



SCHOOL for
THINKTANKERS

On Think Tanks



On Think Tanks

WHAT IS A THINK TANK?

History, roles and models

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THINK WHAT?

DOES THIS SOUND FAMILIAR?

“ I do a lot of work with policymakers, but how much effect am I having? It’s like they’re coming in and saying to you, **‘I’m going to drive my car off a cliff. Should I or should I not wear a seatbelt?’**”

And you say, **‘I don’t think you should drive your car off the cliff.’**

And they say, **‘No, no, that bit’s already been decided—the question is whether to wear a seatbelt.’**

And you say, **‘Well, you might as well wear a seatbelt.’** And then they say, **‘We’ve consulted with policy expert Rory Stewart and he says . . .’**”

WHAT IS A THINK TANK?

**When I say “think tank”,
what’s the first thing you
think of?**

The public’s answer (Cast from Clay)



Thinktanker's answer

THINK TANK - WHAT IS IN THE LABEL?

Think Tank
Research Centre
Public Policy Research Institute
Idea Factory
University Research Centre
Investigation Centre
Laboratory of Ideas
Policymaking supporting centres

...

"We are not a think tank, Quique"*

* / 2 Think tank director in Peru, months before the Think Tank Initiative was launched – and to which they applied

WHAT IS YOUR LABEL OF CHOICE?



- What are think tanks called in your country?
- Would the average voter know what a think tank is?

FROM NORMATIVE DEFINITIONS

At one extreme, the definition is written into law:

United States' legal code says: 501 (c)(3) organisations are non-for-profit, non-partisan, and organised for educational, religious, charitable and scientific purposes (Harvard Law Review, 2002).

More common, however:

Non-profit, independent of the state and dedicated to communicating research findings to policymakers. (Some now accept the presence of state-funded think tanks or state-own think tanks).

TOWARDS MORE FUNCTIONAL DESCRIPTIONS

“Viewed collectively, think tanks [...] are organizations that **generate** policy-oriented research, analysis, and **advice** on domestic and international issues in an effort to enable policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy issues” (McGann 2006)

“Independent (and usually private) policy research institutes containing people involved in **studying** a particular policy area or a broad range of policy issues, actively **seeking to educate or advise** policy makers and the public through a number of channels.”
(Buldioski 2012)

DIFFICULT TO PIN-POINT

- The common definition describes [‘think tanks’] as a distinctive class of organisations – different and separate from universities, markets, and the state.
- However, these think tanks only exist in the imaginary of those who idealised the Brookings and Chatham Houses of this world.
- Most think tanks exist on the boundaries with others.

SELF-LABELLING EXERCISE

- Tom Medvetz argues that the act of labelling is a **political act** – this is the art of forging an identity – John Schwartz calls it an intellectual territory.
- The label is adopted and rejected with equal passion by organisations wishing to join or set themselves apart from the think tank community.
- Calls attention to the boundaries of the definition.



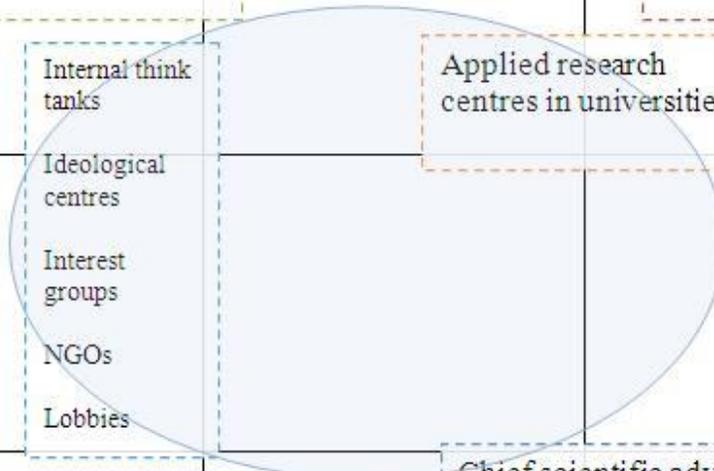
It might be more useful
to ask what do they do

FUNCTIONS INCLUDE

- They generate evidence and knowledge.
- They can advance and promote policy ideas and solutions.
- They can provide legitimacy to policies and politicians (whether it is ex-ante or ex-post).
- They are advisors on policy design, but also on implementation.
- They can act as spaces for debate and deliberation –even 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 way the policy process works.
- They are providers of cadres of experts and policymakers for political parties and governments.
- They act as auditor or social monitors
- Etcetera

