Build a think tank

A guide for policy entrepreneurs

Acknowledgments

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Foreword

This project started back in early 2011. I discussed the idea informally with Sarah Earl from IDRC, whose support for a book about think tanks (which instead became hundreds of short articles and blog posts) provided the initial investment for the On Think Tanks initiative. She suggested that the book should provide a manual for thinktankers on policy influencing strategies. Initially, I resisted. I felt then, and I know now, that no two think tanks are the same. A manual does not capture the diversity in the business models and strategies that think tanks pursue.

But demand for a manual never weakened. It came from think tanks funders and think tanks alike. We have responded through webinars, short courses, articles, best practice documents and how-to notes which we were able to produce thanks to the long term support of the Hewlett Foundation (and particularly Sarah Lucas), but the demand was still strong.

Then in 2016 I wrote an article that brought many of our resources together: Setting up a think tank: step by step. As I wrote then: *'The title is misleading. I am not offering a definitive list of steps (they may not even be in the right order) to set up a think tank. Instead, this post presents advice that could be considered when trying to set up a new think tank* '. And it has been one of the most popular articles on our website – with many thinktankers contacting me directly seeking advice on how to set up new think tanks and quoting it as the foundation of any progress made so far.

After a decade of work in support of think tanks we felt it was necessary to attempt to address the demand for a manual. Andrea Baertl took on the task and, after a great deal of reflection, suggested a different approach – much inspired by three questions posed by Stephen Yeo: Who will be its audience? Who will work there? Who will fund it?

Andrea expanded the list of questions to include Why? What? Who? How? and When? questions and, in collaboration with others members of the OTT team, reached out to researchers and practitioners and translated our extensive archive into a fantastic contribution to the field. The resulting document is not a step-by-step guide to set-up and manage think tanks. Instead, it emerges as a map and a collection of instruments and reference material that any explorer would need as they venture into uncharted waters.

It has been designed so that it can be updated with new cases, experience, and advice.

We hope this manual will be an indispensable companion for thinktankers all over the world

Enrique Mendizabal
OTT Founder and Director

So, you want to change the world for the better? It can seem daunting to tackle vast, complex and historic global challenges; or navigate through intractable and messy local politics to help people. Even if you are ready with transformational ideas or powerful evidence, cutting through the noise to reach policy and decision-makers is a huge task. Let alone building the credibility, strategies and partnerships to successfully influence policy. But if you believe in the potential for positive change and have passion, resilience and sheer determination in spades, then you *can* make a difference.

At the think tank I know best, ODI, our mission is to inspire people to act on injustice and inequality. We have spent more than 60 years developing collaborative research and ideas to influence change. Our founders would have benefited hugely from a toolkit like this one on setting up a think tank. It offers invaluable insights and options based on what we and our peers have found works, and doesn't! Including dispelling think tank myth 101: that the evidence and ideas will speak for themselves. They won't. This is why ODI has invested so heavily over the last decade in relationship building, strategic convening, public affairs and communications.

There are no shortages of problems, issues or opportunities requiring careful analysis, curious interrogation and creative thinking. And political leaders making decisions about policy are incredibly busy. They face multiple competing demands and a relentless 24-hour news cycle. So, think tanks can play an invaluable role doing the research, convening and thinking that governments simply do not have time to carry out; conducted apart from the daily politics but deeply rooted in the political reality.

This creates the potential for more well-informed, progressive policymaking, more just and equal societies and ultimately a better world.

Well done on taking this first important step. There is no one recipe to set up a think tank, but in this guide you will find useful information and resources to support you.

Enjoy the journey!

Sara Pantuliano
Chief Executive, ODI, UK
@SaraPantuliano

Using this guide

The reasons for creating this companion guide

This companion guide systematises and compiles information and resources that will help policy entrepreneurs to **think-plan-start and adapt** their nascent think tanks. It draws from resources from On Think Tanks, books, and articles from other sources, and includes case studies and examples tried and tested by our partners to illustrate each point.

Its aim is to offer readers guidance and examples to develop their organisations along the models that best fit their circumstances and objectives. It does not prescribe what should be done; rather it helps policy entrepreneurs reflect on different key think tank issues and offers suggestions and guidance on how to address each of these.

Using this companion guide

This guide is not a recipe to set up a think tank – there is no such thing. Think tanks are all different and all respond to their contexts. This guide is framed around a series of questions that think tank founders should be asking themselves before and during the process of setting up a think tank. Each question is presented with several possible answers and illustrated with examples.

If you are thinking of setting up a think tank, or have just established one, the key questions you need to ask yourself are: **Why? What? Who? How?** and **When?** Each question forms a section within this guide

Each section explores further sub-questions to help you deal with the many decisions you will need to make and the different aspects you need to consider.

- **Why** focuses on understanding what a think tank is and reflects on your motivation and purpose.
- **What** explores practical issues about the context in which thinks tanks operate, their functions, aims, and different business models.
- **Who** delves into the people and organisations that your think tank will be involved with, from the board and staff to the funders.

- **How** examines day-to-day management of think tanks in terms of how activities will be carried out, communicated and monitored.
- **When** probes you to think about when to start and when it is time for founders to let go.

You can approach the guide from any section depending on your needs. When progressing through it, you will note that the sections all interrelate and are interconnected in different ways. This is what you should be looking to achieve in your real life think tank. A think tank is like a complex, living organism with interconnected parts and processes. It is an organism that changes with time, and ultimately needs to adapt or perish.

Each section includes an introduction noting why it is important to reflect on that particular question, gives practical examples based on the experiences of existing think tanks and think tank founders, and provides a checklist summarising the key points. We have also included a checklist at the end of the guide that can help guide your endeavour, as well as further resources to keep delving into the issues where you need further help.

Box 1. Learning from others

If you are reading this guide, you already understand the importance of learning from others. But in any case, one of the first things you should do is to get as much information as you can about think tanks – from think tanks themselves.

Time spent on this might seem like a luxury at this point, but it is better to think of it as an investment for the future (read the advice from Hans Gutbrod on this).

Using this guide is a great first step and we have provided as many case studies as possible to help you learn from other think tanks. Boxes are used throughout the guide to give voice to think tank founders who recount their own experiences and can help you learn from their practices, motivations or challenges. But we still recommend that you approach think tanks yourself, study their websites, and explore what they do and how they do it.

A great resource you can use to find other think tanks is the Open Think Tank Directory (a collaborative project promoted by On Think Tanks to collect and capture a rich set of information about think tanks from all around the world). It offers a view into think tanks developed across the world by providing a searchable database with information on several indicators, such as topics, geographies of focus, business models, founding date and the gender of leaders and staff.

We also suggest attending conferences, webinars and courses. And although we might be biased, the OTT School offers a great selection.

Box 2. Thinking ahead, thinking again, and thinking across

Neo Boon Siong argues that as contexts change or become volatile, organisations need to be able to rejuvenate and renew their policies and practices, to develop fresh perceptions and to undertake adaptations. To do this, they need to have three dynamic organisational capabilities, which have been identified based on a study of Singapore's experience. These capabilities are:

Thinking ahead: the ability to identify future developments that might affect the institution's mission and effectiveness. While it is impossible to be fully prepared for the future, thinking ahead helps the organisation's leaders develop options for a range of plausible futures as well as creating a culture in which questions about the future are continually asked to find ways to put the organisation in a good position for what lies ahead.

Thinking again: the ability to reconsider and reinvent current policies and processes when circumstances change. It is necessary to use data, measurements and other feedback to understand the causes of any results (successes and failures), and to question what can be done differently to obtain better or different outcomes.

Thinking across: the ability to cross boundaries and learn from the experiences of others. Others' ideas and processes offer lessons that can be adapted to a different context or organisation. It is not just about imitating the best practices of others. Rather, it is about understanding why others adopted certain approaches to similar issues, and how their circumstances affected their policies and programmes.

The importance of supporting new think tank development

Aren't there enough think tanks? We do not think so.

Few developing countries have enough policy research institutes to help address the challenges they face. Instead, and because of the small size of the think tank community, they have to rely on policy ideas coming from abroad – often from the think tanks, research centres and consultancies set up in developed countries to lobby and influence international aid agencies (Mendizabal, 2016).

Besides, not all policy issues, regions or population groups are equally serviced by think tanks. Data from the Open Think Tank Directory shows how some regions have a strong think tank sector, while others have a smaller one.

Table 1. Number of think tanks per sub-regions

Northern America	560
Western Europe	446
Eastern Asia	348
South America	328
Northern Europe	246
Southern Europe	181
Eastern Europe	170
Western Asia	157
Southern Asia	140
South-Eastern Asia	125
Australia and New Zealand	84
Eastern Africa	81
Central America	59
Southern Africa	49
Western Africa	46
Northern Africa	26
Central Asia	23
Caribbean	13
Central Africa	4
Melanesia/Micronesia/Polynesia	2
N/A	1

Source: Open Think Tank Directory (data extracted February 2022)

But even in those regions where there is an abundance of think tanks, there is still space (and need!) for new policy research organisations,[2] as many issues and many people, particularly the most vulnerable, remain understudied. Additionally, most think tanks are based in capital cities and address policy challenges at a national level, meaning there is scope and a need for organisations working at different levels.

Furthermore, many think tanks in low- and middle-income countries, most of which are directly supported by foreign donors, maintain a very traditional and often expensive business model, which is difficult to replicate. It is time for new think tank models to emerge: flexible, smart about the use of digital tools and resources, and quick to learn from the practices of established think tanks

In summary, there is scope and a need for new policy research organisations and this guide aims to accompany those who want to take this road and fill this space.

Box 3. The role of think tanks in times of crisis.

This manual is being published at a time when think tanks across the world are facing acute challenges and changes: the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way many organisations work and disseminate their findings; experts and researchers are confronted by growing misinformation and polarization; there is growing social and political unrest across the world; and it is becoming harder for think tanks to obtain long-term core funding. Nonetheless, this is not the first time that think tanks have faced epochal transformations and most of them are able to navigate these challenges (Abelson and Rastrick 2021).

During times of crisis and change, think tanks provide innovative ideas, create spaces for plural engagement, and connect those who can contribute to addressing new challenges. In other words, their role during these times is more crucial than ever.

2 We will use the terms think tank and policy research organisation interchangeably through the document. See the section Defining think tanks for a discussion on the terms.

Unravelling the definition of think tanks

An excellent place to start is by clarifying what a think tank is (although we avoid a rigid definition) and what it isn't.

What's in the name?[3,4]

Think tanks go by many names: think tank, research centre, public policy research institute, idea factory, investigation centre, laboratory of ideas, policy research institute, and more. In other languages, the list is even longer: *centro de pensamiento, groupe de réflexion, Denkfabrik, serbatoi di pensiero* to name but a few.

The concept of 'think tank' applies to different types of organisations with different characteristics depending on their origins and their particular development pathways. Think tanks set up in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century tend to be different from those set up in the latter part of the century. Their business models and organisational structures also differ greatly.

Organisations that call themselves think tanks include: for-profit consultancies, university-based research centres, international and national NGOs, United Nations bodies, public policy bodies, foundations, advocacy organisations, membership-based associations, grassroots organisations, one-off expert fora, and many others.

The definition changes with time and location and it usually incorporates aspects of the organisation's context. Yet, all organisations labelled think tanks share the same objective of influencing policy and/or practice based on research.

Despite its plurality, it's important to acknowledge that the term think tank was coined in the United States with an Anglo-American model in mind. And that model permeates and influences think tanks in different locations in various ways. Let's start by reflecting on the mainstream definition of think taks.

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3 This section has been informed by the article Mendizabal, E. (2014a) What is a think tank? Defining the boundaries of the label.

4 This section is not intended as an in-depth review or critique of the term *think tank*. At the end of the guide you will find a list of further resources which we recommend to delve deeper in this debate.

Defining think tanks[5,6]

Think tanks are commonly defined as organisations that conduct research and seek to use it to influence policies. Donald E. Abelson and Ever A. Lindquist (2000), focusing on North American think tanks, explain that 'think tanks are nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations engaged in the study of public policy' (p. 38). Stone (2001) defines them as 'relatively autonomous organizations engaged in the research and analysis of contemporary issues independently of government, political parties, and pressure groups. This latter definition is widely used by think tank scholars and characterises think tanks as a clearly identified type of organisation, separate from universities, governments, or any other group. But the reality is fuzzier and think tanks that do actually fit the stereotype, such as the Brookings Institution and Chatham House, are less common.

Tom Medvetz, in the paper Think Tanks as an emergent field (2008), argues that this definition is limited because it:[7]

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

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5 This section is not intended as an in-depth review or critique of the term think tank. For that we recommend the following resources
- Abelson, Donald E. (2009), *Do think tanks matter?* Assessing the impact of public policy institutes. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- McGann, James and Johnson, Erik (2005), *Comparative think tanks, politics and public policy*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Rich, Andrew (2004), *Think tanks, public policies and politics of expertise*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stone & Denham (2004), Think tank traditions: Policy analysis across nations. Manchester University Press.

6 This section has been informed by these articles:
- Mendizabal, E. (2010a), On the definition of think tanks: Towards a more useful discussion.
- Mendizabal, E. (2010b), On the business model and how this affects what think tanks do.
- Mendizabal, E. (2011a), Different ways to define and describe think tanks.

7 Click here for an interview with Medvetz and here for his full profile and website. Or read this article to explore this critique further Mendizabal, E. (2010a), On the definition of think tanks: Towards a more useful discussion.

Think tank functions

Besides how they are defined, it is perhaps more useful to explore the roles and functions that think tanks tend to play. Think tanks have many roles and functions that vary based on the organisation's context, mission and aims, organisational structures, business models, and even the resources they have access to. Their main functions include:[8]

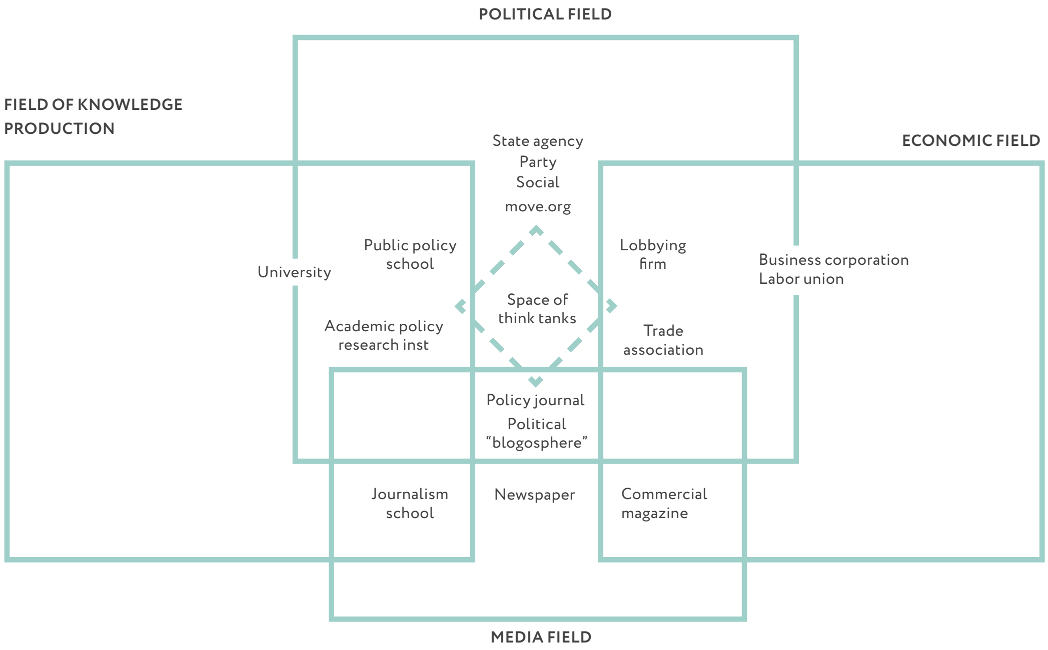
- Generating ideas.
- Providing legitimacy to policies, ideas and practices (whether it is ex-ante or ex-post).
- Creating, maintaining and opening up spaces for debate and deliberation – even as a sounding board for policymakers and opinion leaders. In some contexts, they provide a safe house for intellectuals and their ideas.
- Providing a financing channel for political parties and other policy interest groups.
- Attempting to influence the policy process.
- Providing cadres of experts and policymakers for political parties, governments, interest groups and leaders.
- Monitoring and auditing political actors, public policy or behaviour.
- Offering public and elite (including policymakers) education (something often forgotten by many think tanks due to the difficulty of assessing its impact).
- Employing boundary workers that can move in and out of different spaces (government, academia, advocacy etc.) and fostering exchange between sectors.
- Capacity building – designing courses open to interested audiences outside the think tank, creating fellowships and exchanging opportunities with both young and more experienced think-tankers.
- Participating in networks of organisations through which interaction is facilitated. For instance, the initiative Think20 Engagement Group brings together research institutes and think tanks from major countries to exchange ideas on pertinent topics.

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

8 These functions have been informed by papers from Belletini, 2007, Mendizabal & Sample, 2009, Gusterson, 2009, Tanner, 2002, Mendizabal (2010a, 2010b, 2011a)

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

Figure 1: Thinks tanks in social space.



Source: Medvetz (2008)

Summing up[9]

In summary, a strict and constraining definition of think tanks is of little help. Instead, think tanks are best characterised by a broad definition that emphasises the many forms, ties, ideologies, functions and roles that organisations can hold and play, and still be considered a think tank. They should also be understood based on the context in which they operate: a think tank in China need not be the same as a think tank in Bolivia (Mendizabal, 2011b, 2013a) – and we should not expect them to.

