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# Funding think tanks

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On Think Tanks is the leading global source of information, support and community for people working in, with, and funding think tanks. We create a space to connect, learn and exchange knowledge, ideas and resources.

Check out the 2025 State of the Sector Report:  
[onthinktanks.org/sos2025](https://onthinktanks.org/sos2025)



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STATE OF  
THE SECTOR

The only global publication of its kind, this annual report offers a unique snapshot of the think tank sector—globally and regionally.

Discover trends in funding, policy priorities, institutional growth, and the biggest challenges facing think tanks. Dive into current and past editions.



Explore the State of the  
Sector Reports

# Content

- The think tank funding landscape - funding by income and region
- Financial resilience is more than about having multiple sources
- What is the value added of think tanks?
- Income streams - pros and cons (participatory)
- Funding sources - pros and cons (participatory)
- Think tank competencies and skills

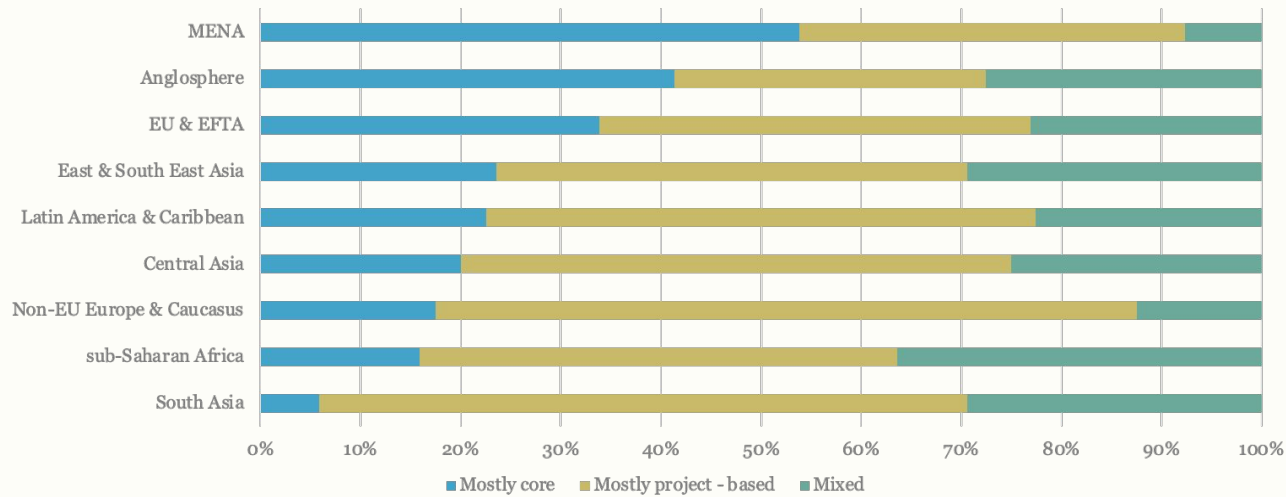
**tt Funding think tanks**



# Funding by type of income and region (2025)

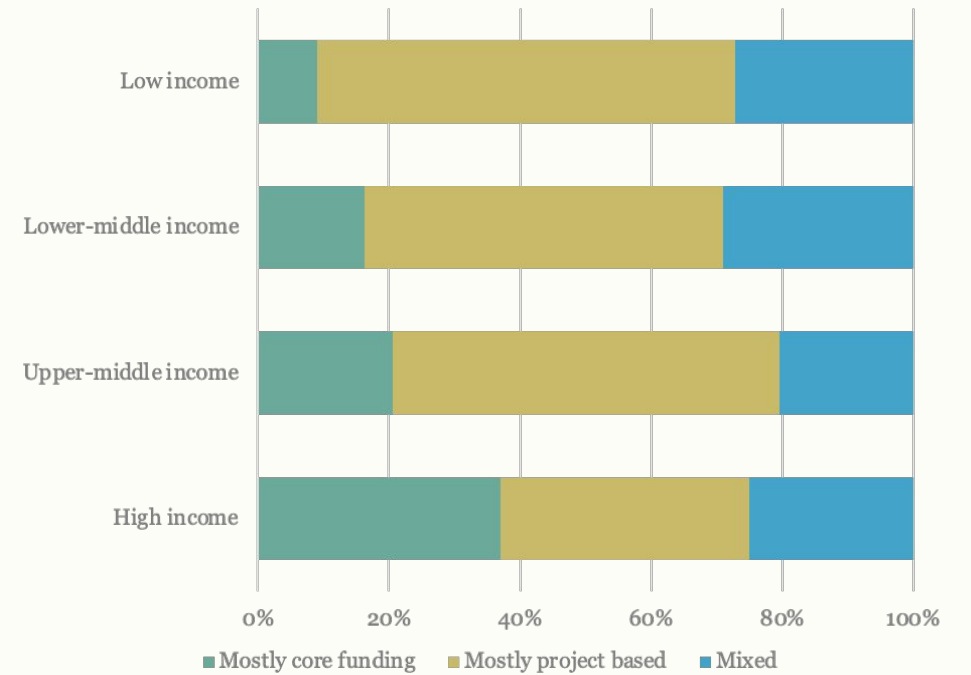
The “Global South” more likely to depend on foreign funding