THEY SHARE MUCH WITH OTHERS

Source: Stephen Yeo

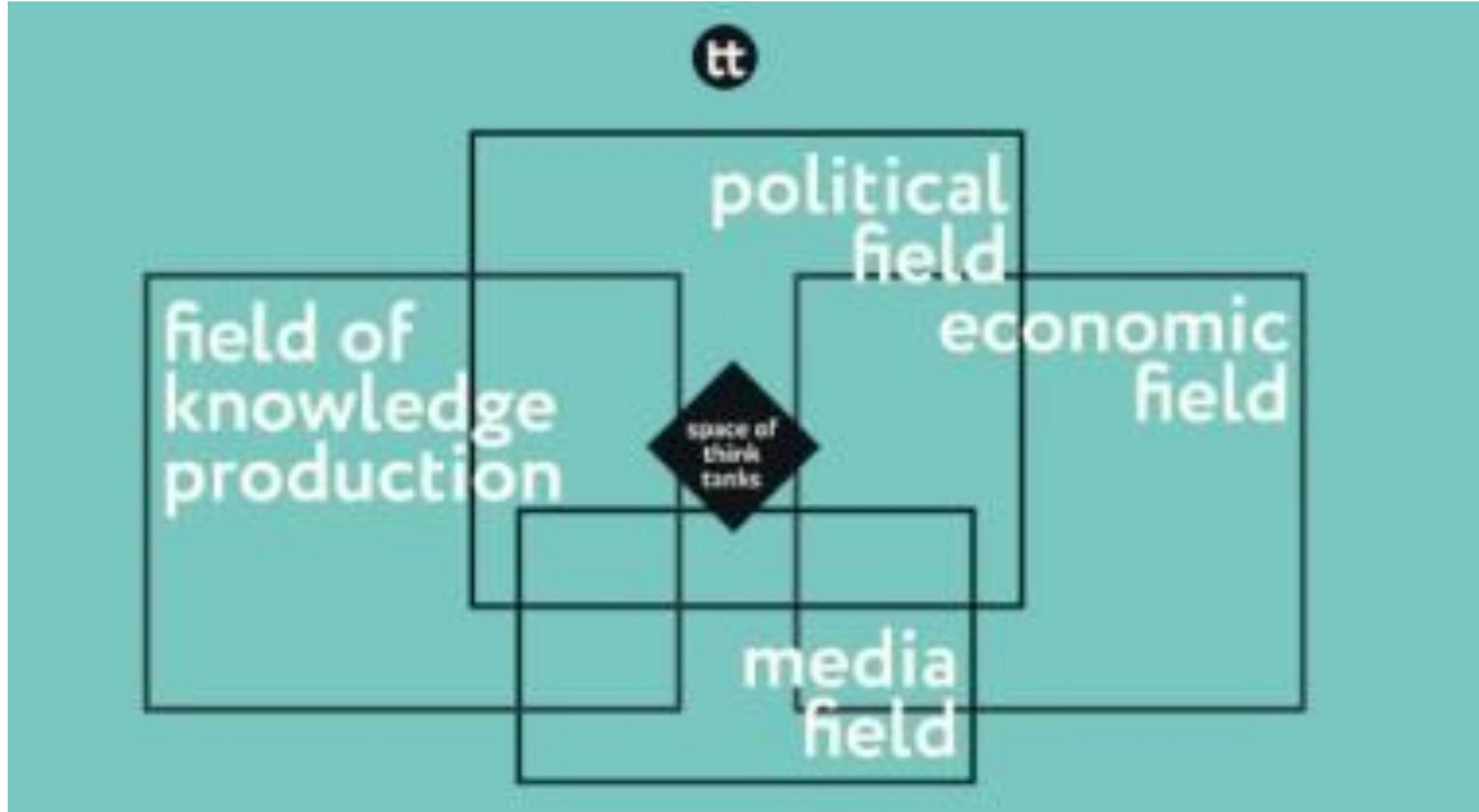
Message based on Mode of work	Ideology, values or interests	Applied, empirical or synthesis research	Theoretical or academic research
Independent research	Editorial Media		"Oxbridge"
Consultancy/contract	Internal think tanks Ideological centres Interest groups NGOs Lobbies	Applied research centres in universities	
Influence/advocacy	Political Parties	Chief scientific advisors, Academic/Opinion leaders	

WHEN DOES AN ORGANISATION STOP BEING ...

- a think tank that generates some of its income through consultancy and become just a **consultancy**?
- an academic think tank, based in a university, and focused on a range of fairly broad and theoretical issues, and become just an **academic research centre**?
- an advocacy think tank with strong ideological arguments to become just an **activist organisation**?
- a think tank with a strong covering power to become simply a **commission or network**?
- a think tank with a strong media presence to become a not-for-profit (or for profit even) **media outfit**?
- a publicly funded and managed think tank based in a ministry or another public body to become a **policymaking body** itself?

