use, 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 evidence takes place in 'systems characterised by high levels of interdependency and interconnectedness among participants. No single decisionmaker has the independent power to translate and apply research knowledge. Rather, multiple decisionmakers are embedded in systemic relations in which [evidence] 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' (National Research Council, 2012).

BARRIERS TO USING SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE TO INFORM POLICY

The barriers to the use of evidence to inform policy have been the subject of a number of academic studies, both broadly and within specific sectors. Recent systematic reviews include those by Oliver (2014) and Langer, Tripney and Gough (2016), which outline a wide range of common barriers to evidence use, including the capacity of civil servants, access to evidence, relationships between evidence producers and users, and organisational structures and systems within government departments. Some of these factors are summarised in engaging and accessible formats by, for example, the Alliance for Useful Evidence (2016) report entitled Using Evidence: What Works? and Weyrauch et al.'s (2016) interactive Context Matters Framework.

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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.

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BOX 4. THE CONTEXT MATTERS FRAMEWORK

The Context Matters Framework (2016) was developed by Politics & Ideas (P&I), a Southern-led 'think net' in collaboration with INASP. They used a literature review combined with more than 50 interviews with policymakers and practitioners across the Global South to map the key factors affecting evidence use in policymaking bodies. These are clustered into six interrelated dimensions, each of which contains a number of subdimensions:

- Macro context: the wider political economy context, including the political, social, economic and cultural factors that surround the policymaking institution and in which it is embedded.
- Intra- and inter-relationships, referring to the formal and informal relationships between public sector bodies as well as between government bodies and research producers and brokers such as think tanks and universities.
- Four dimensions of context within policymaking bodies:
  - Organisational cultures around evidence use
  - Processes and management structures
  - Organisational resources (including financial but also infrastructural, e.g. IT)
  - Organisational capacity

The Context Matters Framework forms the basis for participatory diagnostic processes with government agencies, which can identify which of these factors are in play in a particular context. It has been used in a range of partnerships with governments and multilateral agencies to identify and address opportunities to improve evidence use, as well as to inform conceptual frameworks to understand evidence use in policy (Langer and Weyrauch 2021).

Capabilities within government departments are one of the most fundamental factors affecting evidence use in policy. Newman, Fisher and Shaxson (2012) raised a number of key questions related to the skills and awareness of policymakers to identify their evidence needs, and to gather, appraise and use evidence in decision-making. In the UK, the Department for International Development (DfID) conducted an internal evidence survey in 2013 to explore its own staff attitudes and capacities towards evidence use. Later that year, DfID launched the Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence programme, a group of consortia made up of think tanks, NGOs, government departments and other stakeholders across Asia, Africa and Latin America aiming to explore approaches to strengthening capacity for evidence use within policymaking bodies. A number of other initiatives led by think tanks have sought to explore and build capacity for evidence use in policymaking in countries across the Global South.

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BOX 5. THREE THINK TANKS LEADING WORK ON EVIDENCE USE

1) African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) in Kenya focuses on strengthening evidence use in health policy in East and Southern Africa. They lead capacity strengthening initiatives for government bodies and parliaments on evidence use and have also written and researched extensively on this topic in the African region.

2) The Veredas Institute in Brazil was founded as a collaboration between policymakers, universities and civil society to strengthen evidence use, with a focus on social policy. They host the Brazilian Coalition for Evidence, a collection of more than 40 institutions, and have widened their reach to launch the Latin American Evidence Hub.

3) The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) was the Pakistan country lead in the Strengthening Evidence for Development Impact (SEDI) project that aims to strengthen evidence use in the area of economic development and trade. They shared their lessons and reflections from this experience in a number of written pieces including a political economy analysis of the role of evidence use in Pakistan.

Beyond the issues related to internal capacity within policymaking bodies, there is also a range of practical and systemic constraints that can affect the use of evidence in policymaking. In recognition of this, efforts to strengthen capacity are typically combined with efforts to address these more systemic factors such as the legal and regulatory environment, the resourcing of evidence collection, and the types of formal and informal relationships between evidence users and producers.

As noted above, most of the systemic constraints identified by the main literature on the issue is generally derived from, or inherent to, the broader policy environment or context. 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.

Government and public sector agencies around the world have recognised the need to strengthen evidence use and have invested in a wide range of structures and initiatives to improve this. Taddese and Anderson (2017) mapped over 100 different government mechanisms from around the world that seek to improve the access to and use of evidence. More recently, books by Goldman and Pabari

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(2021) and Khumalo et al. (2022) looked at specific African case studies including, respectively, monitoring and evaluation cultures and procedures within government departments, and evidence systems within parliaments. In the UK, reports conducted by public agencies have reviewed the use of research in the UK parliament (Kenny et al., 2017) and investigated the capability of evidence use in government (Government Office for Science, 2019). The Joint Research Centre, which supports the European Commission, published a handbook drawing on its experience to support others wishing to embed evidence in decision-making (Sucha and Sienkiewicz, 2020). And in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges convened policymakers, researchers, citizens and civil society organisations to identify opportunities for improvement in evidence use, from the global to the local level. It’s clear that collaboration and co-creation are key to the future of advancing evidence-informed policymaking, and that think tanks have a critical role to play in this.