9 Mendizabal, E. (2013a), Think tanks in Latin America: what are they and what drives them?
Mendizabal, E. (2011b), Think tanks: research findings and some common challenges.

Think tanks are a diverse group of organisations that have as their (main) objective to inform (directly or indirectly), political actors with the ultimate intention of bringing about policy change and achieving explicit policy outcomes. While think tanks inform their choice of objectives, strategies and arguments with research-based evidence, they are not independent from the influence of values. They may perform different functions: from aiming to set or shift the public agenda, and monitoring how specific policies are carried out, to building the capacity of other policy actors.

WHY?

The Why? questions

These questions will help you:

- Reflect on your motivations to set up a think tank.
- Learn from the motivations of other think tank founders.
- Understand what a think tank is and what its most common functions are.
- Decide whether what you want to establish a think tank or take another direction.

Why do you want to set up a think tank?

One of the first questions you need to ask yourself is: Why do you want to set up a think tank?

Usually, when trying to answer this question, people describe a specific policy or political, economic or social situation that they want to change or even a new direction they want their country (or the world in some cases) to take. This motivation is fundamental in determining why we want to set up a think tank – it will help address what the think tank will work on.[10]

But we should also take a moment to reflect on deeper questions: Is a think tank the best way to achieve this? Do you have any other reasons for setting up a think tank?

In practice, there are many reasons and motivations for wanting to set up a think tank. They range from ideal and high-minded to more practical, mundane and selfish reasons.

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10 See the *What? questions* chapter

You may wish to set up a think tank simply to raise your personal profile and get into politics in the future, and you think that a think tank is a better vehicle than a political publication, a consultancy or academia. You might be a university-based researcher who wants to start a think tank to earn a decent living as a researcher-cum-consultant, or you might want to be seen as an authoritative expert and gain public recognition in your field.

The motivations for wanting to set up a think tank are diverse and reflecting on them will help you clarify if there is something else that you seek.[11] Understanding your motivations for setting up a think tank will also help you figure out what kind of think tank you wish to create, what activities it will undertake, who will work in it, and more. Here is a list of helpful questions to ask yourself:

- What problem or problems do you want to address? Is it personal or professional? Does it relate to the political, economic or social context in your community, country or internationally?
- What do you want to achieve?
- Do you think that evidence-informed arguments are absolutely necessary to achieve these objectives?
- Can you achieve it through alternative means? (e.g. academia, advocacy, or with an existing organisation)
- Why is a think tank the best means to achieve it?

You may think that a think tank is better than an academic research department at addressing policy challenges head on. This is true. Think tanks are commonly policy focused whereas the incentives within academia tend to be in the opposite direction. But a regular op-ed in a national broadsheet might have the same impact in the short term and your university may be well placed to help you with that. You may also think that it will be easier to raise funding for your research through a think tank. This is also true. Think tanks tend to be charities and tend to attract the attention of political and development philanthropists. But a well-run consultancy may be able to raise enough overhead from projects to fund its own independent research.

Throughout this guide, we will be addressing these and other questions. Reflecting on them early on will make the whole process easier for you. The guide also addresses more practical and mundane issues, such as different business models or how to assemble your team. Boxes 4 - 9 present a collection of the motivations of several think tank founders:

11 See the section *Are you sure you want to set up a think tank* in this chapter

Box 4. Changing the system. Orazio Belletini and Grupo Faro - Ecuador

Orazio Belletini is a co-founder and former executive director of Grupo Faro (Ecuador) Read the full interview here.

'After working several years in the private sector, I decided to start a new phase of my professional life by working in a development NGO. There I learned to appreciate the contribution that civil society organisations (CSOs) make by generating ideas and creating opportunities for the most vulnerable groups of society. This experience also helped me recognise that the work of CSOs usually focuses on specific groups rather than on changing the system that allows the appearance of problems such as social exclusion and environmental degradation.

I decided then to promote the creation of an organisation that would focus on delivering innovative solutions for social problems. My idea was to create an organisation that promotes citizen participation and encourages public-private collaboration to change the rules of the game; an organisation that, as described by Ashoka (a network of social entrepreneurs I belong to), does not just teach a (wo)man to fish but reinvents the fishing industry. I became convinced that one of the best way to achieve this goal was by influencing public policy.'

Box 5. Combining the skills of likeminded people. Simonida Kacarska and the European Policy Institute – Macedonia

Simonida Kacarska, is one of the founders and the current director of the European Policy Institute (Macedonia). Read the full interview here.

'In 2011, with several likeminded individuals with whom we shared the experiences of working on the EU accession of Macedonia, we founded a civil society organisation that grew into one of the leading think tanks in the country and in the region.

At the time of its founding, I was completing my PhD and was looking of a way to professionally combine the different skills and competences that I have gained both over my education and previous working experience. For example, I have insight from engaging with political reforms in societies that undergo transformations as a civil servant, researcher, and lecturer. The think tank position was such an opportunity.'

Box 6. Streamlining good ideas to the public sector. Nicolás Ducote and CIPPEC – Argentina

Nicolás Ducote is a co-founder and former executive director and general director of CIPPEC (Argentina). Read the full interview here.

'I was convinced that in Argentina there were no institutions that were strongly and perseveringly dedicated to taking the best ideas in public policy and pushing them towards the political process. I was very interested in putting together people whom I was approaching, who had an interest in causes such as education or health, and who did not have a vehicle to take their ideas to the world of public policy. And so, together with my associates and friends I decided to create an institution that would support entrepreneurs who wanted to change the Argentinean reality and who worried about what was important: that the things they proposed got done.

For them to be able to accomplish that, they would be free from some administrative tasks in the institution; we told them, 'come work at CIPPEC and we will help you get funding, we'll take care of communications, administrative issues, etc.; you just do the best you can to have impact, to put together a good team and to insert your area of knowledge into others, because most problems are interdisciplinary'. That is how we began with the idea that this would serve as a platform for public or social entrepreneurs, to integrate public policies, and to do it with a very strong focus on implementation; not just producing papers, but having an impact on the decision-making process.'

Box 7. Putting issues on the table. Gilles Yabi and Wathi – Senegal

Gilles Yabi is the founder of the West Africa Citizen Think Tank (WATHI) in Senegal. Read the full interview here.

(On the decision to set up a think tank) 'It is actually more about citizen engagement and a certain idea of what is important in one's life than about my career. I thought there was no reason to wait for retirement age to start something I am excited about and to take risks. I first had the idea when I was a PhD student in France. I wanted to do something useful and original in the region, and a think tank in West Africa can still be original. The concept is new even to many highly educated people here, especially in the Francophone countries. What think tanks exist are largely concentrated in [Anglophone] Ghana and Nigeria.'

(On the motivation for setting up WATHI) 'The states and the societies in the region have to change. The systems have to change: political, economic, and educational systems, as well as systems of values. I'm setting up a think tank with a large group of friends and contacts because we need to put some issues on the table, those which we believe are crucial for the future of West Africa in particular. WATHI is not a typical think tank built on in-house experts in specific fields. The goal is to create a participative think tank, one whose objective is not to produce big sophisticated reports but rather to act as a filter for available knowledge that is useful and share it as widely as possible to stimulate debate and reforms.'

Box 8. Generating research to understand current challenges. Gustav Brauckmeyer and Equilibrium CenDE – Peru

Gustav Brauckmeyer is the executive director of Equilibroum CenDE. Read the full interview here.

'Equilibrium CenDE was born out of the need to better understand both the Venezuelan migratory phenomenon and the challenge it presents for the region, as well as the challenges that arise in Venezuela in areas such as education, employment, entrepreneurship and civil society development. In general, there was a clear need to generate more research and data to understand these challenges, and that data could drive the debate and the creation of innovative solutions to face them.'

Box 9. Connecting academia with policy. Seyed Emamiam and GPTT – Iran

Seyed Sadegh Emamiam is the founder and director of the Governance and Policy Think Tank (GPTT) in Iran. Read the full interview here.

'As a postdoc researcher, I spent more than a year in London to study think tanks there. I was involved with a few think tanks in London and I was very inspired by their work. They were not the same institutionally, they were not necessarily alike, but their functions were very important, and I was inspired by the idea. When I moved to Tehran in 2015, I found a necessity to expand our research institution towards the policy area, because it was a very active part of academia and was somewhat successful, but there was a disconnect between academia and policy. I found that we needed a bridge between academia and policymaking, and that was the main idea behind the GPTT.'

As you can see from the experiences of these founders, the reasons for establishing a think tank may vary in the way they are framed, but in general they all wanted to produce good quality research – with teams of likeminded people worried about society's challenges – to provide good ideas to policymakers. In other words, they wanted to influence policies.

Why do think tanks aim to influence policy?[12]

Any discussion about think tanks needs to consider the field of evidence-informed policy. The prominence and spread of evidence-based discourse (which we refer to as informed policy) saw a rise in popularity with New Labour in Britain in the late 1990s and has spread to multiple sectors across the developing world, first aided by the policies of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and later adopted by other prominent public and private international development agencies (Du Toit, 2012).

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

Academic studies of evidence-based policymaking suggest that policymaking can never be ‹evidence-based'; rather, policy can only be strongly evidence-informed if its advocates act effectively (Cairney 2016).Du Toit (2012) goes on to argue that while research findings are important, 'we need to look at how policy narratives work with it; how it is used; and how it is alternately marginalised or seized on, ignored or imbued with significance'. This is a key role that think tanks can play: the combination of providing evidence and developing a coherent and adequate analysis of social processes.

The development of public policies is an area that by its 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' (instead of 'evidence-based') when referring to policy making.

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12 This section has been informed by these articles:
- Levine, R. (2018), The moral case for evidence in policymaking.
- Mendizabal, E. (2018), What's new in our understanding of how evidence influences policy? A view from Latin America.
- Du Toit, A. (2012), Making sense of 'evidence': Notes on the discursive politics of research and pro-poor policymaking›. Working Paper 21. PLAAS, UWC: Bellville.

Generally, the growing literature agrees that when it comes to influencing policy, scientific evidence:

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

Box 10. The knowledge translation toolkit

Bridging the know-do gap: A resource for researchers (Bennett, and Jessani, 2011), presents an overview of knowledge translation and how to bridge the 'know-do' gap between research, policy, practice and people. It also provides resources to encourage and enable evidence-informed decision-making.

Box 11. The role of think tanks in developing societies

Gurucharan G, director at the Public Affairs Centre (PAC) in India argues (in an interview) that think tanks have an important role in any society, but this role is enhanced in developing societies. They have to:

- *Speak truth to power,*
- *Give voice to the community to hold the state to account*
- *Help improve the quality of governance for better development outcomes.*

But why do we do this? Why do think tanks and policy research centres embark along this road? Ruth Levine has asked herself the same question and resolved that 'no field can be sustained and advanced unless it confronts and articulates its moral core' (Levine, 2018). So, what are some of the moral ideas behind evidence-informed policy making and the missions of think tanks?

- The pursuit of truth: research is ultimately about trying to discover the truth about what is being studied. The truths uncovered might be specific or even small, but they aspire to be truthful (Levine, 2018).
- Distributive justice: think tanks aim for their research and recommendations to ensure the fair allocation of resources (Levine, 2018). There are always trade-offs to be made, and the research that think tanks do helps untangle them. Organisations might have different definitions of what fair distribution is, but they still strive towards their individual visions.

- Visibility and the representation of different voices: as Levine (2018) states 'if it weren't for efforts to collect the same type of information from each and every individual – or at least a representative sample of each and every type of individual – what would we know? We would only know about the lives, livelihoods, and opinions of the people who have the greatest access to the public square'. Thus, the research that think tanks carry out, in a way, ensures that many voices are heard in the debate and provides a deeper understanding of the realities of different groups. Examples of these groups range from manufacturers and their employees, who stand to lose from a new trade deal, to subsistence farmers in remote rural areas, who are affected by climate change. By studying groups like these, think tanks can help ensure that the public debate represents their specific needs.

Are you sure you want to establish a think tank?

After reflecting on your motivations and a brief discussion about how to define think tanks: are you still sure that you want to create a new think tank?

There are other things you can do, depending on your objectives. You could create a blog to share your ideas more widely. Maybe launch a consultancy, if you are looking for something lucrative. Alternatively, if you find yourself more interested in political commentary you could focus on writing op-eds. Or maybe you would like to go down an academic path. Or you may want to be more active and mobilise others to act on a specific subject, in that case you could start an interest group and/or become an activist, and could even run for office or apply for a civil service job.

Regardless of the choice you make you can still find inspiration in this guide and on the On Think Tanks website. For example, you can find inspiration on how to communicate better (see the section How will it communicate? in this guide, or our online articles on communications and impact); how to improve the governance and management of policy research organisations (see the section Who will govern it? or our articles on governance); or about research quality and credibility (see the section How will it ensure its credibility? or see these articles). We invite you to explore and use this tool in any way that suits your needs and aims.

WHAT?

The What? questions

These questions will help you:

- Understand the context your think tank will be born into and how this context will affect your think tank's activities, research areas, communications, access to funding and organisational set up (among other aspects).
- Understand the concept of mission, vision and values, and reflect on what these will be for your organisation.
- Reflect on the issues that your think tank will focus on.
- Reflect on the impact it aims to achieve.
- Clarify your organisation's business model: the way in which your organisation will go about achieving its goals.

What will your think tank do?

In this chapter we discuss several questions that will help you define what exactly your think tank will do. As we have seen, think tanks can fulfil many functions so you need to be clear on what your goals are. We recommend that as soon as you start working on the goals of your think tank you spend time analysing your context. Local and global contexts will condition what your think tank can do, and understanding these will help you identify different strategies.

What is the context?[13]

Think tanks are a product of, and intertwined with, their context. An organisation's research choices, functions and even its impact are a response to its context. The context will frame and influence the research agenda, the communication strategies, and even the ways of engaging with the think tank's key audiences. Think, for example, how the global context of the COVID-19 pandemic changed almost every mode of engagement and shifted the priorities of both governments and funders.[14]

Context will affect an organisation at every level, in all its functions and characteristics. It is therefore fundamental to assess it early on so you can:

- Identify if your ideas (about the challenges or opportunities you want to address) are relevant.
- Assess your real capacity to have influence.
- Position your efforts in the context of relevant current trends (evidence needs, policy gaps, donor priorities, etc.).
- Map out 'the competition' and assess who you might be able to partner with and who is likely to challenge your project.
- Analyse local, national and international spaces for action.
- Understand what roles a new think tank could possibly play.
- Decide what type of think tank you should create and how it should operate.

For example, in Bangladesh and Vietnam, political competition affects how think tanks relate to political parties, just as deciding whether to affiliate to a party or remain independent affects their effectiveness. (Brown, 2015). In Vietnam, think tanks cannot be completely independent from the government; they need a sponsor to help them achieve their objectives. This is similar to the situation in China, where think tanks are deeply intertwined with the government and the Party and cannot function in absolute independence. In the United States, on the other hand, think tanks need to engage with philanthropists and the private sector to secure funding because financial separation from the government is considered essential.

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13 Based on:

- Brown, E. (2015), Introduction to the series on think tanks and context.
- Ordoñez, A. and Echt, L. (2016), Module 2: Designing a policy relevant research agenda. From the online course: 'Doing policy relevant research'. On Think Tanks.
- Mendizabal, E. (2016), Setting up a think tank: step by step.
- Garcé, A., D'Avenia, L., López, C. and Villegas, B. (2018), Political knowledge regimes and policy change in Chile and Uruguay. On Think Tanks Working Paper 3.
- Tolmie, C. (2015), Context matters: So what?

14 For more on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on think tanks see Mendizabal (2020), COVID-19's effect on think tanks in 10 headlines, or explore this collection of articles.

Basically, all think tanks are embedded in a context that frames their work. No matter the sort of organisation that you aim to create, you will be acting and functioning within a system, and therefore you need to be realistic. You will not be able to change the whole system, but you may be able to shape parts of it.

Thus, when analysing your context, you should also consider the future. Take the time to think about what future you imagine for your think tank: what landscape do you imagine five years down the line? This will help you reflect up front on what could go wrong. You should start considering the different risks you may face and how you could address them.

There are also the policymaking and knowledge regimes that need to be accounted for. Knowledge regimes are 'the organizational and institutional machinery that generates data, research, policy recommendations and other ideas that influence public debate and policy-making' (Campbell and Pedersen 2014). To determine the local knowledge regime, you need to understand the policymaking regime (how policies are developed), the economy, the politics, and the social and cultural characteristics of a country – as these all influence the market of ideas and how research is produced and used. To understand how knowledge is produced, and used in politics and policymaking, all of these variables (and their importance in a context) need to be accounted for. But how does the policymaking regime affect think tanks? Think about how, for example, Germany has a strong tradition of using research to inform policymaking, and its citizens and policymakers value the role of knowledge in policymaking. On the contrary, in Uruguay, politics trump technical reasoning; while in Chile, knowledge plays a vital role and creates bonds between political parties and interest groups (Garcé et al., 2018).[15]

Box 12. The importance of local contexts

Dr Asep Suryadhadi, executive director of SMERU (Indonesia) discusses the importance of understanding the context when establishing a new think tank. Read the full interview here.