THE SPACE OF THINK TANKS

Source: Thomas Medvetz



THIS HAS AN IMPACT ON THE ORGANISATION ITSELF

Depending on which boundary they are on, we could argue that they need to have people and teams with skills to:

- Appreciate and undertake research (boundary with academia);
- Communicate effectively to broader audiences and the public (boundary with the media);
- Undertake analysis and deliver solutions (boundary with consultancy);
- Analyse policy and provide actionable recommendations (boundary with policy and politics); and
- Work with citizens to develop new ideas and solutions (boundary with NGOs).

THINK TANKS “GOTTA SERVE SOMEBODY”

- The State.
- Political parties.
- The private sector and private advocates.
- International development agencies.

*“Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody” (Bob Dylan)*

CONTEXT MATTERS

This is further complicated by the effects that the context can have on the formation and development of think tanks:

- Political context –can be a driver and a constraint for their formation. SOS Reports from 2023, 2024 and 2025 consistently highlight the impact of political polarisation!
- Economic context –can define who are the main funders, the funding available and how funding is provided.
- Legal context –can determine the business models chosen, think tanks freedom of operations, etc.
- Education policy/state of higher education – can affect the skills that think tanks can count on ... (which has a direct effect on their bottom line).

THE CONSEQUENCE IS AN INCREASINGLY MESSY SPACE

- There are regional and national traditions – but also waves of formation.
- National - but also sectoral - particularities.
- New and ever-changing business models that challenge the idealised models.

Coupled by:

- Greater competition from old and new knowledge sector players - consulting firms, interest groups, more policy oriented university research centres, government centers, “new public intellectuals”.
- A deficit of trust in experts and expertise.
- A politically motivated strategic rejection of the label.



HISTORY MATTERS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF U.S. THINK TANKS

- Provides a case study to consider the evolution of think tanks in our own countries
- Draws attention to the power of narratives in the formation and development of think tanks
- And the changing nature of the label, think tanks and the community

A CHANGING NARRATIVE: FROM MEDICINE TO MARKETING

The history of think tanks in the US is marked by a series of **waves of development** which explain the great heterogeneity in the current landscape.

They are partly driven by the changing role that science, the state, the private sector and civil society are assumed to play in society.

Also: To keep important matters of the State out of the hands of the public. (This is the explicit intention of some of the early foreign policy think tanks!)

SOCIETY AS THE PATIENT

- American Association of Economics (1885)
- Bureau of Economic Research (1899)
- National Civil Federation (1900)
- American Bureau of Industrial Research (1904)
- **Chicago Civil Federation (1894)**
 - Experts, funders, citizens, and policymakers came together
 - Treated the symptoms and (later) the causes of social “maladies”
- Russell Sage Foundation (1907)
 - Marks the beginning of a new “professional cadre” of policy researchers

EFFICIENCY AND VALUE FOR MONEY

- Twentieth Century Fund
- National Bureau of Economic Research
- New York Bureau of Municipal Research (1907)
- Institute for Government Research (1916 – then Brookings)
 - Sought to influence policy from the outside
 - Focused on improvements in government processes
 - Flourished thanks to professional philanthropy

CRISIS AND PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

The Great Depression and the First World War changed the focus towards reflecting upon and explaining what had happened.

- Twentieth Century Fund (1922)
- Committee for Economic Development (1942)
- RAND Corporation (1948)
 - Recommendations
 - Plans for long term results
 - Plans including implementation
 - Is this where the label was coined?

SALOMON'S HOUSE AND THE REVOLVING DOOR

After the Second World War, Brookings, Russell Sage Foundation and NBER offer advice and moved to DC to serve agencies under pressure to deliver the complex New Deal

- Council of Economic Advisers (1946)
 - Thinktankers take on “boundary roles”

Such was the extent of the “revolving door” that The Economist described Brookings’ researchers as [President] Kennedy’s *experts on tap*. And RAND was the main recruiting ground for the Department of Defence.

THE IDEOLOGICAL MARKETPLACE

- The Hudson Institute (1961)
- The Heritage Foundation (1973)
- The Cato Institute (1977)
 - Explicitly ideological
 - Funding increasingly partisan and private (foundations reduced their role)
 - Set up by people already in politics
 - Think tanks adopt new corporate practices and marketing approaches

THE IDEOLOGICAL BATTLEGROUND

- Heritage has founded Heritage Action for America and Project 2025.
- Think tanks in Washington DC, London and Brussels have to worry about being hacked.
- Think tanks in the Western Balkans are subject to State surveillance.
- The biggest think tank in Europe is endowed by the Hungarian government.
- Think tanks across the world are subject to defamation laws.
- Think tanks (and thinktankers) are increasingly and explicitly siding with parties and political leaders.

SIMILAR WAVES ELSEWHERE

In Chile, China, Russia, etc.

These are defined by the growth of certain ideas, political or economic shocks, institutional reforms, etc.