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4. STRATEGIC GOVERNANCE & 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 while there isn't a one-size fits all model, there certainly are some lessons that organisations in all contexts can benefit from.[8]

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

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[8] 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.

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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. In that sense, they share similarities with boards in 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

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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 5. The pros and cons of different boards

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

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, i.e., 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 (2012), 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:

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- 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 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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5. COMMUNICATIONS

INTRODUCTION[9]

This section introduces the broad (and important) topic of communications for think tanks. In the past, think tanks were used to being found by audiences who went looking for them. But the emergence of the digital space has changed this. To paraphrase Connery (2015), today, audiences expect their information to find and come to them. This means think tanks are now having to diversify how they reach their audiences.

We begin this chapter with a discussion on **how to understand communications in a modern think tank**. We consider different approaches to communications, and present a tool for monitoring and learning from communications.

We then look at communications **outputs and channels for think tanks**, and discuss new approaches to publishing research in a digital world.

The next section focuses on **writing to inspire policy change**, sharing tips for good writing in a digital age and how to craft effective messages.

The final section dives into **data visualisation**, looking at ways to engage audiences with research data, the different types of data visualisation and what it takes to do it well.

UNDERSTANDING THINK TANK COMMUNICATIONS

The importance of communications

Communications is too often treated as a tag-team race: once the research is done, it is handed over to a communications person or team to put it into a template and send it out through the same old channels.

But think tank communications is much more than this. And it starts at the research planning stage. It is strategic, helping to define audiences and policy goals from day one. It's an art – of unearthing the research narrative, of shaping messages, and of choosing the right formats, channels and tools to reach and engage your audiences, and ultimately achieve your goals.
After all, even the most high-quality, robust and credible research won't have an impact if it doesn't reach the right people, at the right time, and in a way that they can understand and connect with. As Jeff Knezovich (2012) argues, 'a policy brief is a piece of paper, it doesn't DO anything on its own'.

Richard Darlington's (2022 [2017]) article 'Defying gravity: Why the "submarine strategy" drags you down' describes how traditional research teams have tended to 'submerge' to the bottom of the ocean to conduct their research and analysis; thinking deeply, alone. When finished, they pop up to the surface – often with a 100-page report and some policy recommendations. Most think tanks today recognise that a submarine approach won't work. But it's not always deliberate. According to Richard, this is what happens by default when there isn't a communications strategy.

Modern think tanks *must* embed communications into their teams and their work from the beginning if they want to have an impact with their research.

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[9] Different sections of the Communications background note were authored by Enrique Mendizabal, Jeff Knezovich and Carolina Kern. Stephanie Nicolle updated this background note in 2023. The most recent update in 2024, which includes new sections, was undertaken by Louise Ball.

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Communications as an orchestra

Enrique Mendizabal (2015) has described think tank communications as an orchestra. Rather than thinking about communications through a project-based approach, think tanks should treat their communications as an organisation-wide effort to maximise their chances of informing policy and practice..
Mendizabal believes that a think tank must develop three things:

1. A portfolio of communications channels.
2. A communications team with clear ownership over those channels.
3. Tactics or rules to use these channels and resources strategically.

In Mendizabal's orchestra model, the head of communications is the conductor: coordinating the different channels, ready to bring the right instruments into play as windows of opportunity arise.

Rather than communications staff being project-based, they should be specialists – developing and honing their skills in events, digital media, publications, and so on (much like the different instrument sections of an orchestra).

Monitoring and learning from your communications

Communications monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) often starts and stops with reporting on download statistics or retweets. But these numbers alone only give us a fraction of the picture. They don't tell us anything about how someone uses your work – or what you could do differently next time to improve your communications and impact.

The communications monitoring, evaluation and learning toolkit authored by Caroline Cassidy and Louise Ball (2018), suggests that think tanks look at two areas:

1. Strategy and management

   You can't monitor, evaluate and learn from communications if you don't know what you were trying to do in the first place. So, you need a good plan. To monitor and learn from your communications, you should ask: Did we have a plan for this piece of work, and did we follow it? What can we learn for next time?

   Answer these questions in a quick after-action review or meeting, making sure you note down any lessons for next time.

2. Outputs

   There are three dimensions to consider:

   - **Reach**. How many people did you reach? (Most evaluations focus on this because it's the easiest to track using analytics.) But also, did you reach the *right* people?
   - **Quality and usefulness**. Was it factually accurate, well-written and grammatically correct, containing clear messages, etc.? How did users receive and perceive it?
   - **Uptake and use**. This is the hardest to measure, but you can begin by recording anecdotal evidence and feedback and start building a picture of how and by whom your work is being used.