One thing that I have learnt is that context matters a lot. SMERU was established when Indonesia was in a transition from an authoritarian governance, where the government can get away with any policy they make, to a democratic governance, where every government policy is openly questioned and debated. This means now that the government needs evidence as the basis of any policy

15 For more on policy and knowledge regimes read:
- Campbell, John L. and Ove Pedersen (2014), *The National Origins of Policy Ideas: Knowledge Regimes in the United States, France, Germany, and Denmark*. Princeton: Press Princeton University Press.
- Garcé, A., D'Avenia, L., López, C. and Villegas, B. (2018), Political knowledge regimes and policy change in Chile and Uruguay. On Think Tanks Working Paper 3.

they make. On theother hand, there were not many of organizations capable of supplying evidence for policy. With this background of increasing demand and lack of supply of evidence, SMERU was able to capitalize the situation and develop itself into an established policy research institution in the country.

So it is very important to understand your context. We cannot just copy successful think tanks in other countries as a model because it may not work in our country. This is not to say that we should not learn from other organizations as certainly there are useful lessons that other organizations can provide. However, by understanding our context, we will be able to set reasonable objectives that we want to achieve as well as determine how we can operate effectively and efficiently.

Box 13. Changing context

Chukwuka Onyekwena, executive director of the Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa – CSEA (Nigeria). Listen the full interview here.

In general, the internal policies that I met in the past years was one where the demand for evidence was quite weak. Over the years, the demand was increasing gradually within the policy space. Think tanks have tried to really push to stimulate the demand for evidence. We thought that Think Tank initiatives which provided flexible funding allowed Think Tanks to emerge within Nigeria (...) As the availability of flexible fundings have been declining, now Think Tanks are struggling. The ability to stimulates evidence is now being unlimited. But that is also changing recently due to COVID. COVID is a shock. People from the policy space needed knowledge to explain what is going on, the impact, what strategy should we use to solve this challenge that is quite rare. Knowledge produced by Think Tanks became increasingly involved in providing adequate advice or recommendation on what to do. So COVID-19 arrived and increased the demand for knowledge and Think Tank has benefitted for that (...) Shocks tend to change the way we do things. For example, financial crisis was a big shock and a lot of accounting principles changed. COVID will change how policy actors view things, how they look at the future and how they prepare for such shocks. Think Tanks have the opportunity to be at the forefront of these kind of conversations. So, it will really trigger higher demand for evidence.

But how do you make sense of your context? What factors should you consider? In their publication Linking think tank performance, decisions, and context, Results for Development (2014) devised a framework for thinking about context as it relates to think tanks and their decisions. The framework describes different levels and factors that explain how think tanks make decisions based on their context. Ordoñez and Echt (2016a) have provided a summary of the framework, shown here in Figure 1, to help organisations reflect on their environments. The framework differentiates between exogenous, endogenous or mixed factors, based on the level of control that an organisation can exert.

- **Exogenous factors:** are 'factors that are determined by forces outside of the think tank's sphere of influence and that impact the think tank's ability to achieve its goals' (Brown et al, 2014). For example, the number and strength of political parties, an authoritarian government, and turnover in key government positions, among many others, are all exogenous contextual factors that will affect what a think tank can do (Brown, 2015).
- **Endogenous factors:** are internal to the think tank and therefore under the control of the organisation, even though they are still influenced by the context. For example, hiring top-level staff is something that is largely under the control of the think tank but is influenced by the context: availability of adequately trained and experienced individuals, labour laws, the location of the think tank (capital or smaller city), and so on.
- **Mixed factors:** include circumstances in which context is partly a function of a think tank's strategic choice and partly a function of variables outside of its influence.

But think tanks do not just passively accept their context: they are a product of their context, but they also seek to change it. They create strategies to respond to it; they use their communication, research, and policy engagement tools to address their contextual factors and react to them (Tolmie, 2015).

Figure 2. Context levels

Exogenous factors	Mixed	Endogenous
• Political and economic factors (political competition, government priorities, transparency and effectiveness) • Donor environment (presence and priorities) • Intellectual climate • Civil society (environment and media)	• Donors agendas • Availability of funding • Situation of allies or competition • Government's agenda	• Credibility • Communications • Social Capital • Resources

Less control ⟷ More control

Source: Developed by Ordoñez and Echt (2016b) based on factors proposed by Results for Development (2014) and adapted by the authors of this guide.

Analysing your context: Key questions to reflect on[16]

It is important to reflect on these contextual factors while thinking about the organisation you aim to create. Remember to focus on the aspects that help explain the situation that the think tank will be born into, and the aspects it will try to address. To do this effectively you will need to be selective of the dimensions that you include in your analysis (Ordoñez and Echt, 2016a) and reflect on what the answers imply for the work that you intend to do, including how you will conduct research and communicate your findings.

Here are some questions that can help you analyse your context (building on Ordoñez and Echt, 2016a; Results for Development, 2014; and Mendizabal, 2015):[17]

Political context

- What are the characteristics of the political system in which you are involved? How does the political system react to independent thinking? How do actors react to the type of work you aim to produce?
- What are the main changes occurring in the political, social or economic systems? Are there any major developments or trends taking place? (e.g. democratisation, regionalisation, changes in economic policies, migrations, etc.)
- Are there any relevant policy or political milestones expected in the short or middle term? Are elections coming up? Is there a 5- or 10-year development plan in place? Is a new constitution or trade agreement being drafted?
- What actors would you need to engage with? Who is most relevant at the local, national and/or international level?

Evidence needs and access to information

- What is the state of the information on the topic you are choosing? What kind of information is available? Would we be able to carry out the necessary research to address any knowledge gaps?
- What contacts are available to you to access data or assess evidence needs?
- What are the interests, worries and capacities of public agencies regarding the use of research in policymaking? What are the needs of government institutions in terms of research? What are their capacities to generate, demand and use research? How can you start a discussion with them?

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16 Based on:
- Mendizabal, E. (2015b), How does the context affect think tanks? A few hypotheses and research questions.
- Ordoñez, A., Echt, L. (2016), Module 2: Designing a policy relevant research agenda. From the online course: 'Doing policy relevant research' On Think Tanks.

17 The headings do not exactly follow the 2014 Results for Development framework. We have adapted them and highlighted some factors to help reflect on the context your think tank will be born into.

Funding

- What are the priorities, strategies and objectives of funders? Who supports the issues you are interested in? Who can you approach?
- What are the international trends in academia or policy? How will you relate to them to make your work more fundable?
- Are there any national, regional and global sources of public and private funding that you may be able to benefit from? What conditions are attached to them?

Intellectual climate

- What is the intellectual climate like? How is science valued? Is it considered valuable for policymaking? How do intellectual debates take place? Is it the same for all policy issues, or do some have bigger and more active intellectual communities?
- What will your relationship with other intellectually relevant actors (such as academics, journalists, opinion leaders, experts in your field and others) be like? Will there be competition, debate or will you complement each other? How can you work together if necessary?

Civil Society

- What is the role of the media? Is it free? Is it overtly partisan?
- What other players foster the dissemination and use of evidence? Are there any academic communities with an active role in policymaking? Who are they? Who has more credibility? Why?
- Is there a demand for evidence from civil society organisations? What type of evidence do they prefer? Is civil society familiar with the evidence-informed approach that think tanks promote? What is their stance on it?
- Is there demand for evidence from social movements and other grassroots organisations? What type of evidence do they prefer? Are they familiar with the evidence-informed approach that think tanks promote? What is their stance on it?
- What is in the agenda of other research centres, universities and think tanks?

Regulatory regimes

- What are the regulatory frameworks that affect think tanks and research organisations? How do they enable or limit their ability to mobilise resources, human or financial? How do they enable or limit their ability to influence policy and practice?
- How will labour legislation affect your organisation? Does it permit flexible work contracts? Will you be able to hire globally?
- What is the tax legislation like? (Think not only in terms of how it affects the organisation but also potential donors). Does it encourage or discourage philanthropists to support research? Does it limit the activities think tanks may undertake (for instance, to maintain tax exemptions)?

- How does the exchange rate affect you? (crucial to consider if you have foreign funders)
- How does civil society legislation more broadly affect think tanks?

Other practical issues

- Is internet access widespread and reliable?
- Will you have access to online databases, academic journals, communities of practice etc.?
- Will you be based in a large or a small city? Will it be in the capital or in another part of the country? How will this affect your access to policymakers, the media or other relevant actors? The definition of your location will be influenced by your goals and your desired level of influence.
- What is transport like within the city or to other cities? Will traffic affect the types of activities you wish to organise? For example, you might not be able to organise too many events if traffic limits mobility in the city.
- How does the education policy affect think tanks? Is critical thinking a value? Are research methods and writing well taught? These factors will affect the quality and quantity of researchers available to work with you.

What do you want to achieve by setting up a think tank?[18]

Once you are firmly situated within your context and have a firm sense of how it will affect your future organisation, you should ask yourself 'what would you like your think tank to achieve?'[19] To answer this we recommend you reflect on the vision and the mission of your organisation, which are framed by your values (Mendizabal, 2013b; 2016).

Vision

The vision is your dream, the ideal world, the big picture of what you would like the think tank to achieve. It is not something that will be achieved in the short term. It should be visionary but at the same time realistic. Here are some examples:

> 'Our vision is a world in which government, politics, business, civil society and the daily lives of people are free of corruption.' Transparency International, Germany.

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18 Additionally, this toolkit A DIY approach to solving complex problems (PDIA Toolkit -2018) can help you think trough the problems that you are trying to solve.

19 We have explored context before starting to look at the organisation's aims, because the context will frame what it will be able to achieve and how.

> 'We envision a world of democratic freedoms and fair and sustainable development through European integration and international cooperation.' Istituto Affari Internazionali, Italy.

Mission

The mission is the organisation›s purpose; it is what the think tank will do to contribute to the achievement of the vision. A good mission need not be lengthy. On the contrary, a short, powerful and clear mission is preferred. For example:

> 'EPI's mission is, through high-quality research and proposals on European policy, to provide a sound base for debate and solutions, targeting decision-makers and the wider public' European Policy Institute, Macedonia.

> 'Centre for London is the capital's dedicated think tank. Our mission is to develop new solutions to London's critical challenges and advocate for a fair and prosperous global city' Centre for London, UK.

> 'Using our knowledge, networks, funding and skills, we work hard to **see** new opportunities and challenges; **spark** creative answers from many sources; **shape** brilliant ideas into practical solutions; and then **shift** whole systems in a new direction' Nesta, UK.

> 'Our mission is to produce knowledge, propose initiatives, develop practices and support processes to contribute in the construction of a stable and lasting peace in Colombia' Fundación Ideas para la Paz, Colombia.

> 'To be recognized as an innovative institution that is committed to Brazil's development, the formation of an academic elite, and the generation of public goods in social and related areas, guaranteeing our financial sustainability through the provision of high-quality services and high ethical standards' Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Brazil.

Values

The values are the guiding principles and the foundation on top of which all actions rest, whether formally identified or not. They are beliefs about what is important, and the way to act. No individual or organisation is without values. Even independence, neutrality, and being led by data are values in themselves:

'Everyone has them [values]. And every time that a think tank recommends a course of action it is making use of values: evidence does not tell us what to do. It informs and is the basis of our analysis to recommend courses of action' Mendizabal, 2016.[20]

It is helpful to identify your own values in the early stages. They do not need to be specific to the point of limiting your actions, but should offer a sense of where your organisation might fall in the political spectrum. These may be rather simple (e.g. all for liberalisation) or more complex (e.g. liberal on social issues but more conservative politically and moderate on the economy) (Mendizabal, 2016).

Through our work with think tanks and policy research organisations we have found that organisations tend to publicly frame their values not in terms of where they stand on the political spectrum, but rather by focusing on how they undertake their work. What values will underpin the way you work? Here are some examples to help you understand this:

> 'Independence: The independence of our thinking, as much as its rigour and creativity, is what makes it influential. Inclusivity and diversity: We ground our analysis and solutions in an inclusive approach. We bring diverse voices to the table to find common solutions to shared problems. We ensure our research and outputs are widely accessible, so people can develop their own voice in international affairs. Collaboration: Collaboration is a core competence for our staff. It inspires our relationships with associates, partners, supporters and members and helps us develop global networks to find positive, durable solutions to policy challenges' Chatham House, UK.
>
> 'What we stand for: Independence. Excellence, Relevance and Innovation. Cross-cutting and Long-term Solutions. Multi-constituency and Inclusive. Partnership and Outreach' European Policy Centre, Belgium.
>
> 'The values that define CIDOB's work are: The desire to act as a public good through the provision of international knowledge. Excellence, through the rigour, quality and independence of our analysis. Innovation in the approach to studying international relations. Visibility, via new research formats and media presence. The promotion of the good management and economic health of the institution and the proactive search for new projects' CIBOD, Spain.
>
> You do not need to put your vision, mission, and values in writing – certainly not laminated. But working on them is highly recommended as they will certainly frame the work that you do. Also, having a clear mission will make planning a

20 For more on this read: Mendizabal,E. (2011), The limits of the scientific method and the need to merge science and innovation.

strategy easier. It will make your organisation more attractive to the likeminded individuals you want to work with, and it will draw attention and support from funders interested in the same issues (Mendizabal, 2016).

Box 14. What does the 'About us' section usually convey?

The 'About us' section of a website is an opportunity to showcase your organisation. What gets included, and also what gets left out, signals to readers (be they funders, academics, policymakers, activists, or the general public) who you are, what is important to you, and what they should expect from you.

We have found the best 'About us' sections include: who the organisation is (organisational structure, affiliations etc.), what the organisation does (main issues, functions), how it does it (key expertise) and why. The style is also important, and keeping it simple, descriptive and to the point tends to work best across all cultures. Here are some examples of content from various 'About us' pages:

The Brookings Institution describes who they are (experts, leaders, history and agenda), what they do (annual report, selected essays, and fellowship programme), and what they stand for (policies on integrity, diversity and inclusion and public health funded research)

The Center for Global Development highlights their mission and values, their impact and influence, leadership, board, directors, working groups data disclosure, funding and history. They also invite visitors to find out more about working with them and supporting them. They have specific sections for educators and the press, where they highlight resources tailored for them

The Nesta Foundation has an inspiring 100-second video that covers what they aim to do, what they stand for, and how they do it. For those who want more details they also explain how they work, what they want to achieve (phrased as questions on the topics that they are covering), their innovation methods, services, and their international work, and introduce their team.

The German Council on Foreign Relations describes their aims and the themes they work on, invites the reader to join the organisation as a member and introduces a journal that they publish as well as their library. There are also links to their board, statute, history and code of conduct.

What issues will the think tank focus on?[21]

In parallel to reflecting on and defining your vision, mission and guiding values, you should work on defining the issues that your think tank will focus on.

Depending on your interests and motivations, you might want to cover a broad range of public policy issues so you can address change at different levels, but we would recommend focusing on a few specific issues. Gutbrod (2013a) suggests concentrating on your own core expertise 'either in one or two issue areas (say, health or education), cross-cutting (accountability, or budget process) or by applying a method (say, citizen report cards or surveys)'. A good place to start is by focusing on aspects that you or your team already have expertise in. It will save you time (no need to invest it in improving your knowledge or abilities in a topic you are not familiar with) and enable you to hit the ground running.

Yet, to decide the specifics you should think beyond your personal research interests and pay attention to the context and existing, or future, policy questions,[22] as well as to the problems you are addressing (Mendizabal, 2016).

'Why not, too, find policy areas that are under-studied? For instance, middle class concerns. Think tanks in developing countries, funded by foreign aid donors and agencies, tend to focus on what is often termed "pro-poor issues" and shy away from more mainstream and middle-class concerns (e.g. they focus on primary education but not on tertiary education). However, as countries and their middle classes grow, their concerns need to be addressed, too. A single-issue think tank is also a good alternative. It may help you find "natural" funders and audiences'. (Mendizabal, 2016)

Another way to go about choosing the scope of your work is to consider what are the most relevant national and international policy agendas. These may be linked to international policy discussions such as Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, or they may involve specific national circumstances, such as the future of work or urban development. By linking your work to existing agendas, you will be able to take advantage of the research already done in them.

Another way to select policy issues to work on is to understand the likelihood of your research being used by policymakers. Datta (2018) summarises research conducted by ODI's RAPID programme showing that four factors are key in shaping the likelihood that evidence will be taken up:[23]

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21 This section draws from these articles:
Mendizabal, E. (2016), Setting up a think tank: Step by step.
Gutbrod, H. (2013a), Advice to think tank startup: Do not do it alone.

22 More on this issue on the section How will it carry out research? and in the article Mendizabal, E. (2013), Research questions are not the same as policy questions.

23 Based on Datta, A. (2018), Three ways to select policy issues to work on.

1. **The level of technical expertise required to participate in policy debates**. In different sectors, the need for specialised expertise may grow (e.g. climate change) in response to its growing complexity, so the demand for knowledge and experts from policymakers also increases.
2. **The relative influence of economic interests in shaping policy dialogues**. In certain policy areas (such as trade or social security) economic actors are arguably more prominent than in others, so it is important to acknowledge the influence of economic interests in shaping research production and uptake.
3. **The level of contestation in the sector**. If the area is highly contested, it will be much more difficult for research to be applied to policymaking than if there is a strong consensus about the need for policy change.
4. **The extent to which policy discourses are internationalised**. On many issues, local actors start to enjoy greater success in influencing policy once they being working with international players rather than only domestically.