Can you recognise any “waves” in your country?



Today

Globally, only 32% of think tanks expect sectoral growth

- Optimism is highest in sub-Saharan Africa and lowest in the EU & EFTA.
- Small think tanks (less than USD 100k turnover) are twice as likely to expect growth compared to very large ones (more than USD 5M).

TABLE 1. EXPECTATIONS OF SECTORAL GROWTH, BY NATIONAL-INCOME GROUP

Organisations that expect the think tank sector in their country to grow over the next 12 months (%)

Low income	Lower middle	Upper middle	High income
63%	48%	27%	21%

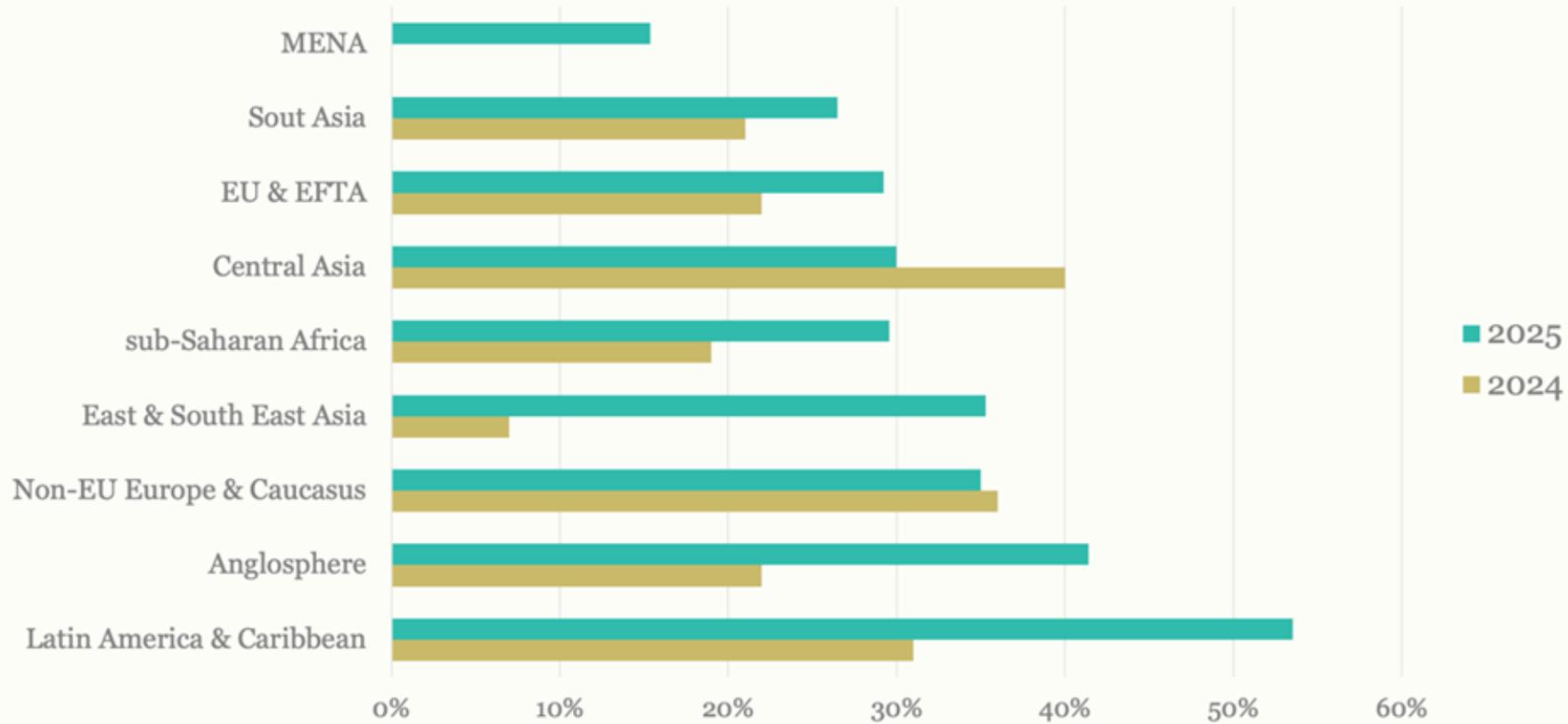
TABLE 2. EXPECTATIONS OF SECTORAL GROWTH, BY POLITICAL REGIME

Organisations that expect the think tank sector in their country to grow over the next 12 months (%)

Closed autocracy	Electoral autocracy	Electoral democracy	Liberal democracy
61%	34%	31%	22%



Impact of polarisation - Sharpest increases in Latin America & Caribbean and East & South East Asia.