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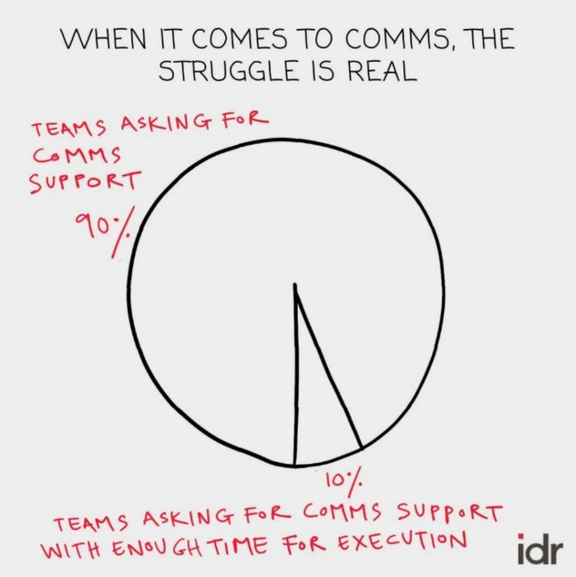
The toolkit breaks down key questions and indicators to measure each of these elements.

Having a simple MEL system for your communications function is a great way to start building an evidence base for what works, and to make the case for additional communications resources (Ball, 2018).

Figure 6. Communications capacity and support


WHEN IT COMES TO COMMS, THE STRUGGLE IS REAL
TEAMS ASKING FOR COMMS SUPPORT
90%
10%
TEAMS ASKING FOR COMMS SUPPORT WITH ENOUGH TIME FOR EXECUTION
idr

Source: India Development Review, *'Five pie-charts for your communications life'*, (2022)

Outputs and channels

Think tanks today have a lot of options for how they engage their audiences. Remember the idea of communications as an orchestra: think tanks can't just think about communications on a project-by-project basis. They must also build their reputation, credibility and visibility – their brand – with their target audiences over time.

A think tank does this by developing a portfolio of communications channels and tools, and then deciding how to use them strategically. Picking the right output or channel will depend on the content (what is it you want to share) and the audience (who it is intended for).

As a starting point, see this non-exhaustive list and read more in 'Communications options for think tanks: channels and tools' (Mendizabal, 2012).

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Table 3. Communications outputs and channels

PUBLICATIONS	DIGITAL
• Academic journal article/paper • Research report • Working paper • Background/briefing note • Literature review • Policy brief	• Blog • Social media • Podcast • Video • Data visualisation • Newsletter • Email
MEDIA	**EVENTS**
• Op-ed • Media release • Briefing	• Public event • Webinar • Lecture/presentation • Workshop • Training • Roundtable meeting • Private briefing

Revolutionising how we publish policy research

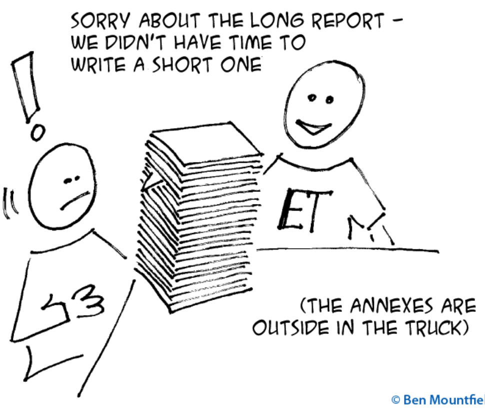
Over the last decade, think tanks have worked hard to make their outputs more accessible by investing in communications advice and support. Larger organisations have employed editors, digital content specialists and media experts.

This is great progress as it has encouraged researchers to think a bit differently about how they might present their work – and to focus on telling a good story. As James Georgalakis (2022), 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.'

Given the amount of information people now have at their fingertips through iPhones, tablets, and so on, research centres' choice of output is changing. While longer reports remain important because of their depth of analysis, shorter and more specific outputs – like blogs – have become very popular.

In a radical rethinking of how we publish our research, Joe Miller (2020) asked: research isn't linear, so why are reports? This led to Joe's (non-linear) book: *Screen, Research and Hypertext.*[10] Non-linear reporting is about letting readers choose their own path through the work, thereby making their own connections and increasing their learning.

Figure 7. Rethinking communications outputs


SORRY ABOUT THE LONG REPORT – WE DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO WRITE A SHORT ONE
ET
(THE ANNEXES ARE OUTSIDE IN THE TRUCK)