What will the think tank want to influence?[24]

This is strictly a what question as we are not referring to which specific audiences you will be focusing on (for that see section: Who will engage with it?). To answer this broader question, think more specifically about what policy debates you will be contributing to. At what level would you be aiming your efforts? Are you looking to have international or local influence? For example, you could be based in Serbia but aim to inform EU policy in Brussels, or be based in Lima, Peru and focus on the Sustainable Development Goals at the local level. Or you could start working at the municipal level and then shift to city level or national politics. Small doesn't mean less interesting or important (Mendizabal, 2016).

There are many levels of influence and impact. For example, depending on the functions your think tank pursues, you may:

- Influence the definition and formulation of a key problem.
- Impact the public agenda, frame policy discussion and help define what issues should be prioritised.
- Help define the questions that fellow researchers should attempt to answer.
- Work on producing evidence to help answer these research questions.
- Make policy or programme recommendations based on evidence (either yours or produced by others) and help policymakers navigate the different options presented.
- Develop programmes or projects based on these recommendations and evidence – and, if possible, test them through small pilots.

24 This section draws from: Mendizabal, E. (2016), Setting up a think tank: Step by step.

- Develop the capacity of policymakers and other relevant policy actors to use and understand research.
- Improve how governments and ministries make decisions – which has an indirect, but equally important, impact.
- Work with the public, the media and other stakeholders to inform the debate on a particular topic, which includes changing beliefs around a specific issue.

Box 15: Local and international audiences

'International audiences are not necessarily harder than domestic ones. In Africa, some new think tanks are seeking out regional or international political spaces as a way of avoiding the challenges involved in domestic politics –especially in contexts where the policy space is rapidly closing down. The very local space is also undeserved. At the PODER Awards to the best Peruvian think tanks we have found a significant difference between the national and the local politics: the former is much better served by think tanks than the latter. In counties like Indonesia, India and Argentina, local think tanks exist to serve sub-national policy communities' (Mendizabal, 2016).

The choices you make about your desired impact or the level you want to work at (local, sub-national, national, regional, or even global), will demand different governance arrangements, different strategies, resources, and so on, and your plans will have to shift accordingly (Mendizabal, 2016). See The How? questions section of this guide, as well as What will its business model be? to continue working on this.

What does 'using evidence' mean in practice?[25]

The goal of many think tank founders is to generate good quality evidence that can be used to inform policies. But evidence-related practices include more than just the application of research findings or recommendations during decision making.

Policymakers may be motivated to demand or use evidence by many factors. It can be that policymakers use evidence for more personal reasons, such as to assess power gained or lost, defend or legitimise a decision, or bolster their status. They can also use it for technical purposes, such as to provide context about an issue, inform a strategy or their engagement with others, or reduce uncertainty about a policy problem.

25 Based on Datta, A. (2018), Five questions to understand the evidence context

What will its business model be?[26]

One of the first things you need to do is decide on the business model your think tank will follow. This decision should be based on what you want to achieve and how you want to work, but also on the context you are starting the think tank in and on the resources you have at your disposal.

A business model is 'the way in which an organisation goes about achieving its goals… it defines the manner by which the think tank delivers value to stakeholders, entices funders to pay for value, and converts those payments to research with the potential to influence policy…. It thus reflects management's hypothesis about what stakeholders want, how they want it, and how a think tank can use its resources to best meet those needs, get paid for doing so, and achieve its mission. In sum, a think tank business model describes the interface of a policy research institute's rationale and underpinning economic logic' (Ralphs, 2016a).

When developing a business model you need to make three choices: policy, asset and governance.

- **Policy** choices are about the internal policies that an organisation establishes for its operations. These range from decisions about flying economy, not using printers, and holding virtual vs. in person meetings, to policies such as establishing funding limits from single sources and how to recruit and retain staff.
- **Assets** are the tangible resources that an organisation invests in.
- **Governance** is how the organisation will discuss and make strategic and day-today decisions (Casadesus-Masanell and Ricart, 2011).

Explore these choices further by considering the following elements:[27]

Elements of a business model	Description
Value proposition	When producing and selling products and services, what value is offered to users?
Core business activities	What activities are carried out in order to create value propositions, and consequently to generate revenue for the organisation?
Leadership	What are the characteristics required of leadership?

26 This section draws from: Ralphs, G. (2016a), Think tank business models: The business of academia and politics.

27 Based on the following sources: Mendizabal 2010, Universalia 2013, Ralphs 2011, Struyk 2006, Yeo 2011 and Politics & Ideas 2014.

Elements of a business model	Description
Governance	How to set up governance?
Communications	How are the audiences defined considering the value proposition? What strategies and channels need to be developed to reach them?
Funding structure	Where does funding come from? How are the decisions regarding funding organised and managed?
Staffing	How to identify, attract and motivate staff members?
Financial management	How does the organisation deal with revenues and costs to ensure its sustainability?

Source: Adapted from Cahyo and Echt (2015)

When reflecting on your business model, one idea is to create a story about how the organisation will accomplish its mission.

Good business models can take many forms, but they share some key characteristics:

- They are aligned and respond to the organisation's goals.
- They are self-reinforcing, meaning that there is internal consistency. All choices and decisions should complement each other and work towards the same goal.
- They are robust. They continue to work overtime fending off risks and taking advantage of opportunities (Casadesus-Masanell and Ricart, 2011)

Remember that your business model can change if it no longer works for your organisation. See the case of Espacio Público in Box 16.

Box 16. Changing business models: The case of Espacio Público in Chile

Deciding on a business model is an important decision, one that will define how the organisation will organise and carry out its work. Business models respond to the objectives and goals of an organisation, its context and resources. Because of that, most business models are unique, and must be continually evaluated and evolving. But it is not a decision that is set in stone. If at any point the business model is not working you can make the decision to change it.

For example, Espacio Público, a think tank in Santiago de Chile, began operating in 2013 with two large core funders who provided 100% of their budget. The agreement with one of the funders was for three years and with the other funder the agreement was that they would reduce their funds every year. This encouraged Espacio Público to search for more project-based funding. By 2017 they had 20% core funding, 70% project based funding and 10% local funding.

But funding was just one of the changes they underwent. They also had to rearrange their board and their team of researchers to adapt to this project-based funding, which demands greater autonomy from the team. They reduced their team of researchers to ensure that it was composed of more senior researchers who could 'stand before donors in their own right' and not as assistants of someone else. In other words, as their funding model evolved, so too did their business model, in a complementary way.

Comparison of think tank business models

Research conducted by Leandro Echt and Ashari Cahyo Edi (2015) analyses the business models of six think tanks (three in Latin America and three in Indonesia) by focusing on the elements presented above. The study reveals that think tanks have different understandings of what 'business model' means. Some point to funding structure while others focus on the think tank's mode of work or value proposition.

Similarities among the think tanks studied:

- Most think tanks diversify their core business activities, rather than concentrating on a single activity. These activities are usually research, capacity building and policy advice.
- Most think tanks make efforts to diversify their funding sources.
- Most organisations understand their different audiences and have communications tools to target them.

Differences among the think tanks studied:

- In terms of governance, some think tanks have heavy governance arrangements (with many internal and external bodies with specific functions) while the approach is much lighter in other organisations.
- Regarding the value proposition, for some organisations research excellence is their main product, while for others it is their ability to engage with grassroots communities.

Not everyone has the right skills to develop the business model, so it may make sense engaging a professional team to support you at this stage. Having a well-drafted business model and business plan is key to gaining the confidence of future partners and funders.

Types of think tanks[28]

The application of the different elements of a business model results in different types of think tanks. Stone's (2005) classification, which relates to the think tank's origin, is a good place to start. She identifies the following:

1. Independent civil society think tanks established as non-profit organisations.
2. Policy research institutes located in, or affiliated with, a university.
3. Governmentally created or state-sponsored think tanks.
4. Corporate-created or business-affiliated think tanks.
5. Political party (or candidate) think tanks.

These are just some examples of types of think tanks, and many nuances exist within each category. For instance, within independent civil society organisations, some behave like research consultancies (undertaking research on demand and even bidding on calls for proposals).

This model tends to exist where international cooperation has played a significant role or where the main research funder is the state, via requests for expert advice or evaluations. These think tanks engage in service contracts to carry out long- and short-term research projects, and because of this, their space to follow their own agendas may be somewhat limited (Mendizabal, 2013a).

Some think tanks try to combine research consultancy with more independent type communication and outreach work. (Mendizabal, 2016)

Box 17. Types of Think tank across the world

According to the 2019 Think Tank State of the Sector, which analyses think tanks around the world, the majority of think tanks for which there is data available are non-profit organisations (67%), followed by university institutes or centres (16%), government organisations (10%), for-profit organisations (5%) and a small group of other (2%). This also varies by region. For instance, in China the percentage of government think tanks is 74% while in the US and Canada 97% are non-profit. The legal registration of your organisation will need to adapt to the context in which it will operate (see What is the context? for more on this discussion)

28 This section draws from:
- Mendizabal, E. (2013a), Think tanks in Latin America: What are they and what drives them?
- Mendizabal, E. (2013c), For-profit think tanks and implications for funders.

Another example of organisations that fall somewhat outside Stone's categorisation are the for-profit think tanks we have come across in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Africa. Their context has made this the most logical business model: high upfront costs for civil society organisations, regulations that limit their free functioning or access to data, complicated tax laws for the non-profit sector, and other factors, led them to opt for this model (Mendizabal, 2013c). Many figured that while governments may try to curtail civil society, they are unlikely to do the same with small and medium size businesses.

foraus is a Swiss think tank that was set up as a grassroot organisation and reflects its origins through its extensive network of volunteers who take on policy challenges and undertake research in a very collaborative way. They are supported by a small group of young think tankers who manage these processes and fulfil core functions.

These are just some of the options that exist. Your organisation could resemble any one of these or even be different. In any case, it is important to bear in mind that the business model should work for your organisational aims and the context in which you operate and that you expect to influence.

Box 18. Think tank models in Zambia

As examples of the diverse types of think tanks that exist, we present a summary of different think tank models in Zambia (based on Mendizabal, 2013d and 2013e).

Academic think tank
These are the most traditional, and preferred by funders such as the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF). They follow an academic model and tend to be rather expensive (funding wise). ZIPAR (Zambia Institute for Policy Analysis and Research) is an example of this type. It had a slow and steady early start focussed on setting itself up: office, staff, systems, processes, partnerships, and so on, producing little or no outputs. This was made possible by core funding from ACBF. Up until 2013 it still had core funding from ACBF as well as from the government of Zambia, complemented by project funding from DFID and the Danish Embassy.

GO think tank
An interesting example is the Centre for Trade Policy and Development (CTPD), which was born from the secretariat of a network of NGOs, working on issues related to trade and development. This secretariat started by doing mostly capacity building work, but it slowly shifted towards policy analysis and influence. The network members then became a board or assembly for CTPD. The organisation receives funding from international NGOs (some of it core funding).

Faith-based think tank
The Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) has an interesting and uncommon think tank model: it is a faith-based organisation. It has the key advantages of having an established narrative and constituency. JCRT uses the

Christian narrative, stories and metaphors, to communicate its evidence. This resonates strongly with many specialised and general audiences in the country. They have also developed a product: the basic needs basket. This is circulated and used in government, international actors, trade unions, media businesses, etc.

For more on religion and think tanks read these articles: Mendizabal (2012,) The church and think tanks and Mendizabal (2011), Is religion a 'no no' for think tanks?

WHO?

The Who? questions

These questions will help you:

- Understand the different roles that a board can play for a think tank and the different types that exist.
- Know the challenges that a think tank leader faces and the different skills he or she needs to deal with them.
- Reflect on how the think tank will engage with its audience and begin mapping the best ways to do so.
- Appreciate the skills that a think tank's researchers need to have, how to define the staff you will need, and how you will hire them.
- Know that there are different types of funding streams available and begin a reflection of what would be the best for your organisation based on what you want to achieve.
- Identify who can support your organisation with access to different resources.

Who will govern it? (And how?)[29]

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. These rules affect the nature and style of an organisation's management.

29 This section draws from:

- Mendizabal, E. (2014b), Better sooner than later: Addressing think tanks' governance and management challenges to take full advantage of new funding and support opportunities.
- Mendizabal, E. (2016), Setting up a think tank: Step by step.
- Moncada, A. & Mendizabal, E. (2013), Think tank boards: Composition and practices.

This is a *who*, and partly a *how* question, as you would need to decide who will govern the organisation and how big decisions are going to be made. Will the think tank be governed by a board, an assembly of members, or directly by the executive director? The answer to these questions will be related to your business model and the type of organisation that you decide to create.

Specific think tank models call for different governance structures. For instance, organisations affiliated to universities should follow the rules of their hosts; network-based organisations need to ensure that their members are represented; and political party think tanks tend to be influenced by the party that created them.

Coming up with your own governance model will depend on several factors, but most importantly:

- National laws about the type of organisation you will be legally creating.
- Your business model.
- Your relationship with other organisations.

Despite some diversity, all governance arrangements should consider the following (Mendizabal, 2016):

- A **board or governing body** responsible for overarching decisions and the long-term vision (independent from management).
- **Executive direction:** a competent manager at the centre of the organisation.
- **Senior managers/decision makers** with oversight over three main aspects of the think tank's work: research, communications and management.
- **Institutional structures** that bring people, teams and roles together

If you want to have a lean and flexible organisation that can act quickly, you shouldn't make the governance too top heavy: avoid having several boards (e.g. management, advisory, legal etc.) as this will make governance cumbersome and expensive (Moncada & Mendizabal, 2013).

Box 19. Good governance as one of the basis of good management

Good governance underpins good management and good management is fundamental for the think tank to deliver its mission. We tend to think that to be a successful think tank you need lots of good researchers, but that's only part of the story: you need good governance and good management.

- Good governance and management affect the think tank's capacity to:
- Engage with funders and take advantage of their support
- Manage funds effectively
- Ensure their independence from interest groups
- Learn from their successes and mistakes

- Attract the best talent at all levels of the organisation
- Address internal and external shocks
- So without appropriate governance arrangements and management competencies, think tanks are unlikely to deliver sustainable funding strategies, high quality research and effective communications.

For more on this see the video the role and functions of boards. made for the School for Thinktankers.

Board functions

A strong and independent board of directors is a key aspect of a successful think tank. The main function of a board is to ensure that the organisation stays on the right track to deliver its mission and has the necessary resources to carry out its work. It is important to outline the functions that a board might have from the start, to ensure that you are making the most of it (Moncada & Mendizabal, 2013).

Some of the key functions of boards include:

- Supporting fundraising.
- Accessing networks.
- Overseeing strategy.
- Helping in the hiring of senior management.
- Encouraging innovation.
- Monitoring compliance with the mission, vision, values, bylaws, and policies of the organisation.
- Ensuring the technical and financial sustainability of the organisation.
- Reviewing and approving the strategic plan, the operating plan, and annual budget.
- Appointing and evaluating the executive director.

Board types

Think tank boards come in many forms, but they can be broadly categorised into the following (Moncada & Mendizabal, 2013):

- **Corporate board:** This is the most common type of board and is entrusted with two main tasks: defining and maintaining the think tank's original goals and values, and determining and ensuring its finances. 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 board:** An assembly of individuals associated with the think tank (usually researchers and founding members). The assembly often elects an executive council (or a management team) and executive director from among their ranks. The Instituto de Estudios Peruanos in Peru has a membership board.
- **Secondary boards:** Additional boards may be set up to support different aspects of the organisation. For example, advisory boards to offer thematic expertise, international boards to support a think tank's efforts to raise their credibility at the global level, funders' boards to offer funders a space to influence the direction of the organisation, programme or project specific boards to inform and support flagship initiatives, and so on.

Who should be on your board?

A good board is made up of members with invested interests in the polity and the issues that the think tank will focus on, but who also possess a mix of skills that the think tank director will make good use of: access to the right networks, contact with the public and private sector, communication and media skills, strong research and research management skills, human resources experience, financial planning and fundraising expertise, legal expertise, and so on.

The exact balance will depend on the think tanks' goals and needs. But you should remember that VIPs may not be the best board members – especially not as you work to create and launch an organisation. Your board members must be committed to the project and be able to offer their time to support you (Moncada & Mendizabal, 2013).

Box 20: An organisation›s governance should evolve with it: Grupo Faro

Case based on Belletini, O. (2014), Strengthening Grupo FARO's Board of Directors.

The founders of Grupo Faro created an advisory council when it was first established in 2004. The members of the council were reputable scholars from different countries who, by being part of it, transferred their personal legitimacy to the nascent organisation. The council's main role was to suggest the topics and objectives that the organisation should pursue; they provided access to their networks and even came to meetings with potential donors. However, as the organisation grew in size and complexity, more professional support was needed.

So, in 2012 they reformed their statute and established a board of directors with the legally recognised competence to govern the organisation. This board had members from diverse professional, political, religious, and cultural backgrounds and added value in a more structured way to different aspects of the organisation.

Institutional structure[30]

There are different options available in terms of institutional structures. You should choose the structure that best suits your objectives and resources – including the people who will work there and the expectations of your funders.

For example, a typical academic think tank, one that is born out of a university department or founded by academics in search of a less bureaucratic vehicle to undertake practical research, will be less keen on a corporate style management board than a group of consultants or social entrepreneurs looking for greater rigour in their policy advice.