Higher income countries more likely to depend on domestic funding



Main funding type (core/project-based), by subregion

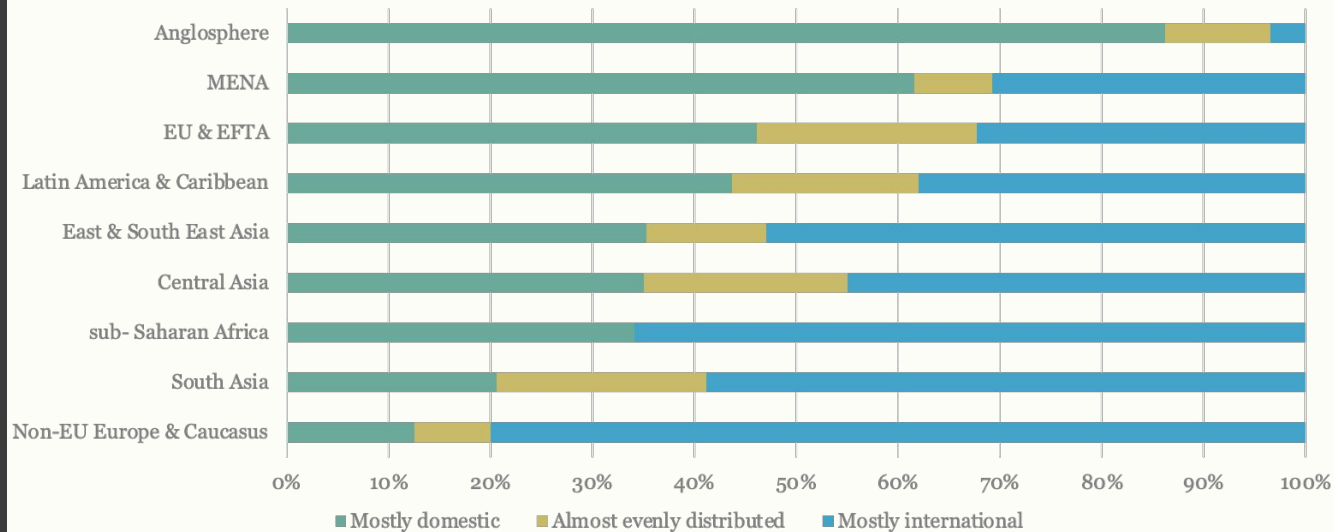
Main funding type, by national income level



Main funding type, by national income level

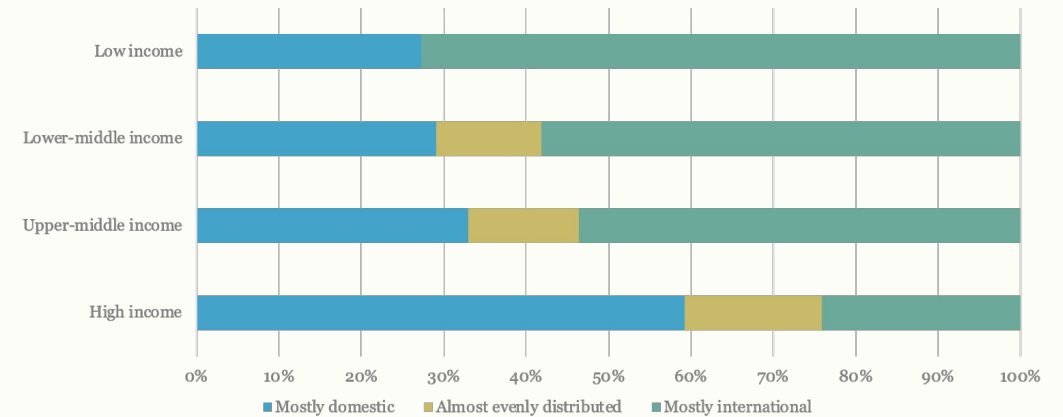
# Funding by source and region (2025)