Source: BenMountfield.net

© Ben Mountfield 2012

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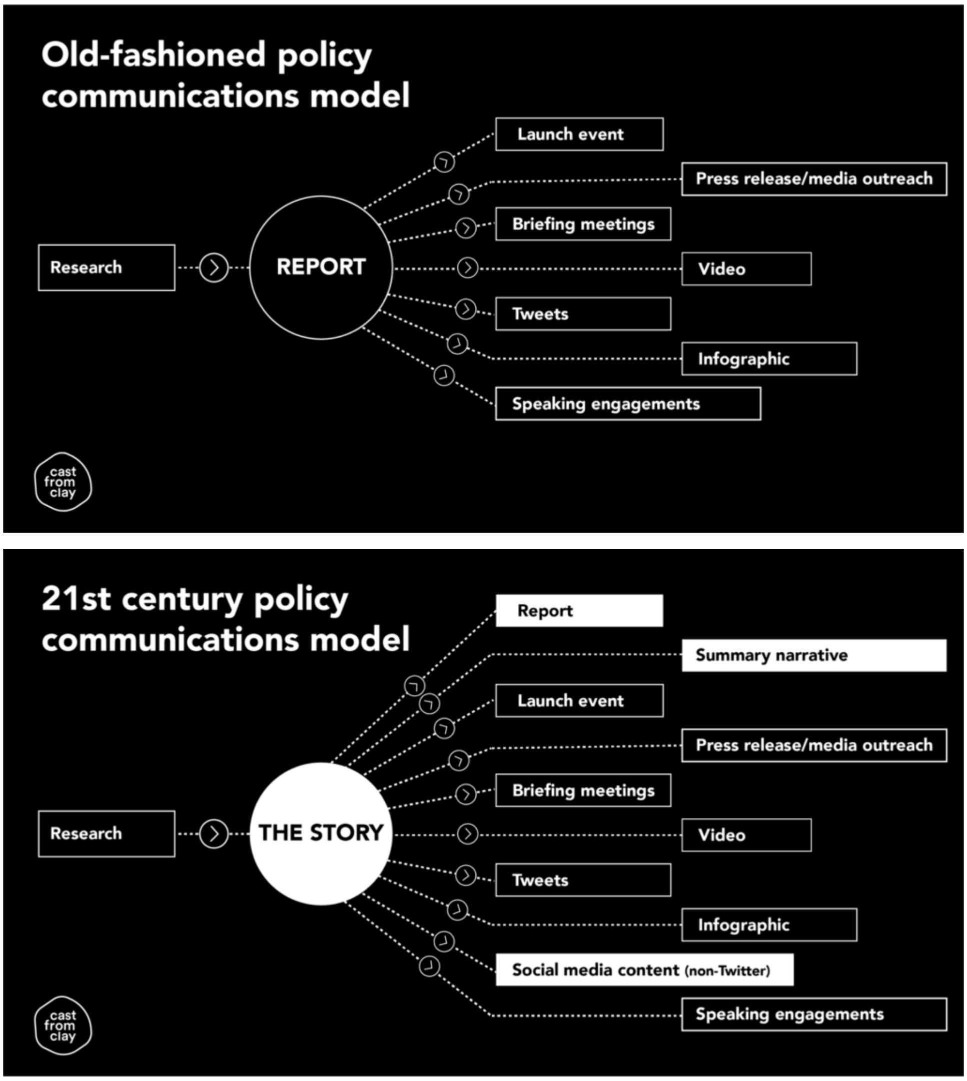
10. Listen to an interview on OTT Talks with Joe about the book.

The 21st century policy communications model

In 2018, Cast From Clay proposed a new model for policy communications. They argue that old models put the report at the centre of think tank's time and efforts, with key messages extracted and packaged up into other outputs to promote the report. In the new model, the report is just one of multiple assets that are used to communicate a story – the central message or narrative that you want people to hear.

Figure 8. A new model for policy communications



Old-fashioned policy communications model

Research → REPORT

- Launch event
- Press release/media outreach
- Briefing meetings
- Video
- Tweets
- Infographic
- Speaking engagements

21st century policy communications model

Research → THE STORY

- Report
- Summary narrative
- Launch event
- Press release/media outreach
- Briefing meetings
- Video
- Tweets
- Infographic
- Social media content (non-Twitter)
- Speaking engagements

Source: Cast From Clay (2018)

WRITING TO INSPIRE POLICY CHANGE

The power of good writing

Much has been written about the art of writing clearly. George Orwell's six rules, published back in 1946, still hold true today:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech that you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

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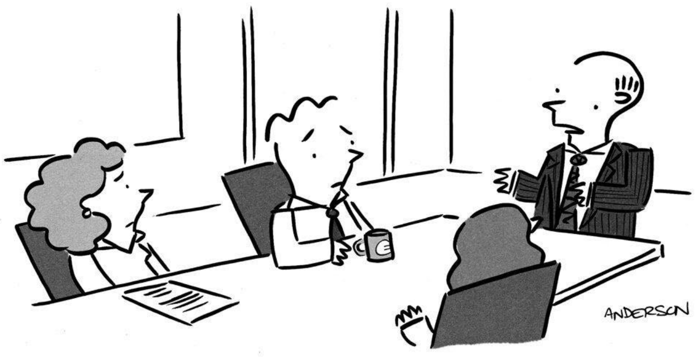
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Then there are more contemporary practical guidelines such as The Guardian's Style Guide and Cast From Clay's 'Please get to the point'.

At its core, strong writing 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.'*

Figure 9. A new model for policy communications



"To make a long story short, what it all boils down to in the final analysis is that what you should take away from this is..."

Source: https://andertoons.com/

Style guides

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

As a complement to style guides, publication policies are also crucial tools to define the desired length, tone, audience and branding and quality control processes of different types of content. See CIPPEC's approach to improving the quality of its publications.

By developing style guides and publication policies, organisations can elevate their editorial standards. For this reason, it's worth putting together solid and well-presented guides and policies, which are updated frequently and systematically disseminated to staff, including new hires.

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Crafting effective messages[11]

Every well-written report, compelling presentation, or effective communication output has strong messaging at its core. A common mistake is to not think about messaging at all. It's often assumed that summarising and delivering information is enough. But effective communication requires a clear message – or set of messages – aligned with your aim.

Messages are 'the tip of the iceberg' (Young and Quinn, 2012). They represent what your audience most needs to know. This message is supported by the main information (the rest of the iceberg).