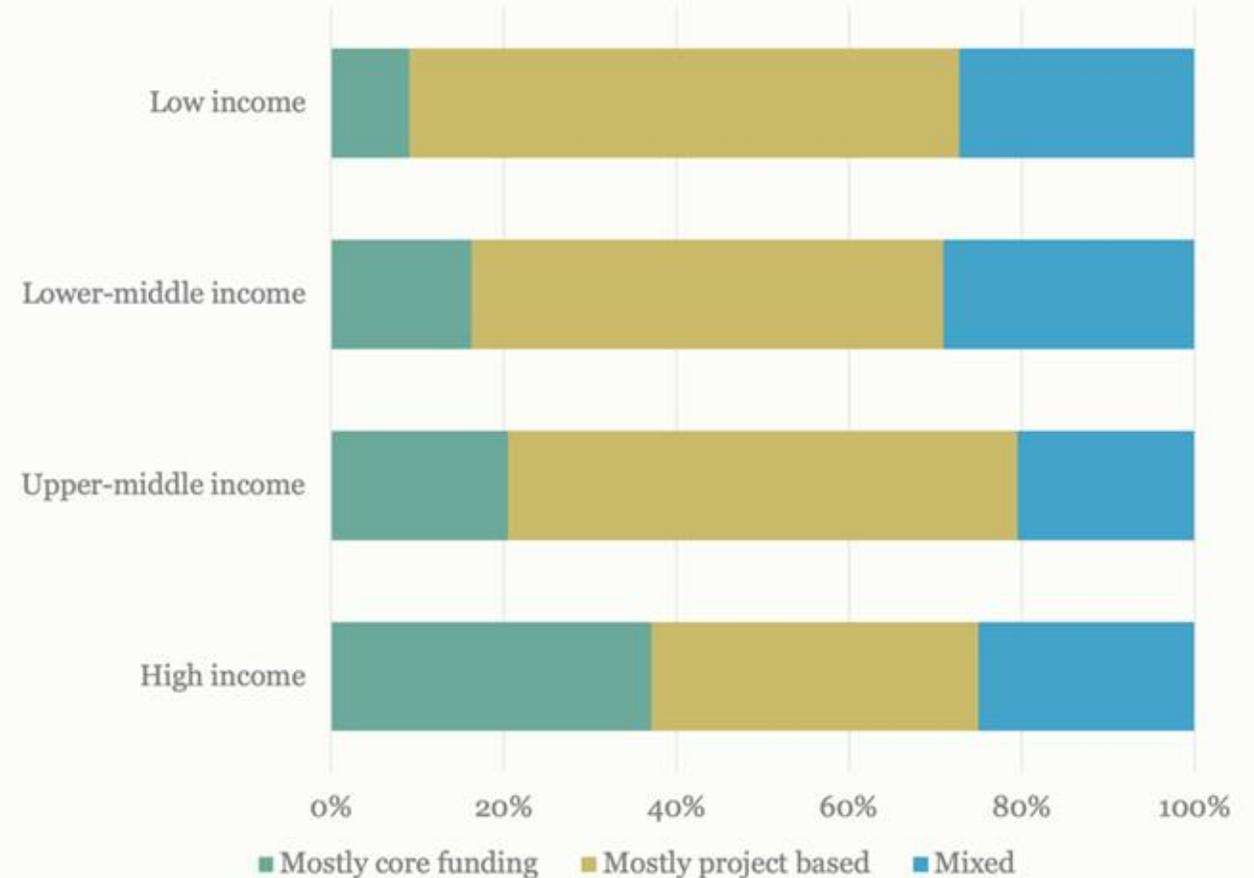
Impact of political polarisation (2024-2025), by subregion