The “Global South” more likely to receive project funding



Source of funding (international/domestic), by subregion

Higher income countries more likely to receive core funding



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

# Funding disparities: Education policy research in Africa

When we looked at the funding for research on education in Africa, we found that, although the African grantees in our sample receive **45% of the number of education research grants**, they only receive **19% of the total funding**. Conversely, North American grantees receive **38% of the grants** and a staggering **81% of the total research funding**.

<https://onthinktanks.org/articles/local-research-for-local-problems-who-gets-the-money/>

North American grantees received nearly all (82%) of the long-term funding commitments (defined as grants lasting over five years), compared to none in Africa.

Most grants to African organisations are made in response to funders' calls for proposals. However, grants to North American and European grantees are often the result of funders seeking them out or grantees submitting unsolicited proposals.

<https://onthinktanks.org/articles/unveiling-the-disparities-revisiting-education-research-funding-for-africa/>

# Financial resilience is more than about having multiple sources

Organisational resilience:

- Adaptive leadership
- Operational agility
- Strategic communication - to funders, stakeholders and public
- Team wellbeing
- Financial sustainability - diversified income, reserves, cost-effective practices.

Critically:

- Multiple sources
- Multiple income streams



**Funding model**

# First, consider what is the added value of think tanks?

- Evidence
- Policy and decision-making inputs and advice
- Capacity development
- Elite and public education
- Resistance to change and reform
- Legitimation
- Channelling of resources
- Creation and nurturing of spaces
- Access to key individuals
- Other?

# Income streams - pros and cons

|   | Pros  | Cons   |
|---|---|--|
| Membership fees                           | Can add up and connects think tanks to a loyal audience                         | Takes time, requires scale to work, demands new skills   |
| Participation fees                        | Can contribute to sustainability of events, encourages buy-in from participants | Small amounts and may exclude a large audience   |
| Consulting                                | Can generate significant income and keeps think tanks relevant                  | Can be a distraction from the mission, requires different competencies and skills  |
| Polling                                   | Can be highly profitable and very good to raise think tank's visibility         | Can be highly political and at the same time demand neutrality from the think tank. Very specific skills are required.   |
| Sponsorship                               | Can be used to fund events or to raise funds at annual events                   | Could generate internal tensions or public critique depending on the sponsors.   |
| Education and training                    | Can raise funds and is a great way to inform policy and build capacity          | Requires strong marketing capabilities or partnerships with education providers  |
| Sale of books and other                   | Can deliver a more focused audience – willing to pay                            | Small amounts and may exclude a large audience   |
| Grants                                    | Often come with little reporting restrictions                                   | Can make the organisations too dependent on them and disconnected them from more practical work and stifle innovation – also, increasingly unlikely for think tanks to rely on |
| Other: investments, rental of space, etc. |   |  |

# Income sources - pros and cons

|  | Pros   | Cons   |
|--|--|--|
| Individuals  | Lower reputational risk, less reporting  | Takes time to reach scale and to manage  |
| Diaspora   | Used to funding think tanks, politically aware, high-income funder even if low-income country think tank | Takes time to reach scale and to manage  |
| Private sector, inc. business associations - local | Politically aware, close and informed funder, limited reporting  | Reputational risk, often with strings attached   |
| Private sector - global                            | Lower reputational risk, high ticket   | More strings attached  |
| NGOs, Universities                                 | Limited reporting, alignment   | Often small ticket, conflicting agendas  |
| Private foundations or philanthropists - local     | Politically aware, responsive, limited reporting   | Small ticket, limited scope  |
| Private foundations or philanthropists - global    | Large ticket, non-aligned  | Non-responsive to local needs, politically detached, potentially high reporting burden |