You need to help your audience to understand and absorb your message. When writing your key messages, the most important consideration is your audience. Who are they? What do you need them to know and why? What do they care about? What interests them?

Heath and Heath (2007) discuss six dimensions of effective messaging. Originally from the marketing realm, these principles are universally applicable to all forms of communication, including the translation of evidence for policy-making. Effective messages are:

- simple
- unexpected
- concrete
- credible
- emotional
- stories.

It is common for clear and effective messages to be refined after the report has been written, for instance when drafting a blog or a presentation to promote the research. However, it is helpful to develop your messages after the research is complete, but before the report is written. This will help shape the report structure and inform strategic decisions about the outputs and channel needed to tell your research story.

DATA VISUALISATIONS[12]

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 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 – facing 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 help support the research process itself, but they can also help communicate large quantities of information to a wider, less technical audience.

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[11] This section has been adapted from the VakaYiko Evidence-Informed Policy Making Toolkit, Chapter 4 on communicating evidence. Published by INASP, available at: www.inasp.info/publications/evidence-informed-policy-making-eipm-toolkit.

[12] 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 2022.

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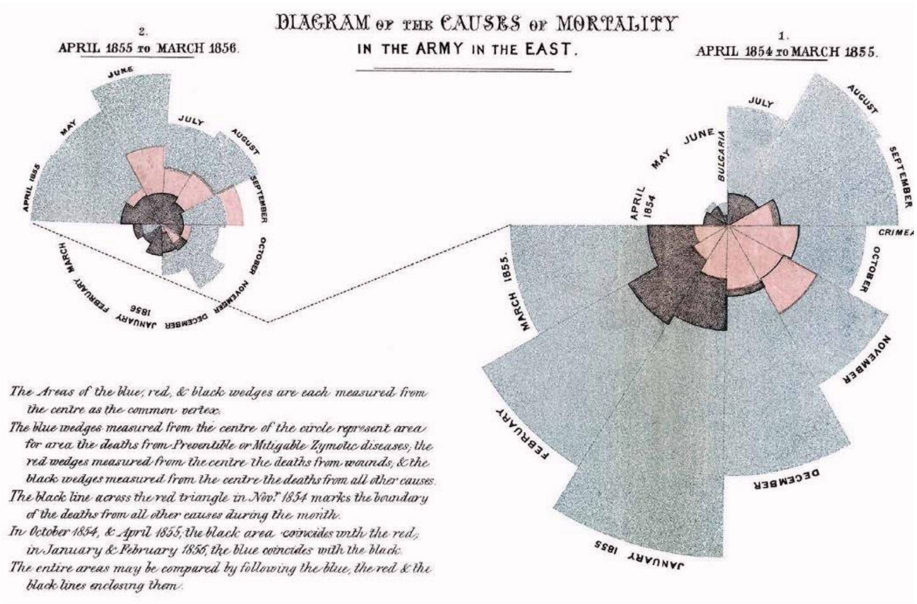
Data visualisations and policy influence

The ability of data visualisations to effectively communicate data makes them a powerful tool for think tanks. Take, for example, Florence Nightingale's 'coxcomb', or 'rose' diagram of the causes of British military deaths during the Crimean War (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Florence Nightingale's diagram of the causes of British military deaths during the Crimean War



The Areas of the blue, red, & black wedges are each measured from the centre as the common vertex.
The blue wedges measured from the centre of the circle represent area for area the deaths from Preventible or Mitigable Zymotic diseases; the red wedges measured from the centre the deaths from wounds, & the black wedges measured from the centre the deaths from all other causes.
The black line across the red triangle in Nov.r 1854 marks the boundary of the deaths from all other causes during the month.
In October 1854, & April 1855, the black area coincides with the red; in January & February 1856, the blue coincides with the black.
The entire areas may be compared by following the blue, the red & the black lines enclosing them.

Source: Carstens (2022)

The diagram shows that most deaths were caused by preventable disease, not battle wounds. Nightingale used it to lobby British parliamentarians 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.

During the early stages of COVID-19, the media frequently relied on logarithmic graphs to show how the situation was worsening. Romano, Sotis, Dominioni and Guidi (2020) carried out an experiment to test how well people understood logarithmic and linear graphs. The results showed that the use of logarithmic graphs to convey information was counterproductive. Many people found them hard to interpret. Worse still, it affected people's attitudes towards the pandemic and thus their policy preferences; people who viewed logarithmic graphs felt reassured that things would eventually get better – which was the opposite of the intended message.

What kinds of visualisations are there?

The term 'data visualisation' refers to creation of graphical representations of data, both quantitative and qualitative in nature – although quantitative data is particularly well-suited to visualisation.

One way to think of different types of data visualisations is by their format, which is also linked to their level of user interactivity – either static, motion or interactive graphics. Static visualisations, such as bar charts or pie charts, are typically used to highlight key facts in reports, posters and on social media (e.g. Don't limit her

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possibilities from JumpStart Georgia). Motion graphics are useful for explaining complex data and telling a story (e.g. Visualizing the past, present and future of carbon emissions by the World Resources Institute). And while these two forms tend to be linear, interactive visualisations offer multiple pathways, allowing users to choose how they explore and engage with the data (e.g. Mapping Czech crime, by Otevrenaspolecnost).