Survey sample= 333

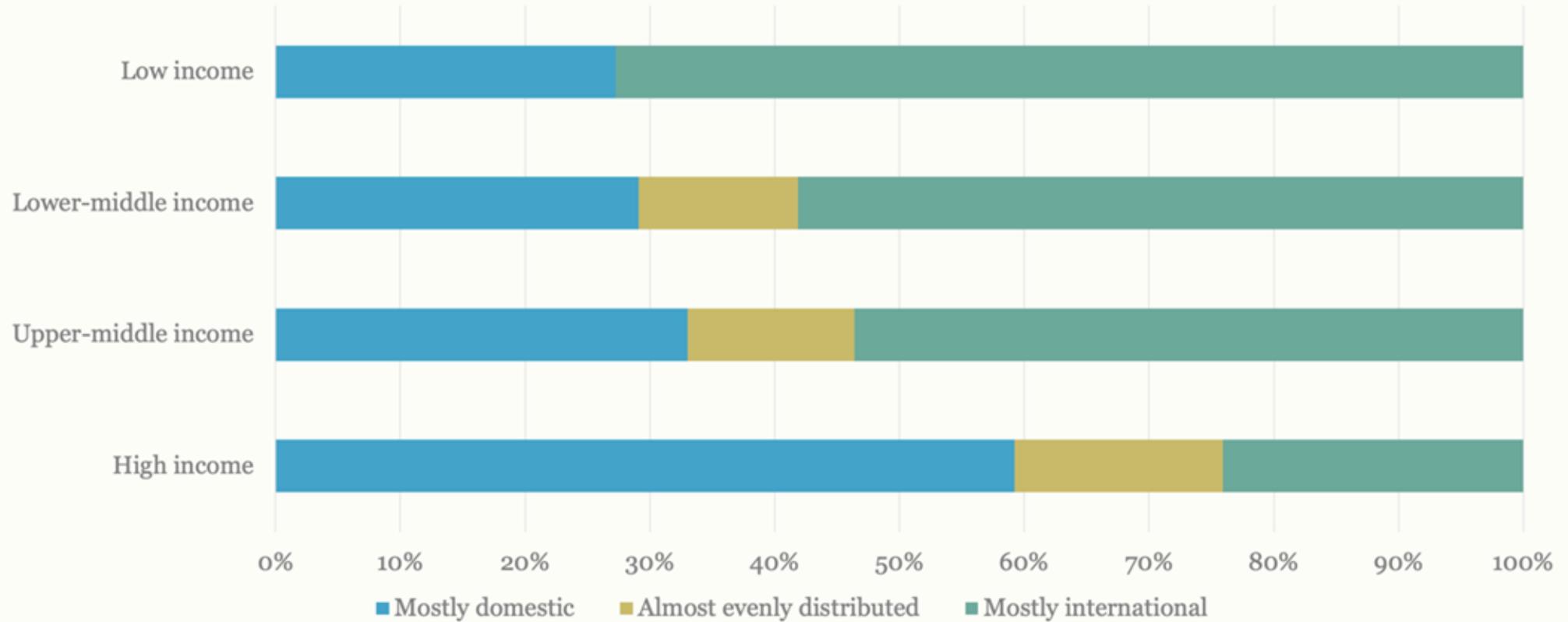
Core funding is more prevalent in higher-income countries than in lower-income countries

- 37% of think tanks in high-income countries report that their budget is “mostly” or “almost entirely” core-funded, up from 27% in 2024.
- In lower-middle-income countries, the proportion of core-funded organisations has nearly doubled – from 9% to 16% – over the last year.
- Fewer than one in ten organisations in low-income countries receive core funding.

Main funding type, by national income level



Think tanks in lower-income countries are primarily funded by international sources



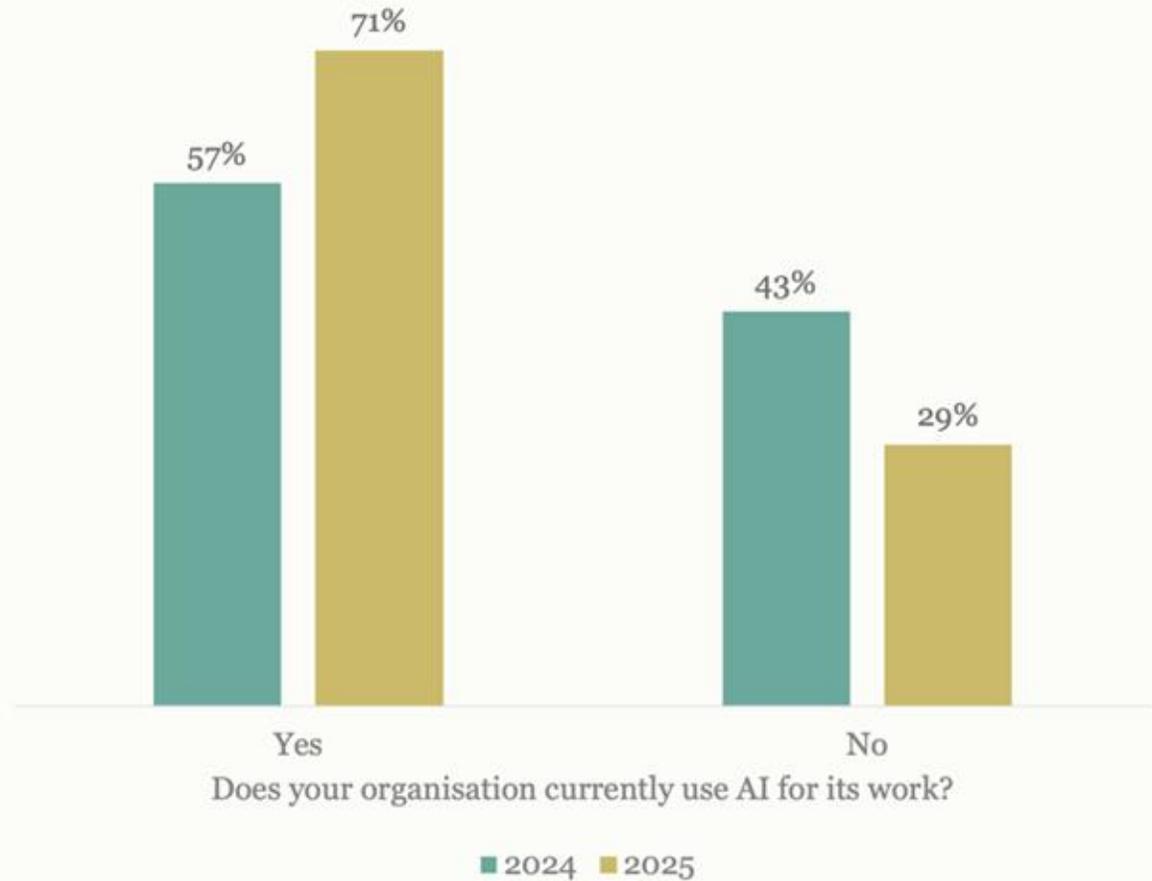
Source of funding (international/domestic), by national income level