# Income sources - pros and cons

|   | Pros  | Cons   |
|---|---|--|
| Bilateral / Multilateral – local missions | More responsive to local needs, limited reputational risk, could award credibility, middle to high ticket | Some reporting, medium reputational risk, limited agendas                              |
| Bilateral / Multilateral                  | Could awards credibility, high ticket.  | Non-responsive to local needs, politically detached, potentially high reporting burden |
| Public - government                       | Access to policymakers  | Reputational risk, strings attached, high procurement and reporting burden             |
| Public – Science granting councils        | Long term funding, lower political risk   | Limited scope, high procurement and reporting burden, limits political action          |
| Other                                     |   |  |

# Funding model

- Your funding model will be **the mix of income streams and sources that meet your organisational needs**
- E.g.:

|                         | Percentage | Detail  |
|-------------------------|------------|---|
| Membership fees         | 10%        | 50% students<br>20% from Embassies  |
| Participation fees      | 5%         | Annual conference   |
| Consulting              | 20%        | Min 50% multi-annual<br>Focus on few clients<br>Research/advisory to corporations |
| Polling                 | -          |   |
| Sponsorship             | 10%        | 5 long term partners<br>Business associations                                     |
| Education and training  | 10%        | 80% from longer/ higher fee courses   |
| Sale of books and other | -          |   |
| Grants                  | 40         | Min 50% multi-annual<br>Min 5 sources<br>Private foundations                      |
| Investments or reserves | 5%         | ~ 7% annual return  |

# Funding strategy

The funding strategy refers to *how* the think tank plans to achieve its model.

E.g.:

|                         | Percentage | Detail                                       | How  |
|-------------------------|------------|--|--|
| Membership fees         | 10%        | 50% students                                 | Partner with local universities  |
| Participation fees      | 5%         | Annual conference                            | Target senior participants with ability to pay                                 |
| Consulting              | 20%        | Min 50% multi-annual<br>Focus on few clients | Develop research support service to keep clients informed and MEL practice     |
| Polling                 | -          |  |  |
| Sponsorship             | 10%        | 5 long term partners                         | Annual public event series and annual conference                               |
| Education and training  | 10%        | 80% from longer higher fee courses           | Partner with local School of Government  |
| Sale of books and other | -          |  |  |
| Grants                  | 40         | Min 50% multi-annual<br>Min 5 sources        | Apply to national science council and build rapport with domestic philanthropy |
| Investments or reserves | 5%         | ~ 7% annual return                           | Invest reserves in S&P and cash  |

# Organisational skills required

- Board
  - Members with skills and experience in fundraising, business development, marketing, grantmaking, etc.
  - Members with responsibility for supporting the development of new funding relationships and funding streams.
- Senior management
  - CEO responsible for overall funding model and strategy.
  - Director of Communications / Director of Research / Programme directors with responsibility to deliver on model and strategy.
- Senior researchers
  - Responsibility to deliver on model and strategy.

# Organisational skills required

- Business development
  - Potential team or function within the organisation.
- Communications and marketing
  - Not enough to develop research communications competencies and skills
  - Think tanks need marketing competencies and skills.
- Strategic planning and financial management
  - Targets are defined as part of a comprehensive strategic planning process to define income target, direct and indirect costs, and desired profit or reserves policy
  - Delivery of targets is supported by careful programme and project budgeting that incorporates organisational targets.

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# Organisational skills required

- Project management
  - Team leaders need to know how to manage a project according to the budget
  - Or be supported by project managers who can.
- Funders “who get it” – and can tell than 15% indirect cost rate is never enough!
  - Most think tank funders do not cover all indirect costs.
  - Their policies often contradict best practice or best advice.

**tt** Group work



# Individual work

In similar contexts

- Consider
- Who could pay for each income stream and in the future.
- What can you do now to mobilise/ cultivate/ activate those fund in the future?

Together:

- Share
- So, what is different and what is similar?

|                         | <u>Who</u> would pay for this now? | <u>Who</u> could pay for this in the future? | <u>What</u> to do now? |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|--|------------------------|
| Membership fees         |                                    |  |                        |
| Participation fees      |                                    |  |                        |
| Consulting              |                                    |  |                        |
| Sponsorship             |                                    |  |                        |
| Education and training  |                                    |  |                        |
| Sale of books and other |                                    |  |                        |
| Grants                  |                                    |  |                        |
| Other                   |                                    |  |                        |



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