What goes into effective data visualisation?

At the heart of any effective data visualisation should always be the objective, and the end-user. Data visualisations are targeted at the subconscious mind and designed to be both immediately comprehensible and aesthetically pleasing. This can be particularly important when working to engage policymakers, as they tend to have limited time and short attention spans.

There are three main skills needed to produce effective data visualisations:

- **Research**: the ability to handle and understand the raw data.
- **Design**: knowing the appropriate types of visuals for the data; understanding chart design fundamentals; understanding principles of balance and flow; and knowledge of the appropriate use of colour, typography, and other visual cues.
- **Communications**: the number of visualisations that either don't have a clear message or a clear purpose is staggering. Communicating the right messages 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 can collaborate across these three areas. However, one of the benefits of the modern explosion in data visualisation is the tools and technologies that support their creation.

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6. FUNDRAISING & FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION[13]

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.[14]

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.

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 the 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).

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[13] 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.

[14] 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 following table (Table 4) sets out some of these considerations for two main funding models.

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Table 4. 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.

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Table 5: 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 6: 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

Also see this OTT talk on fundraising challenges and opportunities for think tanks.

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7. MONITORING, EVALUATION & LEARNING (MEL)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MEL FOR POLICY INFLUENCE[15]

Introduction

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's worth investing energy and resources into a systematic assessment of policy influencing efforts. In addition, some monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) activities can 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, especially as part of a well-thought-out MEL plan, can help organisations to:

- Reflect on and enhance the influence of their research on 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.

Why develop a MEL system?

Being clear about *why* a think tank wants to do an evaluation (and MEL more widely) is a key first step.

Consider the following questions about a think tank:

1. Does the think tank need 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 want 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 want to empower its members through greater consensus and commitment to the objectives?

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15. This chapter was originally developed by Vanesa Weyrauch and Dena Lomofsky in 201. It has since been updated by Susan Njambi-Szlapka with input from Stephanie Nicolle.

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BOX 6. FIVE REASONS TO UNDERTAKE MEL

In its toolkit on monitoring and evaluating policy influence, the CIPPEC (2013) proposes five reasons why an organisation might undertake MEL. Note how these reveal the ways in which MEL activities could help organisations achieve the kind of objectives we have just considered:[16]

- *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, obstruct work or 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. A MEL system can 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.

These objectives – and the reasons for undertaking MEL activities – can be more or less applicable to organisations depending on their individual characteristics, experience, leadership interests and values, and so on. The important thing is for an organisation to be clear about its own reasons for the MEL effort, since the strategies and methodology chosen will vary according to the type of knowledge that is needed and how it will be used.

Different purposes and reasons for MEL will require different approaches to the activities. For example, a MEL framework focused on learning what works and what needs to change will pay attention to 'why' the initiative was developed and 'for whom', with some concentration on 'what conditions' are needed to influence policy. For this purpose, drawing on methods like developmental or realist evaluation can be useful. But when conducting MEL for donor reporting, for example, the focus will be on the question of 'if' something worked. It will be geared towards demonstrating success and evidencing change.

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16. 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.

ASSESSING WHAT MATTERS: IS IT POSSIBLE TO MONITOR AND EVALUATE POLICY INFLUENCE?

Assessing the impact of research on policy is complex – and it's important to acknowledge the inherent limitations and challenges of trying to do so. Research and evidence are just one of many inputs, and their impact depends on how they compete with other ideas and other influencing efforts. That's why linear or rational models – where research leads directly to solutions that policymakers adopt – are too simplistic. A more intricate model that considers the interactions among various stakeholders and external factors reveals the complex realities of multiple decision-making arenas.

What aspects of policy influence efforts can be effectively assessed? To address this key question, it's crucial to first broaden the definition of 'success' beyond the strict achievement of policy change. Mendizabal (2013c) offers useful discussion points for defining the broader scope of 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 their peers first. As they do so, preliminary ideas, findings, research methods, tools, and so on flow in both (or multiple) directions. 'Uptake', therefore, may 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 (for instance public health information) or practitioners (such as 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 may be subject to uptake. The research process is important too, because it helps maintain the quality of the conversation between the different participants of the policy process. In essence, policymakers need to understand *where* ideas come from.
>
> *Replication is uptake too (and so is inspiration).* Consider the inter-generational transfer of skills. Much of the research conducted in universities and think tanks can be used to train new generations of researchers or advance a discipline or idea – and this counts as uptake. Writing a macroeconomics textbook or a new introduction to a sociology book, for example, is as important as producing 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. Researchers, including those in think tanks, often influence by helping decision-makers *understand* issues rather than pushing for specific actions. To gauge research uptake, it's essential to consider all the functions of think tanks: agenda-setting, issue explanation, popularising ideas, educating the elite, debate facilitation, critical thinking development, public institution assessment, 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; it informs stakeholders about situations, alternatives, and future effects rather than dictating actions. It's up to policymakers to make the decisions, and researchers (and donors) shouldn't anticipate that research alone will drive change.

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. The goal should be 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 just as likely as – if not more likely than – good ones. Bad decisions can be lived with – but poor decision-making *processes* are unacceptable. And worse still is keeping these decision-making processes out of sight.