Box 21: Deciding on an institutional structure for a think tank in Timor Leste

Adapted from Yeo, S., Echt, L. (2018b), Setting up a think tank: Lessons from Timor-Leste (Part 2: alternative institutional structures)

In 2017, the Asia Foundation asked On Think Tanks to assess the prospects for establishing a public policy institute in Timor-Leste. Based on an analysis of the context Stephen Yeo and Leandro Echt (2018a) reached the conclusion that creating a large organisation with full-time staff would not be the best approach. This was mainly because qualified researchers were scarce in Timor Leste, and the few that did exist were sought after by the government (which offered better salaries). Also, a large organisation would be difficult to fund. Their suggested option was a lightweight organisation, with a small core team that relied on a pool of financial resources that could be used to commission policy analysis as needed.

Given the context, and especially the small demand for knowledge, this lightweight institution could be sufficient for Timor-Leste and could provide all the research and analysis that the country needs (and can use). And later on the organisation could evolve and grow with the demand for research and analysis.

Echt and Yeo recommended setting up an institute 'at the network end of the continuum, with a director, a small secretariat of administrative staff and a pool of funds to commission research by Timorese or international researchers.' The success of the network model, in this case, depended on whether the director or senior management had experience in commissioning policy research (e.g. the skills to frame a policy research project and set its terms of reference), as well as contacts in the academic and policy community to recruit from (an active and strong advisory group could also assist in this).

30 This section draws from Yeo, S. and Echt, L. (2018b), Setting up a think tank: Lessons from Timor-Leste (Part 2: alternative institutional structures).

The recommendation also clarified, that although the institute should begin as a network, it should not necessarily remain one, relying solely on external international expertise. The institute should work to develop local capacity and promote the use and need for evidence to inform public policies in the country.

Who will lead the think tank?[31]

Although there are several ways to understand leadership, in this section we are referring to the senior operating person who is responsible for ensuring the day-to-day running of e organisation: the executive director.[32] We will reflect on the key responsibilities this role undertakes, the mix of skills (profile) that an executive director should have, and the key challenges that most executive directors face.

Key responsibilities

Executive directors are key for think tanks to be successful, have credibility and achieve impact. They are responsible for key roles and functions that range from day-to-day management to more strategic tasks. Although specific functions vary between organisations, there are five key responsibilities that executive directors fulfil:

- **Providing strategic direction:** delineating what the organisation's mission is and drawing a strategy for how to achieve it. Strategic direction also entails being able to identify, anticipate and react to changes in the organisation, external or internal (e.g. new parties in power, COVID-19, shrinking funding).
- **Management of operations:** the executive director is ultimately responsible for a variety of supervisory tasks to ensure that the organisation runs smoothly. This includes general administrative issues, human resource management (strategy, hiring and line management of senior staff), managing and overseeing finances, engagement with the board, and project management and/or monitoring.
- **Providing intellectual leadership and ensuring research quality:** think tank leaders should provide intellectual leadership to ensure that the organisation produces high quality research that is credible and relevant to the public and to policymakers. This involves functions that range from establishing and

31 This section draws from:
- Mendizabal, E. (2016), Setting up a think tank: Step by step.
- Mendizabal, E. (2014c), Resources for executive directors: Competences, structure and tools.
- Echt, L. (2013), Think tanks' executive directors: Background, profiles and qualities.
- Ramos, C. (2021) Think tank leadership: Functions and challenges of think tank executive directors.

32 CEO, general manager or president are other names to refer to the person with the highest responsibility for day-to-day operations.

maintaining the relevance and credibility of the organisation, to research management and quality assurance, and even mentoring others.
- **Fundraising and ensuring the availability of resources:** leaders manage existing funding sources while actively working to attract new ones, and ensuring that the organisation has the funds that it requires to operate. This is not to say that executive directors are the only ones undertaking fundraising activities, as researchers in many organisations actively and successfully fundraise, but it is the responsibility of the executive director to ensure the coordination of fundraising activities so that there are enough funds to take the organisation towards its goals.
- **Representing the organisation, establishing partnerships, and building networks:** executive directors regularly interact with a wide range of stakeholders, such as funders, policymakers, their own staff, the board of directors, external partners or the media. They engage with them for different purposes: establishing alliances, advocacy, advice giving (or receiving it as well), dissemination and outreach, negotiating, discussing proposals, exploring funding opportunities, examining key issues, informal conversation etc. The executive director is the main representative of the think tank; they serve as a spokesperson, are in charge of establishing and maintaining partnerships, enhance the profile of the organisation and engage with policymakers, media and other key stakeholders.

Box 22. Undertaking research

Although many think tank leaders want to devote time to their own research, the reality is that the day-to-day running of the organisation leaves them no time to do so. We have found that this related to the think tank's model, but also to the stage it is at. But it is important to bear in mind that executive directors seldom have the time to devote to their own research work, and if this is something that you want to do you will have to establish the structures and support to do so.

The first three functions are more internal to the organisation, while the last two are outward focused. It is important for directors to be able to balance these two aspects of the role. For instance, focusing too strongly on the internal issues may limit time dedicated to obtaining the resources and external validation that the staff needs to function. Striking a balance is difficult and, more often than not, executive directors feel that they are spread thin. It is important to also establish a good team (see Who will work for it?) and work with the board when necessary (see Who will govern it?)

Profile

Even though there are a mix of skills and characteristics that are needed for the job, the profile, personal characteristics, or background that a think tank leader should have vary greatly between organisations and are also a function of the context. According to a typology of policy entrepreneurship developed by Simon Maxwell, think tank leaders, and policy entrepreneurs in general, need to combine a set of certain key skills and characteristics (the strength and mix of each will vary, though):

- **Communication skills:** the leader should be a good *storyteller* who can confidently navigate different audiences and engage with each to achieve the organisation's goals.
- **Interpersonal skills:** the executive director should be a good *networker* who has strong public relations skills and is well connected in order to fulfil some of the most important responsibilities of the think tank. Responsibilities include representing the organisation, raising funds and mobilising and empowering people to deliver the organisation›s mission.
- **Management skills:** the leader should be an *engineer* who is involved 'on the ground'. They need to supervise day-to-day operations while being active in high-level meetings. Academic expertise may provide legitimacy about policy issues, but management skills will make it possible to deliver the mission. Good management practice suggests that directors should give leeway to their teams and help them gain recognition in their fields. It is also important to keep an eye on younger researchers and plan and prepare progression of staff. Finally, leaders should also be able to think about business models, identify and solve problems, translate policy problems into research projects, and anticipate and manage change within the organisation.
- **Political savviness:** this means being a fixer – someone who is knowledgeable, authoritative and recognised by their peers on particular issues so that they can convince decision makers and other audiences on how to approach them.
- **Commitment to the organisation**: although not part of Simon Maxwell's typology, a *commitment to the think tank project* and being willing to devote at least five years to get it established would be a requirement for the leader of a new organisation. Being dedicated to success will help deal with the many challenges that come with leading a think tank.

Box 23. Key skills for thinktankers

Watch here Simon Maxwell explain key skills for thinktankers.

It is interesting to reflect on how your profile will influence your think tank's activities and whether you need to seek complementary roles to balance your profile, or work with people with similar orientations. This will depend on the type of think tank you wish to develop and your policy impact aims.

Finally in terms of knowledge and expertise the following are important:

- A nuanced **understanding of think tanks** and/or of evidence-informed policy.
- **Knowledge of the context** in which the think tank will operate, including policymaking processes.
- **Knowledge of the topics** that the think tank will focus on.
- Being **capable of mobilising resources**.

Challenges

As a think tank leader, you are likely to face many challenges, and identifying them could help you prepare in advance. These challenges can be summarised into personal and organisational categories.

Personal challenges:

- **Juggling too many functions:** think tank leaders are responsible for many tasks that range from overseeing day-to-day operations and conducting research to meeting with funders or talking to the media. Some leaders eventually find themselves spread too thin and lacking the time or knowledge to deal with everything. It is thus important to ensure that there is support available, be it team members, external services or board members, to help deal with the many responsibilities.
- **Personal characteristics:** in some cases, leaders, or think tank staff in general, experience challenges in how they are perceived by others. Unfortunately, there is prejudice and/or discrimination in the sector and sometimes leaders of a particular gender, race or age experience pushback from others they engage with. This is not intended to deter anyone from any position, on the contrary, we should work as a sector to ensure this does not continue to happen.
- **Learning to manage a think tank:** many think tank leaders have been trained as researchers rather than as 'managers' so they find they have to learn new functions on the job. They must prepare in advance for the management tasks that they will need to undertake (or appoint someone with those skills). This guide is a good place to start (see the resources sections for more tools on management).

Organisational challenges:

- **Securing funding:** establishing a sustainable funding base is a perennial challenge for think tank leaders and one of the main issues that keeps them up at night.
- **Establishing and maintaining the credibility and relevance of the organisation:** think tanks need to be perceived as credible sources of information if they want to participate in the policy process. They should be attractive to funders and engage with reputable networks. Therefore, think tank leaders need to ensure that their products and services meet the rigour and quality necessary to be credible and that their strategic vision allows the organisation to stay relevant.
- **Recruiting and retaining staff:** think tank leaders face this challenge in two ways. One is when there are not enough qualified researchers in a particular country and the other is when there are competent researchers but not enough funds to attract and keep them.
- **Building the field:** in some countries, think tanks are relatively new or not necessarily known by policymakers, the media and other stakeholders, so directors and founders have had to create a demand for their ideas and services. Being a pioneer means having to build a legitimate space in the policymaking arena and showing why the services offered by a think tank are useful.

Box 24: Challenges faced when funding a think tank: CPPR in India

D. Dhanuraj is the founder and chairman of the Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR) in India. Read the full interview here.

"These were some of the challenges I faced:

- *Setting up systems and processes relevant for think tanks*
- *Updating and keeping interest in topics of the institutions*
- *Training researchers and preparing them for bigger assignments*
- *Wearing the hat of a social entrepreneur and also of an academic*
- *Becoming involved in educational work while continuing networking activities satisfactorily*

Think tanks in India are still fairly new. The culture is evolving. Unlike their counterparts in the western world, think tanks in India have limited patronage. This raises challenges on the sustainability front. The governments should be open to the role of the think tanks and acknowledge them, since the government is the ultimate beneficiary. The economic growth of the country may help think tanks in the long-run as more funds and philanthropists may start supporting the work done by these organisations. Freedom of expression is another essential factor that needs to be guaranteed for think tanks to be able to meet their objectives."

Box 25: Challenges of a regional think tank: Task Justice Network Africa

Alvin Mosioma is the executive director and co-founder of Tax Justice Network Africa, which is a pan-African organisation. Read the full interview here.

"As a leader, running an organisation that operates across different regions means that you are thinly spread. Working in all these different areas requires intense concentration. Fundraising and developing strategic partnership are huge work. In all these different tasks you end up finding yourself thinly spread. For instance, the role implies many engagements, such as speaking engagements, meetings people expect you to attend, calls you need to have, etc. That is a challenge I am a 'Jack of all trades'. I am doing organisation management, I am doing strategy, I am doing board-related issues, I am working with funders, thinking about the next steps of our strategies. I have to engage in all these different tasks as head of the organisation because I am the face of the organisation and that means I am thinly spread.

As an organisation, I think that the biggest challenge we face is that we are a regional organisation working at different levels, but also, we are membership driven. So, there are tough choices you have to make about how involved you are in country-level activities, in regional or global processes which put a lot of pressure on the organisation, in terms of where we should be allocating our resources."

As a regional network you want to be able to address the different constituencies and that can be resource-intense, but then, you are struggling as a small organisation to harness all those resources.

As an institution, we started with the unique position of being the only regional civil society network that is working on tax, but because of this the expectation for us to respond to all tax issues across the continent is bigger than the size of our organisation and the resources we have. Another related challenge is language, because we operate in the continent and we are multilingual – anglophone, francophone, lusophone, etc."

Who will engage with it?[33]

Think tanks need an audience to fulfil their missions. When *exploring your context* you should identify your main audience and who will be interested in what you have to say. Identifying who will listen to your think tank relates to the question of what it *will aim to influence*, the policy debates your aim to contribute to, and the policy level you wish to influence (national, local, etc.).

33 This section draws from: Mendizabal, E. (2013i), Think tanks and their key audiences: What do they have to say? Grant-Salmon (2014), Audience development: Can we have a meeting to discuss the dissemination of my research report?

Start by identifying who is interested in the issues your think tank is working on; who are you aiming to influence and who can support you in that process (e.g. media, funders, NGOs and opinion makers)? Remember that your audiences are not only policymakers, civil society and the media. Other thinktankers and donors (to name a few) also play a role. There are many tools available to help you in this process (see Box 27) – but don't get overly focused on an exhaustive process at the beginning.

The question of who will listen to you is also relevant to your research uptake strategy. It is important to involve or consider your various audiences throughout the whole process to ensure that the research is relevant to their needs and interests.[34]

A good suggestion is to approach your audiences and ask them directly:

- How do you prefer to access new ideas and knowledge?
- How could think tanks communicate better with you?
- What examples can you share of good and bad experiences with think tanks?

Their answers will help plan your engagement with your audience. For example, a Peruvian journalist told us that 'accessibility and credibility of the sources is very important'. When a source works well then it is very likely they will go back to it (Mendizabal, 2013i).

Audience development is a useful concept to understand when thinking about who will listen to a newly formed think tank. Grant-Salmon (2014) describes it like this: 'audience development is about developing our communications with existing and new audiences, not just increasing the number of people we are talking to. By understanding and gaining knowledge about existing and potential audiences, we can develop relationships in order to communicate relevant, timely, simple messages of value. And by understanding our audiences we can build up trust and credibility so that they seek our help. We can also avoid trying to communicate with audiences who are not interested in our work.'

Finally, remember that not all audiences need to be convinced that your policy recommendations must be acted on. Some may need convincing that they should support your ideas while others may need to be supported in developing and communicating their own arguments.

34 For more on research uptake read Mendizabal, E. (2013), Research uptake, what it is and can it be measured.

Box 26: Tools for stakeholder mapping

Here is a selection of tools that could be useful for analysing and mapping stakeholders:

- GIZ (2010), Youth development stakeholder analysis: A handout for practitioners.
- Schiffer, E. (2007), Net-map toolbox: Influence mapping of social networks.
- IIED (2005), Stakeholder power analysis.
- Brouwer,H., Hiemstra, W. and Martin, P. (2011), Using stakeholder and power analysis and BCPs in multi-stakeholder processes.
- Overseas Development Institute (2010), Planning tools: Stakeholder analysis.

Engaging with stakeholders and counterparts[35]

Datta (2018) offers advice for setting up your team and establishing key relationships in order to participate in projects that help counterparts and policymakers use evidence.

- **Ensure your team has the 'right' people and organisations:** Aim for a small team of 3–4 people including: an insider with deep knowledge of the policy issue and understanding of the context; someone with facilitation skills and the networks to engage with policymakers; someone with technical skills; and a team leader who coordinates the members and brings together the technical and political dimensions of the project.

- **Make the most of prior connections and shared experiences:** To foster strong relationships it is important that there are expectations that something 'good' will happen. Having some prior contacts and shared experiences can accelerate this process.

- **Base your team close to the 'action':** The team should be as rooted as close to the 'action' as possible and be made up of national staff. When bringing in foreign team members, immersion in the context for long periods of time is essential for them to build good relationships with key actors.

- **Establish 'good' team working practices:** Make sure your team members communicate regularly and that they feel comfortable talking and listening in equal measure.

35 Based on Datta, A. (2018), Twelve tips to set up a team and establish relationships.

- **Work with high-capacity institutions for short-term change:** Your counterparts will be more likely to use your support if they have high levels of capacity to begin with. This doesn't mean that you avoid institutions with lower levels of capacity, just that doing so will require a longer-term approach.

- **Work with an evidence-to-policy entrepreneur:** Try to find an 'evidence champion' to work with, ideally someone based in a government institution. This should be someone interested in putting 'evidence on the map' within the institution and who can manoeuvre departmental process and provide the contact details of other people to speak to.

- **Negotiate the role you play in relation to your counterpart:** When working with partners in government, you have to decide with them how much emphasis should be placed on getting results versus capacity development. If there is a results approach you may take a more hands-on approach (managing the overall process). If the focus is on capacity building, your team may take a more reflecting approach by limiting inputs to observations.

- **Listen to the needs of your counterpart but don't set out to meet all their demands:** Your counterpart has deep knowledge of the local context, but there is value in what you have to offer, so it is important to have discussions that consider different perspectives and to see each other as partners or collaborators.

- **Identify and coordinate with existing in-country policy support or evidence-related initiatives:** There may be other teams who are supporting policymakers to use evidence. If this is the case, try to find ways to work together, as you may find that your work is complementary.

- **Consider setting up an advisory group:** A steering group may help ensure that the work produced between you and your counterparts is relevant beyond the actors you work with. It can also pressure your counterparts to ensure a rigorous engagement with the process. For this advisory group you can approach institutions with a cross-government mandate or representatives of other policy support initiatives.

- **Formalise the relationship between the delivery team and your government counterpart:** Consider revising the memorandum of understanding that often underpin agreements between government institutions and external actors if there are areas that you would like to see changed, such as confidentiality or intellectual property clauses.

Box 27. Partnership toolkits

These two partnership toolkits provide advice on how to build successful partnerships through structured approaches that will help you identify the type of partnership needed and the kind of agreements you will need to reach.

- NESTA (2019), Partnership toolkit.
- Sterne, R.; Heaney, D. and Britton, B (2009), The partnership toolbox.

Who will work for it?[36]

A good team is the flowerbed on which your organisation will grow and flourish. New organisations can be pulled in many directions and you could be tempted to enrol a bigger team that you can afford (or manage). Or you might end up with a team whose skills are not what your organisation needs. It is thus very important to set up a team focusing on your aims, business model and budget.