Survey sample= 333

AI use

- Communications (49%) – for drafting, editing, translation, and audience profiling.
- Research (46%) – for data analysis, literature review, and writing support.
- Administration (30%) – including scheduling, HR tasks, and internal reporting.
- Fundraising (19%) – such as donor research or writing proposals.
- Other areas (5%) – such as training.

Use of AI tools (2024-2025)



Survey sample= 333



**Explore the report, survey
data, and our local partner
insights online**

onthinktanks.org/sos2025



WHAT NEXT?

FROM THINK TANK TO CHANGE HUB

The poster features a light green background on the left and a grid of red and yellow squares on the right. The text on the left includes logos for 'tt', 'DGAP', and 'The Brussels Binder', followed by 'OTT Conference 2021' and the main title 'FROM THINK TANK TO CHANGE HUB'. A 'Keynote' label is positioned below the title. At the bottom left, the hashtag '#OTTConference' and the date 'April 2021' are displayed. On the right, a portrait of Anne-Marie Slaughter is shown within a grid cell, with her name and title 'CEO of New America' printed below it.

tt DGAP The Brussels Binder

OTT Conference 2021

**FROM THINK TANK
TO CHANGE HUB**

Keynote

#OTTConference April 2021

**ANNE-MARIE
SLAUGHTER**
CEO of New America

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=la1qBgliBHM>

THINK TANKS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS



**Activists and policy
experts: Exploring think
tank engagement with
social movements**

 Working Paper | 8 | June 2020

Ajay Datta and Andrea Bassit

<https://onthinktanks.org/articles/understanding-think-tank-social-movement-engagement/>

THINK TANKS AND IMPACT INVESTING



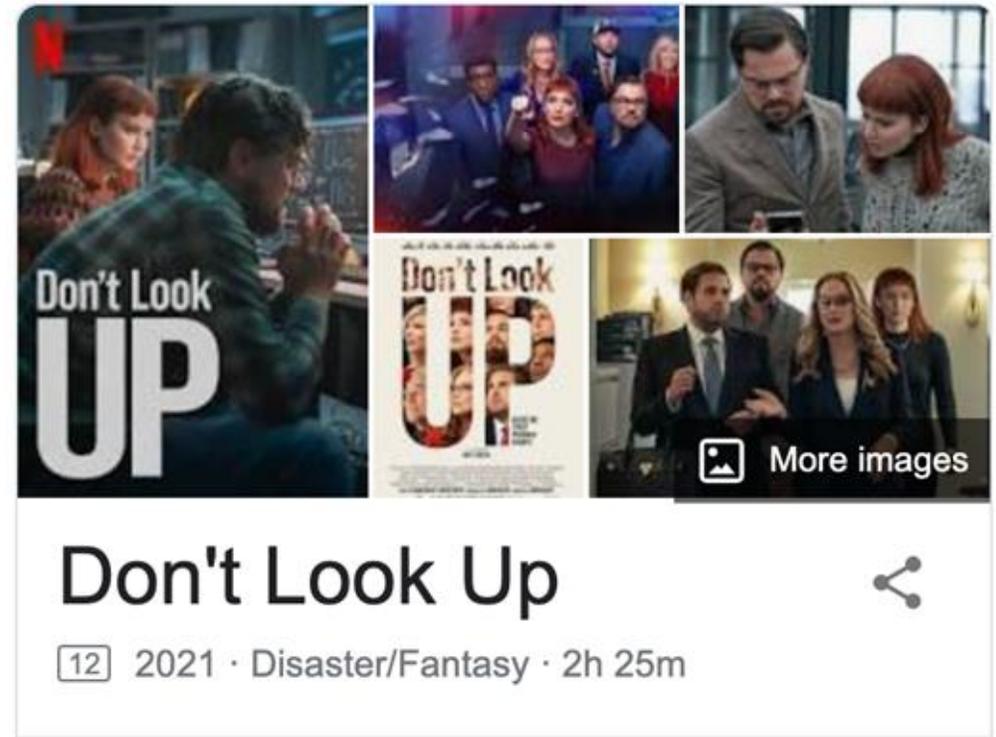
<https://onthinktanks.org/initiatives/think-tanks-and-impact-investing/>