There's extensive literature on evidence in policy-making, and various frameworks assess evidence-informed policymaking (EIPM) by examining both supply and demand factors, including policymakers' ability to use evidence, and evidence quality, relevance, and timeliness. Think tanks typically operate on the supply or intermediary side, collecting or translating evidence for policymakers. A MEL framework for think tanks should therefore emphasise these EIPM aspects, but also consider other factors influencing the outcomes of their engagement with policymakers.

SIX KEY AREAS FOR MEL

Pasanen and Shaxson's (2016) guidance note summarises six areas of MEL for knowledge institutions, structured around six key questions that organisations should ask:

1. **Strategy and direction:** Is the organisation doing the right thing? This component focuses on the start of the project and is monitored and evaluated at regular intervals. It ensures that an organisation's strategies are on track and adaptable to changing circumstances.
2. **Management and governance:** Is the plan being implemented in the most effective way? This too should be assessed regularly and focuses on the effectiveness of management and governance structures in implementing the plan.
3. **Outputs:** Are the outputs the most appropriate for the target audience and do they meet the required standards? This is about monitoring and evaluating specific outputs, such as a research paper or a workshop.
4. **Uptake:** Are people accessing and sharing the outputs? This involves evaluating the accessibility and sharing of produced outputs among the target audience.
5. **Outcomes and impacts:** What effects are being generated by the think tank's work? Is it contributing towards any change? This component forms the core of evaluation work and can be summarised by the key question of 'so what?'.
6. **Context**: How do political, economic, social and organisational changes affect the work and outcomes of the organisation? This should be monitored at regular intervals, especially before a project starts and at its end.

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BUILDING A FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE POLICY INFLUENCE

Developing a good theory of change

The first step of developing a good MEL framework is to identify a clear and explicit theory of change, including the desired policy impacts and underlying assumptions. Clarity is crucial for directing evaluations towards organisational priorities and testing the theory's assumptions.

The RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA) (ODI, 2014) offers guidelines for think tanks to shape their theory of change and accompanying MEL framework. It explores various types of change that a policy-influencing strategy can target and suggests the creation of key policy-influencing parameters. These could be changes in discourse among policy actors and commentators (e.g., what language are they using), improvements in policy-making procedures and processes, changes (or no changes) in policy content, and behaviours change for effective implementation (see ODI 2014, page 27).

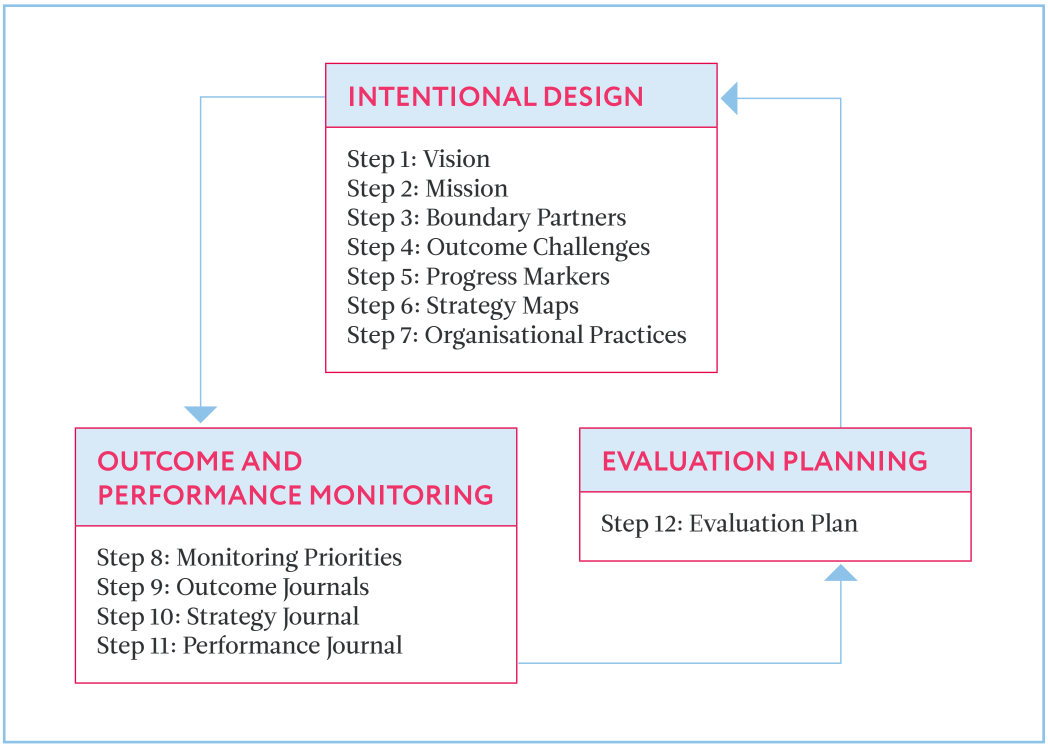
Think tanks should identify the changes they want to make, the specific activities involved, and who the changes are intended for – the latter of which should be done through a stakeholder mapping exercise, as outlined in the ROMA guide's Interest and Influence Matrix (also referred to as the Alignment, Interest and Influence Matrix). When linking activities to the desired results, it's crucial to clearly state the assumptions so that they can be tested.