A think tank's core team should involve a leader, a researcher (who may be the leader), a communicator and an administrator, although much of a new think tank's administrative work may be carried out by the rest of the team and some of it can even be outsourced.

A good suggestion is to aim to keep initial costs low and build-in flexibility to the organisation. There are several options available to build in staffing flexibility and avoid full employment contracts at the beginning. For instance, working with consultants or associates using short-term contracts, developing partnerships with organisations with research or communications capacity, and so on (Mendizabal, 2016).[37]

Another aspect to consider is the availability of researchers in your context, given that in some environments and countries, the offer of trained researchers is either scarce or very expensive (Yeo, 2013). An option to get around this is to hire young talent and train them (see section below for more on this). Another option is to develop policies that incentivise researchers to stay. For example, in order to stop high levels of turnover, Grupo Faro introduced a human resources reform in 2012 that introduced more certainty to staff members' career paths. This was achieved by changing contractual terms, creating a human resources guide, developing a performance evaluation process and creating team-building opportunities (Echt and Cahyo Edi, 2015). At the Center for Global Development, the key to

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36 This section draws from: Mendizabal, E. (2016), Setting up a think tank: Step by step.

37 For more on different ways to work for researchers see Mendizabal, E. (2017), Funding models: The role of researchers.

hiring and retaining staff is to give them plenty of freedom and responsibility so that they can shine and develop their careers (MacDonald and Moss 2014).

Researchers' skills[38]

As mentioned before, the type of skills that your staff needs will vary depending on your aims, business models and the type of activities you're aiming to do.

Despite the variability of skills for different roles, think tank researchers nowadays should all have these three basic skills: research (this is a requisite); management (at least to manage a research project and raise and manage funds); and communication.

Researchers need to have good interpersonal communication skills. They should be able to communicate their arguments to their peers, and adequately engage in debate. They should be able to edit their own texts to suit the audiences that they are trying to reach, know all the communication channels available and plan to use different kinds depending on their audiences. They do not need to know how to operate all of them, but should be proficient enough to know which should be used for what purpose and audience (Mendizabal, 2015c).

In terms of research team structures, Struyk (2012) explains that think tanks choose from one of two extremes: teams or solo stars. The solo star model requires the presence of recognised and influential researchers who work on their own (or supported by research assistants). The team model requires a team of researchers who work together.

How will you hire your team?

Hiring at the early stages can offer opportunities and challenges. You may attract young and driven think tankers who fit perfectly into the organisation's business model; but you may also find it hard to attract more experienced staff who may not want to commit to a new venture.

To address this, you should make sure you start by developing clear job descriptions for each of the core roles. This will ensure that young think tankers have clear guidelines and that more experienced applicants can relate to what you expect from them.

If you choose to work through a partnership, hosted by a university for instance, then take advantage of their networks to find the right candidates.

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38 Section draws from Mendizabal, E. (2015c), The future of researchers.

While senior leadership positions may go to individuals who are known to you already – through personal and professional networks – it is advisable to hire using objective and transparent processes.

If the business model you are pursuing is not common, then you could use tasks during the interview process to ensure that you hire the right people. You may ask them to write a policy brief, prepare and deliver a presentation, produce a concept note for a new funder, etc. This will give you a better sense of the strengths and skills of the candidates.

If your budget is limited and you want to keep the organisation lean, you can work with research associates. As they are probably employed somewhere else they can bring their credibility and expertise to the organisation, but bear in mind that this makes planning and coordination a bit trickier (Mendizabal, 2016).

Box 28. Attracting and retaining top researchers in Africa

Cheikh Oumar Ba, executive director of the Initiative of Prospective Agricole et Rurale in Senegal. Read the full interview here.

"Attracting and retaining top people is a constant challenge. We live in a competitive setting in this globalised world and mobility has to be factored in. For example, we had an excellent economist working with us once but after a year, he left for a job with the World Bank. However, all in all, we're doing well at staff retention. We pay good salaries, not quite as much as the UN does, but we're definitely paying good market rates. We also try to provide a positive working environment.

Sometimes donors balk at paying full market rates for local researchers. We recently put in a tender that had an international team of researchers from various countries, worldwide, and the client complained about the price tag of the African researchers on the team and asked us to lower their rates. We refused. You have to remember, we all went to the same universities, we have the same degrees. In the end, the client paid up."

Young talent[39]

Another suggestion is to combine senior researchers with young, up and coming research officers and assistants.[40] Some of the best work in think tanks is often done by young

39 Sections draws from Boyco, 2015a, 2015b

40 We say young, because they are usually in their early career phase and willing to work for starting salaries, but people of all ages exist with these characteristics.

researchers interested in developing their careers (Mendizabal, 2016). Both parties gain a lot from this arrangement. A think tank can access relatively cheap (and good) labour, and in return train and develop the skills of young think tankers. Working as an assistant provides young researchers with an opportunity to specialise in particular fields, strengthen their research skills, become familiar/proficient in new research methods, develop relationships with senior and prominent researchers, become immersed in environments dedicated to producing and communicating research, working in challenging and interesting environments, and engaging and networking with different actors (Boyco 2015a, 2015b).

Consultants[41]

Think tanks often need to hire consultants to supplement the work they do. This can be to increase the expertise of a team on a topic for a particular project or to work independently on a project. Hiring a consultant can be risky: 'a poor-quality product creates a major problem for the think tank which then has to work with the consultant on significant corrections or organise a re-do' (Struyk 2018). Struyk recommends that think tanks follow these steps to ensure that the consultant's work is efficient:

- Thoroughly prepare a comprehensive terms of reference document.
- Be careful in the selection of the consultant.
- Estimate and negotiate the consultant's payment.
- Actively monitor and follow up with the consultant about the progress, especially when the task is spread over several months.
- Be rigorous in the quality control of the products received.

Box 29. CGDs model for staff

Based on Mendizabal, E. (2015), People with competence, freedom, and responsibility are the key to success and MacDonald and Moss (2014), Building a think-and-do tank: A dozen lessons from the first dozen years of the Center for Global Development (CGD).

CGD has an interesting model that works well for organisations built around senior researchers (with their own interests and personal agendas). Their main approach on staff is:

Hire great people and give them plenty of freedom and responsibility.

They argue that think tanks are about the people, and that recruiting the best requires both a compelling mission and a great work environment with competitive compensation.

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41 Draws from Struyk (2018), Managing consultants on think tank research projects.

Organisations have a clear list of characteristics they search for in their staff (besides expertise and knowledge) that include creativity, kindness and even a sense of humour. They aim to attract not only established researchers but early career ones as well. They place their success to attract top individuals in the freedom, and responsibility for their own work, that they offer.

When hiring senior fellows, they look for people with institutional experience in large organisations and who know how the policy process works. Their junior staff members are recent graduates (bachelor's or master's degrees) with little to no work experience; their turnover is of two to three years, and this constant influx of fresh minds ensures them energy and novel ideas. And this also has led to the development of CDG alumni, which they cultivate through various means.

Their model also includes non-resident fellows who are tenured faculty at top universities, and visiting fellows that tend to be policymakers who use the centre as a space to learn, reflect and write

Box 30: The importance of your team: The experience of CIPPEC

Nicolás Ducote is a co-founder and former executive director and general director of CIPPEC- Argentina. Read the full interview here.

"The first piece of advice I would give is that they have to work in a team: none of the issues we've discussed can be done alone. CIPPEC's virtue is that when we decided to found it, we went out and looked for ten or twelve people who were willing to work with us on that enterprise. That team has to be complementary: an individual who wants to begin a think tank project has to ask themselves about how to find human resources to fill the needs that every think tank has. How to get people who want to communicate, that want to raise funds, that want to study issues and propose a public policy agenda.

It's also important to have people who worry about the institutional dimension: investing time in thinking about processes to make decisions, developing an institutional memory, being transparent, etc. In the first year, as soon as the first two cents came in, we thought about accountability, which spoke of a vocation for certain processes, and not just a search for results. Thirdly, worrying that people who begin with the institution stay enough time: there are learning curves, the best performance of any of us in the disciplines that we work in doesn't come in the first or second year, but usually it's about five to ten year cycles, and if you have high rotation in important positions, the organisation suffers. CIPPEC managed to keep its area directors long enough to carry out orderly transitions."

Who will fund it?[42]

Adequate funding will ultimately enable the success of your think tank.

Most think tanks would agree that landing core funding is a once in a lifetime opportunity.[43] There are now only a handful of funders willing to provide it. Also, foreign funders are under more pressure to tone down the support for civil society, especially organisations trying to influence policy. In many African countries, for example, international agencies are being increasingly monitored and managed by stronger governments, turning already risk-averse funders even more conservative. This scenario is a risk for any organisation that aims to be creative, and provide alternative policy suggestions (Mendizabal, 2015c).

But there are many other options available for think tanks to consider:

- Short- or medium-term project funding.
- Research consultancy work.
- Paid-for training and capacity development services.
- Sponsorship of reports, events or capacity development initiatives.

Although global and regional funders are decreasing in number or reducing their support, there is a diversity of other funders at national level, such as domestic governments, INGOs, and research networks. Overall, it could be said that the funding environment and incentives are challenges for a think tank. However, there are other fundraising methods you can pursue (Lah, 2021).

Here are some other income-generating ideas that you could consider (Mendizabal, 2015c):

- **Paid membership that provides access to member-only events, report launches and advice:** Membership programmes can provide a source of income, as well as a good platform for other more profitable ideas, or even generate relationships that can turn into more important supporters. See how Bruegel and the Atlantic Council have set this up.
- **Renting out capacity:** for example, the Busara Center for Behavioral Economics rents out its behavioural insights lab to organisations interested in research of this kind.
- **Renting out space:** this is useful for organisations that have free office space, including space for events.
- **Hard copies of reports and books**.
- **Paid-for courses**.

42 Section draws from Mendizabal, E. (2015c), The future of think tanks in Africa: Trends to look out for.

43 For more on how to manage core funding (for the first time) see Vurmo, G. (2014), Developing a think tank: First-hand experience with core funding.

A new think tank may have to be creative and seek out in-kind support. You could, for instance, benefit from free office space by requesting support from a university or a foundation. Some of your central costs, such as utilities, administrative, and accounting support, could also be covered by a host.

Therefore, while core funding is now less common, there are many ways to generate income. Do not limit yourself by thinking that you need to constantly search for core and long-term funding. This kind of funding is important, and you need to find it, but there are other ways. On the other hand, it is key to start building your network and your name before you can start approaching funders.

Box 31: The philanthropic sector in Africa

It is a challenge to tap into local philanthropists in countries in the global south. As economies are strengthened, the number of people that could become philanthropists should increase. But their number has not followed economic growth. Nonetheless, philanthropy is emerging as a force. For example, African philanthropist Mo Ibrahim has a foundation that has launched several initiatives. There is also the African Grant Makers Network. These institutions, and others that might develop, are a promising opportunity for think tanks to diversify their funding. But the road is long, and developing an active philanthropic sector requires patience and a concerted effort from different actors (Yeo, 2013).

Box 32. Think tanks and the private sector

With the reduced availability of accessing flexible and core funding, think tanks are devising new funding strategies, and engagement between think tanks and the private sector is growing across the world. Engaging with the private sector is one way to access new funds but it can be difficult to convince those actors of the value of funding research.

Other challenges of establishing relationships with businesses and corporations include maintaining a think tank's self-determination and safeguarding its credibility. To overcome these challenges and take advantage of the opportunities these engagements offer, think tanks should research potential partners and identify how and why they can be attractive to them. For instance, they may offer public relations and legitimacy, strategic philanthropy, or advice and expertise (Baertl 2019).

Funding models[44]

A funding model goes beyond the funding streams described above. This is the approach that an organisation has for raising, receiving, accounting for, and reporting on funds: 'A funding model tells the story of the different sources of funding of an organisation and how this funding pool is maintained, expanded, or diversified' (Ralphs, 2016a).

You could aim for a mix of funders, explore funding from the private sector,45 approach foundations, work for contracts or grants, or charge for content (Garzón de la Rosa and Weyrauch, 2016).

The funding mix that you aim for (or have access to) will have implications on the way that your organisation is managed and functions. Successful funding models take many forms, but most importantly they create 'sustainable revenue in a way that enables the organisation to best pursue its mission' (Garzón de la Roza, & Weyrauch, 2016). Here are some aspects you should aim for:

- **Reliable** funding that does not come and go randomly.
- A **diversification** of funding sources, not only of donors but of type as well. Strike a balance. If you are stretched too thin it can become difficult to manage different projects and research objectives.
- **Acceptable conditions** that enable the organisation to do their policy work to the best of its abilities.
- **Intellectual independence** from donors.
- **Transparency**. Always be clear about where the funding comes from (this will also help to ensure and protect your credibility).

It is also important that your think tank has reserves that can cover expenses in times of unforeseen crisis, such as a shortfall in revenue or a worldwide crisis like COVID-19.[46] In order to be resilient when your cash flow is under pressure, and to remain relevant when policymakers need your work, you should have around four to six months' worth of cash reserves. This, of course, is difficult, as donors do not often provide funds that can be saved, so this surplus may have to come from other sources or from investments.

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44 This section draws from Ralphs, G. (2016a),Think tank business models: The business of academia and politics; Garzón de la Roza, T. and Weyrauch, V. (2016), What does a successful funding model look like?

45 For more on fundraising read the following series: Funding for think tanks part one: Domestic funding and Funding for think tanks part two: The private sector

46 Based on Resilience and relevance: The role of reserves in managing think tanks, by Simon Maxwell (2021).

Who will do the fundraising?

This is an issue that concerns many mature think tanks facing funding challenges. Who will be responsible for funding?

In the beginning, it is useful to encourage all the leadership to assume responsibility for seeking and securing funds for the think tank. This includes the executive director, senior members of the team and even some board members.

It is always worth considering involving a fundraising or business development expert in your team. While some may see this as a luxury expense, the contribution of an expert to a think tank's sustainability should not be underestimated.

You can make sure that you raise enough funds in different ways. Some from think tank directors recommend starting with contacts you and your team already have (e.g. from a university, from donors already known to you in previous positions), applying to calls from international donors and, especially, being open to combining different sources of funding. The below are some strategies based on the experiences of STIPRO, a think tank in Tanzania who received core funding for almost a decade and then had to find new and sustainable funding sources:[47]

- **Involve all staff** by creating an organisational fundraising culture and training all staff in the basics of fundraising.
- **Scan the donor environment** to understand which donors may be interested in your work. After mapping them, you can approach them, let them know about your work, and develop a relationship with them.
- **Offer capacity development services** to donors in the areas you specialise in. Providing training can be a good way to become known and to earn an income.
- **Maintain a good relationship with existing donors** even when you are looking for new ones. Make sure that your reports are submitted on time and that you keep in touch.
- **Engage your board members**, who may help in different ways, such as reaching out to their contacts or providing seminars to your staff on issues such as proposal writing or project management.
- **Increase your visibility** through communications such as your website, blogs, news outlets, seminars, public debates, etc. This will help potential donors know who you are, what you do and what impact your work has.

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47 Based on Six strategies for sustainable think tank funding, by Sulamba Shaban (2019).

Below we provide some examples of how think tank directors approached accessing funds when their think tanks started. One way is to start by reaching out to existing contacts and capitalising on any standing affiliations (e.g. to a university). Another way is to identify international organisations and foundations interested in your region or priority areas so that you can target them when you apply for grants. Another is to rely on funding from the funding sector. Although some think tanks prefer to avoid these funds, if the corporations that are willing to fund your work allow you to remain independent, it is a good way to increase your financial resources.

Box 33. Starting with established contacts: The experience of GPTT in Iran

Seyed Sadegh Emamian is the founder and former director of the Governance and Policy Think Tank (GPTT), established in Iran in 2012.

"First, we worked with our university affiliation because we were established as a university affiliated think tank, and it is a very well-respected university in Tehran. We capitalised on this reputation and we defined ourselves as a new institution that was an extension to the university.

We have had different stages of fundraising. In the beginning we capitalised from the reputation of the university. We gathered a group of talented graduates from the best universities and some young, talented policy researchers and the idea was interesting for some funders that had already funded universities and university institutions. We also were able to use the facilities that the university already had, like the building or staff who were already working there.

Once we started to function and the think tank itself had a basis of trust and respect, it was time to approach some funders and show them that this wasn't just an idea but a real institution. We showed some interesting impact. In another stage of fundraising, we built up on the recognition that GPTT itself had.

At the moment, some of our funds come from the university, directly or indirectly, some come from policy projects and some come from funders and donors that are willing to fund.

Projects are usually from the public sector to work on policy issues. The government, the parliament, and some research institutions have funded us for several projects. And some grants that have come from private foundations."

Box 34. From supply-driven to demand-driven funding: The experience of CADEP in Paraguay

Fernando Masi is the director and co-founder of CADEP. Read the full interview here.

"All funding came from international foundations and organisations. In the beginning, it was more supply driven: identifying foundations with interest in Latin America and their priority areas in coincidence with ours, elaborating and presenting proposals.

It became more demand driven from 2000 onwards: donors started launching calls for papers and setting the research agenda. In addition, getting private or public local funding for research in Paraguay was not a possibility in the 90s. Only very recently public funds for research have become available."

Box 35. Combining different sources of funding: The case of CAPRI in Jamaica

Diana Thoburn is the director of research at CAPRI, a public policy think tank in Jamaica. Read the full interview here.