COMPETITION



Documentaries

Films



Reports by foundations



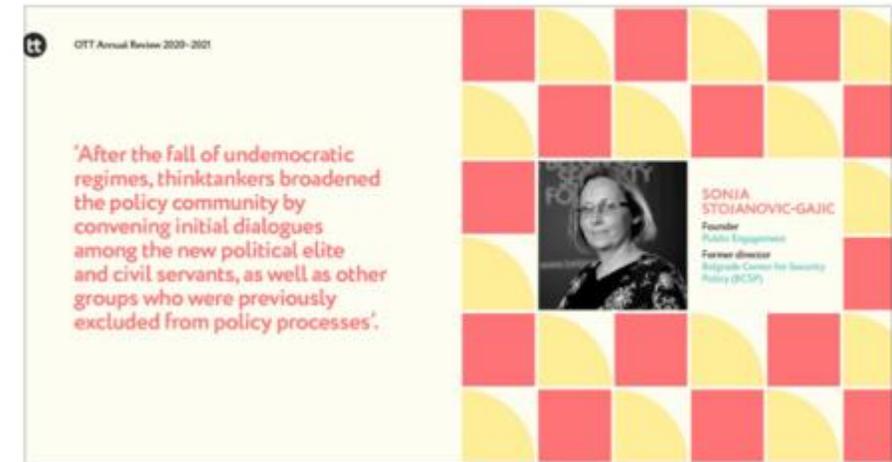
STATE CAPTURE BACK TO ORIGINS



Think tanks in Mexico: Shielding civil society organisations

Despite its size and importance, Mexican civil society is among the weakest in the region. This structural fragility can be explained...

 OTT
Apr 10 · 3 min read



The reverse circle of change in the Western Balkans

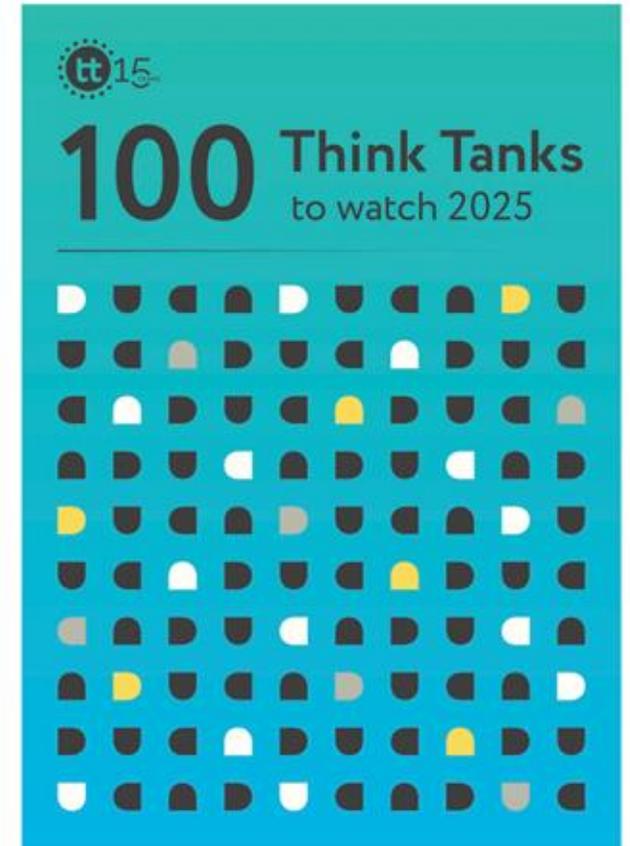
It is not easy to be an influential policy actor in a region that has been identified with instability. The region is famous for...

 OTT
Apr 10 · 6 min read

Ongoing innovation

At the individual level, think tanks are constantly innovating, adopting new strategies and tactics.

onthinktanks.org/100towatch



NEW MODELS, NEW THINK TANKS

So in response to changes in the context in which think tanks operate: unexpected competition, state capture, wealth concentration, polarisation.

We will explore new models for thinktanking: student-led think tanks, AI thinktanking, change hubs, business think tanks, trans-national spaces.

We will also consider new functions - or old functions.

And innovations that are constantly being brought about by members of the community!



Thank you!

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SCHOOL for THINKTANKERS
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