After identifying the desired changes, intervention target groups, and associated activities, the next step is to devise data collection and analysis methodologies. These methodologies are essential for discerning whether the intended changes are taking place, and need to take account of both monitoring and evaluative aspects. At this point, it's crucial to distinguish between *monitoring* and *evaluation*.

Monitoring involves the data you collect on an ongoing/regular basis and is best suited for tracking incremental changes. *Evaluation*, on the other hand, focuses on broader, medium- to long-term transformations, and asks what your work as a think tank has contributed to these changes. Outcome mapping combines strategy design with monitoring and evaluation and is a valuable tool for both planning and assessing the effectiveness and impact of your work. See three stages of outcome mapping (Figure 11) on the following page.

Outcome mapping is a good framework to use to guide MEL work. As outcome and performance monitoring are built into the approach, it's a good tool both to plan for impactful policy influence and to actually monitor and measure policy impact.

Figure 11. Three stages of outcome mapping


INTENTIONAL DESIGN
Step 1: Vision
Step 2: Mission
Step 3: Boundary Partners
Step 4: Outcome Challenges
Step 5: Progress Markers
Step 6: Strategy Maps
Step 7: Organisational Practices
OUTCOME AND PERFORMANCE MONITORING
Step 8: Monitoring Priorities
Step 9: Outcome Journals
Step 10: Strategy Journal
Step 11: Performance Journal
EVALUATION PLANNING
Step 12: Evaluation Plan

Source: Adapted from Earl et al. (2001)

Collecting data on evidence use

Developing appropriate data collection tools to monitor evidence use in public policy can be complex. Policymakers themselves may not always recognise their use of evidence due to misconceptions about what is actually *meant* by 'evidence'. Furthermore, policy documents may not always cite the evidence used and, in any case, policy changes may not always be reflected in a single document. It's important to think about how to get *meaningful* information when devising evaluation questions, and to triangulate data.

Additionally, it's important to understand why a policymaker is using or not using a particular piece of evidence at a particular time. It can also help to identify barriers to evidence use – such as lack of awareness, competing values, resource shortages, promises to constituents, or general public discourse – in order to understand where we need to direct our efforts. Likewise, it's crucial to understand when and how evidence is being used – for example to better understand an issue/ problem, to change policy discourse, or even to retrospectively justify decisions that have already been made. Davies et al. (2005) have outlined a taxonomy of evidence uses, categorising them as either 'conceptual uses' (for changing people's knowledge, attitudes or understanding around a policy issue) or 'instrumental uses' (for driving a change in practice, policy or behaviour). Others have broken these down into further categories, such as political use or symbolic use.

The evaluation of evidence use typically relies on two methods: (1) interviews with subjects involved in the policy process or (2) a qualitative review of policy documents, followed by a conversation with decision-makers to reconstruct the decision-making process and the role of evidence (Nesta, 2019). While there are different tools and methods for MEL on evidence use, it's important to be aware of the limitations of each, to find ways to triangulate data collection to mitigate those limitations, and to combine tools where necessary.

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BOX 7. LESSONS FROM B2B MARKETING

Recognising that the policy process is complex and non-linear, Nesta (2019) offers an alternative way to measure evidence uptake that borrows from private sector business-to-business (B2B) marketing approaches:

- **Persona mapping:** mapping targets organisations and their system of decision-making, including the decision-makers and supporting actors. Typologies of these personas are created with detailed accounts to understand their attitudes, fears, behaviours and objections.
- **Customer journey mapping:** mapping the journey each persona might take to reach a decision. The mapping should be as detailed as possible, covering elements like pre-conceptions about the service or product, media consumption habits that could influence a persona's attitudes about the service/product, the role of competitors, and the persona's contribution to the decision-making process.
- **Touch-point analysis:** identify interaction points between the decision-maker and the think tank, enabling the creation of targeted KPIs for measuring engagement in relevant situations.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Who should participate in MEL and who will benefit? Who will use the findings, and how? Michael Quinn Patton's (2021) utilisation-focused evaluation framework emphasises that evaluations should be measured by their utility and actual use. Evaluators should facilitate the [evaluative] process, while carefully considering how every step will impact utilisation of the findings. It's not only essential to consider how others will benefit from the results, but also how they will be involved (or not) throughout the entire process, including reflecting on it for learning and decision-making.

Three key questions should be addressed when designing a MEL framework:

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

Participation is crucial. MEL initiatives should engage stakeholders from the outset, from conceptualisation to design, fostering a culture where learning is prized as much as accountability.

Involving others also presents an opportunity to identify ongoing issues and challenges faced by staff, which MEL practices can address. Staff are more likely to embrace a new system when they recognise its relevance to their work. Beyond donor compliance or showcasing success, MEL should inspire staff buy-in and maintain the MEL system effectively.

Engaging others can lead to insightful outcomes. For instance, a think tank's staff, while contemplating MEL, may recognise the need to revise their project-design approach. This scenario is common. The consideration of MEL dimensions often prompts a re-evaluation of planning strategies, results, and project alignment with programme or organisational objectives.

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