"Funding affects our very existence and everything we do – from the research that we conduct, to our staffing. As an independent think tank, we do not have a parent organisation that we rely on. The majority of our core funding is from large Jamaican corporations and a couple of non-Jamaican private businesses. That core funding primarily pays most of the organisation's 12 employees. The university supports us with office space, overheads and two salaried positions.

Most of our research funding comes from international development partners. The main ones we've worked with in the past few years are the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO, formerly DFID,) UNICEF, the European Union, the Inter-American Development Bank and USAID, in response to themed calls for proposals. This means that, for the most part, our research agenda is not solely determined by us. While we are fortunate to be in a stable financial situation, our salaries are well below market rates which makes it difficult to hire and retain quality talent."

Who will support it?

A good question to ask yourself is ‘who can support your think tank?’ This not the same as asking who will fund it. Rather, who will be able to support the organisation with access to their networks, guidance, knowledge, and even office space?

Think about what you need to get started and who can you turn to for support. Board members and their networks are a good source for this. For example, in the case of On Think Tanks we are supported by Soapbox, Universidad del Pacífico, the University of Bath, our fellows and board members, to name just a few. Soapbox has provided us with invaluable guidance (and work) on the development of our website. The University of Bath has supported us with space for our annual conference and Universidad del Pacífico supports us with space and access to their research network. Our fellows are ambassadors to On Think Tanks and regularly submit articles. All of this enables us to have a lean operation that looks much bigger than it is.

HOW?

The How? questions

These questions will help you:

- Understand the different options for the way to carry out research, the importance of policy-relevant research, and options to ensure its quality.
- Reflect on office locations the approach that best suits your needs.
- Acknowledge the importance of communications for a think tank and reflect on the different channels and tools available for it. What will be the best mix for your organisation.
- Think about a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) process to monitor your organisation's progress.
- Understand the concept of credibility, and the different factors that you should cultivate, besides research quality.
- Acknowledge the relevance of adaptation to changes that influence your organisation's operations and relationships.
- Understand the importance of engaging with evolving technology.

How will it carry out research?

Research is the cornerstone of a think tank. No matter the type of think tank, its aims, activities or business model, they all undertake some form of research. In this guide, we will not focus on research methods or type of research, but rather on how you can organise how it is carried out.

We have mentioned before that you can have researchers that are permanently employed by the organisation (in-house model) or work with external or associated researchers or consultants, national or international, hired to produce specific outputs (network model). Each has advantages and disadvantages (as seen in Table 2), and most think tanks rely not only on one or the other, but a mix of both (Yeo and Echt, 2018b).

Table 2: Strengths and weaknesses of the in-house and network models

In-house	Network
Strengths	
Work of in-house researchers perceived as more legitimate	Coverage of issues
Researchers have more opportunities to influence policy	Financial sustainability
Potential for interdisciplinarity	Timeliness
Researchers more committed to the success of the institution	Capacity building
Helps build local capacity	Flexibility
Weaknesses	
Requires highly qualified staff	Reduced political legitimacy
Delays in recruiting and training staff	Difficulties in building relationships with policymakers
Bureaucratic rigidity	Contracting
Financial sustainability is more challenging	Ensuring high-quality outputs
Need for funding to meet high fixed costs reduces institution's ability to respond to local policy priorities	Local capacity building
Perceptions of partisanship	

Source: Extracted from (Yeo and Echt, 2018b)

Earlier, we mentioned the two different research models: the **solo star model** vs. **the team model**. In the solo star model, notable researchers work independently with the aid of research assistants. The personal agendas of researchers largely influence the organisation's work, and given their prominence and respectability in the sector, management staff have less power to shift the agenda. In the team model, team members work in coordination with other centres or consultants (or among themselves) to produce their work. Think tanks with a team structure tend to lean towards conducting large-scale research projects, programme evaluations, and so on. In this type of organisation, the research agenda tends to be more centrally determined by the organisation.

Box 36: Balancing own research and consultancies

In this video Lykke Andersen, one of the founding members of INESAD (Bolivia) explains how to balance commissioned work and long-term research.

How will you ensure that your research is policy relevant?

To be relevant to policy and practice, research needs to be embedded in its context. It needs to respond to existing problems and be recognised by the stakeholders involved.[48] If a research piece is either too general or too specific it might not be useful or find a space in the debate. Applied research, which is the sort that a think tank does, aims to find solutions to a problem and therefore needs to be timely. If not, it might miss the opportunity to inform policy (Ordoñez and Echt, 2016b).

To be policy relevant, research should follow these principles (Ordoñez and Echt, 2016b):

- Be embedded in policy context.
- Be internally and externally validated.
- Be respond to policy questions and objectives.
- Be fit for purpose and timely.
- Be crafted with an analytical and policy perspective.
- Be open to change and innovation: as it interacts with policy spaces and policymakers.
- Be realistic about institutional capacity and funding opportunities.

Box 37: Toolkit for Political Economy Analysis

This toolkit is intended to help development projects achieve the best quality analysis and strong results: WaterAid (2015), Political Economy Analysis Toolkit.

48 It might be the case though that a problem is not recognised by the stakeholders involved but considered important by the think tank. In this case, if the issue is considered to be important by the think tank, then one of its first tasks will be to elevate it in the public agenda and to the eyes of the actors involved.

Box 38: Policy questions are not the same as research questions

Based on Mendizabal, E. (2013f), Research questions are not the same as policy questions.

An important task for think tankers is working with policymakers to define what it is that they want to know and what information they need. If they focus only on what they say they want, a researcher misses out on uncovering what information is needed. A key skill for a think tanker is to unravel, with their stakeholders, what important questions need to be asked.

Policy questions are bigger in scope than research questions. To answer a policy question, many research questions need to be asked. For example:

Policymaker X might ask... But researchers might first have to answer...

- What skills needed to be developed to take advantage of the rise of new trading opportunities? Are we facing more competition from other neighbours than in the past?
- What specific sectors are under stress?
- Which sectors seemed to be emerging as future opportunities?
- What effects had domestic and international policy changes on these?
- Are our trade policy strategies and regulations ready to address future challenges and threats?

Think tanks' comparative advantage lies, or should lie, in translating policy questions into research questions and research question answers into policy question answers. To do this they must behave as boundary workers: simultaneously working in the policy and academic communities (Mendizabal 2013f).

Positioning your think tank for policy influence[49]

The Think Tank Initiative (TTI) supported policy research institutions across the developing world for 10 years. TTI learned that a think tank's policy influence is shaped by many factors, but two of these are key:

- **A reputation as an independent organisation that provides credible research:** Independence rests on organisational strengths, such as having financial sustainability.

- **The agility to navigate the local policy landscape and participate in policy debates:** Engaging with policymakers early in the research cycle helps to ensure uptake, so the think tank has to be agile in responding to shifts in the environment and choosing the right points of entry. Think tanks can play a positive role engaging

49 Based on TT Insights 'Positioning think tanks for policy influence'

citizens, the media or advocates for marginalised groups directly in their research and in the policy process.

Therefore, achieving policy influence involves the entire organisation. The reputation for independence demands strengths across the think tank: effective leadership, financial sustainability, great researchers and administrators and the right skills in communications and networkers.

Research agendas[50]

A research agenda is 'a guideline or framework that guides the direction of the research efforts of an individual and/or organisation. It helps individuals and organisations communicate what they are focusing on and their area of expertise, and it also helps focus their research efforts and articulate different initiatives into common goals' (Ordoñez and Echt, 2016b). It is not about producing a document and letting it sit. Research agendas are alive and active and they should guide the research that an organisation carries out. Agendas should be policy relevant, and for that they need to respond to the context.

Box 39. Components of a research agenda

There is no one specific way to draft a research agenda; depending on their characteristics and aims think tanks give prominence to different aspects. But in general, the following sections are recommended:

- Contextual justification
- Research priorities
- Conceptual or ideological approach (if it exists)
- Partnerships
- Funding sources

When starting out you do not need to draft a lengthy document that outlines your research agenda (you can leave that for later) but it is a good idea to think about it, as it will give direction and purpose to your think tank. Your agenda should link to your aims and relate to your business model and funding strategies, as it will be affected by them. A think tank with core funding is freer to pursue their own interests, while contract or consulting think tanks tend to be more demand led.

50 Based on Ordoñez, A. and Echt, L. (2016b), *Module 1: Designing a policy relevant research agenda*. From the online course: 'Doing policy-relevant research' and Weyrauch, V. (2015), *Is your funding model a good friend to your research?*

When developing your research agenda, you should bear in mind the issues that interest you and the issues that are relevant in the context in which you wish to operate, but also the potential funding sources. The risk of building your research agenda in this autonomous way is that the topics and frameworks may not be completely linked to relevant stakeholders such as policymakers. On the other hand, funding based on grants or projects means you'll have to be more flexible and open to addressing new topics or abandon others as you may have to adapt your agenda to donors' priorities. Therefore, there is a trade-off between a more stable but less dynamic research agenda and a more flexible albeit less coherent research programme focused on projects.

How will it ensure the quality of the research?[51]

Research quality, in the evidence-informed policy arena, is more than caring and ensuring that the methodology and process of a piece of research is sound, ethical, rigorous and unbiased. The literature on the subject identifies many aspects to research quality:

- **Clear purpose and fitness for purpose**. The questions that the research seeks to answer should have a clear purpose (of influence or action) and the research methods applied should respond to it.
- **Relevance for stakeholders and policy/legitimacy**. The research should address the needs of the stakeholders involved.
- **Integrity and scientific merit.** This entails the technical quality of the research: design rigour, conclusions following from analysis, transparency, and following ethical guidelines
- **Quality assurance processes.** The organisation must ensure that the research they produce fits all these quality criteria.

Box 40. The role of the research director

Diana Thoburn is the director of research at CAPRI, a public policy think tank in Jamaica. Read the full interview here.

My role as director of research is, broadly, to ensure that all the research we do and the reports we produce are done to the highest methodological and editorial standards. More specifically, I participate in determining our research agenda, conceptualising research projects, supervising researchers' work from start to finish and editing the final report. I ensure that the organisation's quality assurance protocol is adhered to and, as necessary, I engage in the research and writing myself. Finally, I represent the organisation in a variety of arenas, including presenting research results, whether on the media, to closed audiences, or at our public fora.

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51 This section draws from:
- Baertl, A. (2018), De-constructing credibility: Factors that affect a think tank's credibility. Working Paper 4.
- Doing policy relevant research.
- Think Tank Initiative in Enabling success.

Options for ensuring research quality

Breaking down research quality into its component parts helps with planning for how to achieve it.[52] For starters, working on developing a policy-relevant research agenda,[53] as we discussed earlier, can help you identify gaps where research can be helpful. It can also help ensure that the research you will do is relevant to its stakeholders and to define the purpose of the research.

Box 41: Do I need a peer review process?

The short answer is no, you do not need one. But it is a good idea to set one up for important work, and also to monitor the quality of your work and improve it. Setting a peer review process up also establishes an internal frame of mind that values and cares about research quality. It also signals credibility to your stakeholders (if you communicate it).

One thing you can do is work on developing a **peer review process**. This does not need to be applied to every piece of research that you do, but for important work you could have an internal peer review process in which researchers comment on each other›s work. Or you could have an external advisory group to advise on your research, not only after it is finished, but to ensure quality through the process.[54]

You could also seek to **collaborate with other research partners** and academic institutions, especially on topics where you do not have internal capacity. This could help train your team and improve your organisational skills on specific subjects and research methods.

Finally, you should strive to develop a **culture of evidence and quality data** from the beginning. Discuss this with your team from the early stages and aim to grow and expand your quality control mechanisms as your organisation grows. Openly share your quality control mechanisms. This will be a signal to your partners and stakeholders that you produce quality research.[55]

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52 We recommend exploring the Research Excellence Framework and the RQ+

53 For more on this you can inquire read the series Doing policy relevant research

54 For more on peer review process read the series Peer reviews for think tanks

55 Read the section on How will it ensure its credibility for more on this.

How will it be managed?

Without appropriate management, think tanks are unlikely to be able to deliver sustainable funding strategies, high quality research, and effective communications. Management involves various practical aspects of the organisation's functioning: project management, budgeting, staffing, line management, and workspace, among others.

Budgeting[56]

Budgeting is more than an administrative task. Effective budgeting can make a huge difference to a think tank's financial health, and sound financial management will allow the organisation to achieve its goals. Therefore, you need someone in your team with budgeting and financial skills. However, it is important that other members of the organisation who do not have training or experience in admin, can also understand or engage with it when needed.

A project's life cycle could help to manage the project budget at department level in a think tank, following stages such as designing and submitting a research proposal, project initiation, project implementation, management and monitoring, and closure. Do not underestimate the importance of budgeting when preparing the following:

1. **Proposals for funders:** it is important that the budget reflects the real costs of the project, including a share of the costs that are not directly attributable to specific research projects, such as staff costs, office rent, electricity, and others. You can add them as an overhead, under separate budget lines, or do both. You also need to separate out what is income and what are the expenses.
2. **Project budgets:** transfer the proposal budget to a project budget template approved by the finance department. Keep the budget up to date and maintain an invoicing tracker.
3. **Budget monitoring:** both the finance department and other project departments need to keep their own records of income and expenditure to provide an additional layer of quality control. Every financial movement should be recorded (plus supporting documentation). Also, a quarterly budget review process needs to be established to update all project finances.
4. **Project closure:** projects that have finished in the current financial year need to be closed (balanced between incomes and expenditures, invoices sent to donors, expenditures completed, and fee information updated and finalised), but those that continue into the next financial year need to be reconciled (incomes, expenses and fee allocations updated). (Cardoso, 2015).

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56 Read more about budgeting in Jones (2017), How to create a smart project budget for think tanks and in Cardoso (2015), Managing budgets in a think tank. You can also watch the webinar Smart project budgeting for think tanks.

Financial management

Financial management entails strategic planning, organising, and managing the generation and use of funds in an organisations. And it is a key factor in ensuring the overall think tank sustainability. You should aim to find the right mix of actions and income sources for your organisation, bearing the following in mind (Stojanovic, 2022):

- The activities fit your mission
- Ensure a combination of sources and types of funding (not putting all your eggs in one basket)
- The choices made allow the organisation to do its core work

It is important that financial information about your organisation stays transparent, clear, and up-to-date. This will ensure good financial management, but also help prepare you for financial audit processes and management letters (memoranda on internal controls), which will contribute to an evaluation of the organisation's financial health that takes into account its cash flow situation.

Box 42. Reserves

"A think tank's reserves exist to cover expenditure in times of unforeseen crisis, either to deal with a shortfall in revenue, or to fund unexpected demands for additional work... they are crucial to both resilience and relevance. And, for this reason, the reserves policy is not an arcane topic to be left to the accountants on the finance committee, but rather a key management tool" Maxwell (2021). Read more about reserves in this article.

Box 43. Guide for financial management

The following toolkits provide useful resources to strengthen your non-profit financial management:

- Wallace Foundation Strong nonprofits toolkit.
- MANGO Guide for financial management for non-profits.

Workspace

Although technically not a 'how' question, deciding on where to locate your operations is a management decision. If you have a comfortable budget, setting up an office will mostly entail choosing the best options that fit your budget. But as the COVID-19 pandemic showed, an organisation can very well function virtually. So if your funding and budget are small, investing in office space might not be worth it. There are many options available; you could seek to be hosted by an organisation that supports you and lets you work from their offices. Or you could work virtually and meet in rented spaces or even cafes. A virtual set-up works very well, especially if you opt for working with a network of researchers or in partnerships.

Going digital to save office costs, either until you have more funds or as a chosen strategy, is a great choice. Investing in a small office could equal the cost of a research assistant in many cities. And a research assistant is more important than an office. Also, it is possible to run an organisation remotely. There are several project management tools available. Dropbox or Google Drive can be your intranet; Slack is a great a team communications tool; Google suite solves your email needs;57 and teams can meet in coffee places and rent space for bigger meetings or events. Once you have secured more funding you can start looking for office space, but in the meantime going digital is a great option.

Line management[58]

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:

- 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

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57 These are just a couple of suggestions based on our experience with these platforms.

58 For more on staff see Who will work for it?

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.

How will it communicate?[59]

Starting out with your communications can seem daunting. There is a lot of noise out there and making your research stand out among all this information can feel like an uphill battle. There is also the matter of figuring out where to start, who will be in charge, and what you will communicate. There are a lot of resources you can use to communicate your research, but before you spend a lot of money on a fancy website, set up social media accounts on various platforms, or plan a big launch event, take a step back and ask yourself one key question: Who has to engage with my work in order to get my desired impact? More often than not the answer to that question will take you directly to the correct communication tool or channel.

At the start of any project, think about what you are trying to achieve. What does success look like for your work? It is important to think about this at the start of a project. It will enable you and your team to choose the correct output to ensure maximum impact.

Box 44. Events

Producing events can be a cost effective way of producing new content. Here are a couple of ideas for doing so (Mendizabal, 2016):

- Search for free venues in your city. Universities sometimes lend empty rooms to their alumni, staff or students. Or you could co-organise with other think tanks – even coffee shops and restaurants lend themselves for events. Be creative and think outside the classic hotel venue and you will find many options.
- Events do not have to be elaborate; a simple room with chairs and space to present will do. And, if pressed for funds, limit the refreshments – people go for ideas, not for free breakfast (although in some contexts offering refreshments might be crucial so adapt this suggestions to your own environment).
- Keep events to the point, brief your speakers beforehand and allow plenty of time for the public to engage (and for networking!)

59 This section draws on Grant-Salmon (2014) Audience development: Can we have a meeting to discuss the dissemination of my research report?

- Use the event as way of producing new content. You can record or web stream the event, live tweet it, upload or share presentations, write blogposts or reports on it, interview the panelists to create short videos, add attendees to your database, and so on.

An event is an incredible opportunity to do these and many other things; be prepared and think outside the box. Read more about events here: How to produce a public event

If you know your audience, you know how they consume information.60 This will allow you to be innovative with your outputs and communication tools. It will also allow you to optimise your budget: it is better to have a small event (a breakfast meeting, for example) attended in full by key stakeholders, than a massive event where your stakeholders may stop by for a quick minute and leave without engaging. Your audience might consume information in the form of blogs, videos, briefings, virtual conferences, social media, press releases, backgrounders, infographics or one-to-one meetings – or a combination of several of these (Grant-Salmon, 2014).

After you answer this question, ask yourself: What is my budget for communications? It's important to be realistic about what you can and cannot do. However, don't make assumptions on costs. Don't assume you cannot afford something just because it looks pricey or because bigger and/or older organisations can. Video is a perfect example of this: it is an excellent tool to communicate on urgent policy issues, yet organisations often think they are prohibitively expensive and shy away from producing them. Yes, they can be expensive, but you can also produce effective videos on a low budget. As with most things, it's about doing the best you can with the resources you have available, and not aiming for a knock off. A video on a budget can look like a video on a budget and still be effective, engaging and impactful.

Deciding on tools and channels[61]

There are a lot of tools and channels with which to communicate, but keep in mind that not all of them are appropriate for all projects (or all organisations). Each think tank has to choose the mix that works best for each project and for the organisation as a whole.

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60 If you do not know how your audience consumes information, do take some time in speaking with either your potential stakeholders or someone who knows the best way to communicate with them.

61 Section draws from
- Mendizabal, E. (2012b), Communication options for think tanks: Channels and tools.
- Weyrauch, V. (2014), Selecting different ways to reach audiences: A strategically ongoing effort.

There shouldn't be a massive discrepancy between these two aspects. If your organisation is focused on specific themes and the work you produce is targeted at roughly similar audiences, there is likely to be a synergy between these two combinations. Larger organisations, however, are likely to have a wider scope on themes and research outputs and, consequently, their audiences, which means that the tools/channels combination will most likely be project-based (Mendizabal, 2012b).

The following questions can guide the process of choosing your tools and channels combination (based on Mendizabal, 2012b):

- Does the centre have the resources (funds and people) to effectively deploy all the chosen tools? For example: Does it have the media skills to deal with an important media strategy? How many events can it organise in a week? Does it have reliable access to the internet? Does it have resources for printing its publications?
- Are the tools sufficient to reach all of the organisation's main audiences? Are any audiences not being reached through your choice of tools and channels?
- Do they offer the right balance between content and outreach? In other words, is it all repackaging or is there sufficient original material to carry the argument for a significant period of time?
- What will be the best way of keeping the organisation's arguments and ideas on the public agenda for longer?
- Are the tools linked to and supporting each other or are they being deployed independently and in isolation?

Box 45: How to use your tools?

Based on Mendizabal. Communication as an orchestra.

The goal is to introduce your ideas to the public and keep them there for as long as possible, maximising your chances of being present whenever a window of opportunity opens. Think tanks need to keep their public engaged for prolonged periods of time. It is not good enough to get their attention once, at a press release or an event, never to engage with them again. They must keep journalists coming back for more, reporting on their ideas and recommendations; keep policymakers engaged in policy discussions over several policy cycles until the right policy window opens; keep other researchers involved in debates, and more. Their ideas have a greater chance of informing policy if they remain relevant and on the agenda for a long period of time.

This means that think tanks have to keep producing excellent communication outputs that they can combine to make 'great music' – music that is engaging, popular and interesting.

To help you with this, here is a chart showing the type of channels and tools available and how successful they can be at reaching specific stakeholders.

Table 3: Channels and stakeholders

Type of channel/tool	Stakeholder
External newsletter	Peer organisations
	Donors
Social media videos	General public, especially other organisations and university students/young people and media
Forums/seminars/open events	Universities
	Central government
	Civil servants with whom there is a close relationship
Internal newsletter	Executives
	Contributors
Policy briefs	Subnational and local governments
	Legislators
	Decision makers
	Candidates
Publications (books, research outputs, essays about a specific issue)	More stable civil servants/ technocrats
Personal meetings/closed events	Politicians with whom there is less proximity/ less developed bonds
	Politicians with whom you work on confidential or delicate issues
	Journalists
Training/debates	Journalists
	Future civil servants
	Candidates
Exclusive/outlined information	Journalists
Networking opportunities or visibility and recognition (events/bi or multilateral meetings)	Politicians
	Donors
Inventory of publications and research	Universities
	University students
	Future decision makers

Press (specially columns and opinion editorials)	Civil servants
	Politicians
	Donors
	Journalists and media

Source: Weyrauch, 2014

The 'classic' model of disseminating information by think tanks ('Expert or academic carries out research. Generates rigorous 40-page report. Comms officer is asked to promote said report. Launch event, press release, tweets. Maybe a video. Maybe an infographic') is no longer sustainable. Tom Ascott,[62] digital communications officer at RUSI explains that this model is almost designed to be inaccessible to a larger and increasingly inquisitive public. Think tanks can't rely on invite-only events or video uploads of those events. They have to compete with other online content creators and capitalise on modern digital media, turning research papers into multi-medium products.

Box 46. Tool: Communications health check

This tool is designed to help think tanks and research institutes to refine and improve their communications. It evaluates a number of key areas: audiences, channels, messaging, systems, strategy, capacity and monitoring.

By answering a number of simple questions, the health check will help pinpoint areas to consider prioritising to help you communicate your research and support your brand. The analysis recognises that communication is a complicated process involving strategy, tactics and resources: in other words, it is not all about output.

Size matters

When you are starting out, your communications department might look **very** lean. And by lean we mean a one-person show. What we do advise, and rather fervently we might add, is to do communications from the start. It might happen that you can only afford a communications manager or a communications consultant on a per-project basis. Whatever your reality is, don't leave communications to the side. A 200+ page report doesn't 'speak on its own'. Neither does a 40-page document. Get your researchers on board. As Enrique

62 Ascott, T. (2019), New technology and 'old' think tanks.

Mendizabal argues in this video, 'the thinktanker of the future is going to be a good researcher, communicator, manager and leader'.

Today's researchers have to be prepared to wear different hats, but you cannot expect them to have the know-how already. This means you might have to invest in capacity-building opportunities to develop their skills. The bottom line is, big or small, when you are setting up a think tank you have to think about how your communications will play out: define who will be in charge and what resources she or he will have at hand.

Think tank branding

It is important for think tanks to work on their brand and ensure that they are more than a logo. Branding is key because your work as thinktankers needs to be communicated to wide audiences across different channels and it needs to carry your identity. In this article, John Schwartz explains that strong branding helps think tanks:

- 'Become the organisations they aspire to be': because the branding strategy extends the organisational strategy.
- 'Own a piece of intellectual and cultural territory': because it allows think tanks to know exactly who they are, what they are for and why what they do is important.
- 'Produce the right kinds of communications for the right audiences': because in order to build a brand, think tanks need to start with a good understanding of their audiences and how to communicate with them in an efficient and impactful way.

Box 47. Communicating research: Research isn't linear, so why are reports?

Joe Miller makes the case for moving beyond PDFs when writing up research because they 'box in our thinking': they create linear narratives.

It is important to choose different tools for different communication strategies. In his article, he talks about a design based on the 'choose-your-own-adventure' approach: a website that allows readers to access the content from different entry points and to follow new links that might be lost in a linear PDF.

Think tanks should be creative and make use of engaging technologies, data visualisations and websites to communicate research findings.

How will it monitor its progress?[63]

It is never too early to start thinking about monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). Measuring the impact and results of the work of a think tank is challenging, as these things are often intangible (e.g. building relationships with policymakers, playing a key role in debates or networks, etc). The ultimate goal is policy change, but this takes a long time and often cannot be attributed to a specific action, or organisation. Policy change is the result of many factors and actors (Lomofsky, 2016).

A good starting place is to define what success looks like. For this you must reflect on where you locate yourself in the policy process with any particular issue (Lomofsky, 2016). A think tank should not only focus on 'driving direct policy change but also try to affect what happens before, throughout and after a new policy is designed. For example, to illuminate the way some policy problems are perceived'.

Aim for a balance between accountability requirements and honesty about achievements. This can be done by:

- Clarifying your policy influence objectives (they need to be realistic). These should be drawn from your mission, projects and the problems you are trying to address.
- Selecting your policy influence strategies and how can this be measured (e.g. advocacy, communications, capacity building, etc.)
- Ensuring you have the necessary resources to achieve results.

When think tanks devise good monitoring and evaluation plans, and when they carry out changes and improvements based on the lessons from the MEL exercise, they will be more effective in achieving their objectives (Lomofsky, 2018). A think tank can target this exercise for different areas of work: MEL of research quality, MEL of communications, MEL of governance and MEL of projects.

- You need to reflect on what your organisation is already doing in terms of MEL and consider why you want to invest in monitoring your work.64 MEL for think tanks can have three focuses:
- Policy influence (MEL-I): this will be discussed in the second session.
- Communications (MEL-C): focussing on evaluating and learning from comms strategies.
- Management and operations (MEL-M): this is about human resources, finance and internal operations.

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63 This section draws on:
- Lomofsky, D. (2016), Monitoring, evaluation and learning for think tanks
- Lomofsky, D. (2018), Series on MEL for think tanks: Conclusion

64 For more on monitoring and evaluation for think tanks read the series MEL for think tanks.

Box 48. Toolkit: How can we monitor and evaluate policy influence?

CIPPEC has prepared a short toolkit that includes the various factors in the monitoring and evaluation of policy influence: organisational assessment, the basis of a MEL system, indicators, data collection methods and knowledge management, and more.

Based on previous work by Lindsay Rose Mayka (2008), the toolkit explains that there five reasons to conduct evaluations:

- **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.
- **Support for operational management:** producing feedback that can be used to improve the implementation of an organisation's strategic plan.
- Support for strategic management: providing information on potential future opportunities and on the strategies to be adjusted against new information.
- **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).

Incorporating MEL into the daily life of any organisation is well worth it. A smart and proportionate use of MEL tools, and especially a well-thought-out MEL plan, can help think tanks to:

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

MEL strategies can be carried out in a variety of ways, but it is important to understand the reasons for the MEL effort to best adapt the strategies and methodologies used to the type of knowledge to be acquired.

Monitoring your communications[65]

Carolina Kern offers some recommendations for designing a MEL strategy for communications, especially for new and small think tanks:

1. Be fully clear about what you're going to measure and why. You can do this by revising your strategic aims or policy influence objectives.
2. Don't do anything too fancy to begin with. Pick a couple of indicators and use simple tools to track them. What you choose to monitor and which indicators you use will vary, but the most useful for those new to MEL for communications are shown here:

Indicators	Why is it useful
Contacts on database (broken down by organisation type, topic of interest, location, activity level)	• Provides an instant snapshot of your current audience (who you're reaching with your outputs). • Points to particular audiences you might need to grow or reengage (if they have become inactive). • Allows you to have a conversation about segmenting your users and tailoring content.
Website traffic (including visitors, views, downloads, listens)	• Provides information on popularity of different themes and different types of products (reports vs. policy briefs vs. videos). • Helps make decisions about which outputs to prioritise.

65 Based on Monitoring your communications: Try this. By Carolina Kern (2017).

Indicators	Why is it useful
Event engagement (who registered, who attended, who livestreamed, who viewed the invite)	• Tells you which events are popular and starts a conversation about why (was it the theme, location, timing, profile of speakers?). • Gives a great indication of how much notice to give before an event, where to publicise, and your event dropout rate. • Media engagement (who is on your list, number of media 'hits', number of enquiries). • Provides an instant snapshot of a very important audience. • Starts a conversation about how to better engage with media (press releases? special section on website?).

3. Have a regular (e.g. once a quarter) meeting that focuses on learning and future strategy. You can present your data in a visually engaging way to show trends and use the meeting to brainstorm ideas for future communications and to fix any issues that may have come up.

Having a clear MEL strategy can be time consuming, but it is one of the best ways to help think tanks achieve the greatest impact in the most cost effective way as long as the data collected is analysed and the lessons learnt put to use.

This Communications monitoring, evaluating and learning toolkit based on internal guidance from ODI provides a framework to think about your strategy and offers questions, indicators and tools to help. It can help ensure that your communications are strategic and that you learn from what works and what doesn't.

How will you ensure its credibility?[66]

To inform policy and practice think tanks need to be perceived as credible sources of information and advice. Credibility qualifies think tanks to be consulted on and invited to participate in policy processes. It makes them attractive to funders. It promotes engagement with the media as experts in their field and facilitates access to reputable networks. Without credibility, none of this can occur, so it is a good idea to work on it from the moment your organisation is set up.

But how to do this? And more importantly, what is credibility?

'Credibility is relational and it entails trust and believability. To be credible, an organisation or person needs someone to trust and believe in them … A credible person or organisation is trusted to have relevant expertise, and believed to be able and willing to provide information that is correct and true' (Baertl, 2018a).

The paper De-constructing credibility (Baertl, 2018b) identifies 10 factors that individuals draw from and focus on (in various degrees) to assess the credibility of a think tank. These are:

- **Networks.** Connections, alliances, and affiliations that an organisation and its staff and board have.
- **Impact.** Any effect that a policy research centre has had on policy, practice, media, or academia.
- **Intellectual independence.** Independence in deciding their research agenda, methods, and the actions an organisation undertakes.
- **Transparency.** Publicly disclosing funding sources, agenda, affiliations, partnerships, and conflicts of interests.
- **Credentials and expertise.** Collected expertise and qualifications that a think tank and its staff have.
- **Communications and visibility.** How and how often the think tank communicates with its stakeholders.
- **Research quality.** Following research guidelines to produce policy-relevant research in which the quality is assured.
- **Ideology and values.** Ideology and values are the set of ideas that guide an individual or organisation.
- **Current context.** The current setting in which a think tank and its stakeholders are immersed.

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66 This section draws from Baertl, A. (2018b), De-constructing credibility: Factors that affect a think tank's credibility. On Think Tanks Working Paper 4.

To ensure and safeguard your credibility, the public needs to know that your organisation is transparent and intellectually independent. You could use your partnerships, affiliations, and board members to increase your credibility (drawing from the reputation of these organisations). You can also work on establishing and communicating your quality assurance processes. Don't forget that the key asset in all of this is the people that belong to an organisation – they are the ones who impact whether credibility is maintained or not.

You can read more about think tank credibility in this annotated reading list that reviews academic and non-academic resources and offers an overview of the subject.

Box 49: Transparify integrity check

The Transparify integrity check is a (downloadable) tool that provides scenarios that will help thinktankers think through reputational risks and prevent reputational damage.

Box 50: CGD's approach

Based on Mendizabal, E. (2014 d), A few initiatives, not many projects, may be the secret to success.

CGD has an interesting approach. Researchers do not have a list of topics but instead focus on one or two key initiatives over a relatively long period of time. These initiatives allow them to organise and allocate cross-organisation resources in ways that other think tanks can't. They bring together people, research, communications, networking, management, and other 'assets' think tanks have to carry out their missions (Mendizabal, 2014d). They describe initiatives as:

... practical proposals to improve the policies and practices of rich countries, international bodies, and others of means and influence to reduce global poverty and inequality. Initiatives draw upon the Center's rigorous research and utilize innovative communications and direct engagement with decision-makers to change the world. (CGD)

In the essay Building a think-and-do tank: A dozen lessons from the first dozen years of the Center for Global Development (MacDonald and Moss, 2014) (the updated version of 12 steps on policy change, Levine and MacDonald, 2018) the authors present lessons, based on their own experience, on how think tanks can organise themselves, how they can seek to bring about change, and how they measure success.

We present them here arranged into the three groups mentioned above (although there are clear overlaps):

On organisation:

- **Start with flexible money, but not too much:** use small amounts of flexible money as venture capital. This will depend on the type of organisation you are trying to create, but ideally aim for an ample and diversified portfolio of financial support. CGD found that a good mix for them was 3/4 programmatic funds for specific work and 1/4 unrestricted funding to be used for new programmes and ideas.
- **Hire great people and give them plenty of freedom and responsibility:** at all levels, senior and junior, full-time staff and associates. An interesting mission, worth fighting for, as well as a nice work environment will help to attract great people. This requires a good work environment.
- **Share leadership:** give staff, at all levels (don´t forget juniors as well), responsibility for running the think tank (or at least their bit of the think tank).
- **Don't plan, experiment:** because this lesson seemingly goes against much of what you will read it is worth quoting the authors on this one: 'Our strategy, so to speak, is to be ready to react to the sudden appearance of a policy window by having a good stock of well-researched ideas and providing our fellows with space to respond'.
- **Partner with people, not organisations:** it is easier to align interests between people than between organisations. Again, a quote on this lesson: 'We've found that the best partnerships are those with very clear, narrowly defined objectives. We partner with a specific purpose in mind, not just to be part of a broad coalition'
- **Resist the growth inertia:** there may be lots of important issues and policy processes but they may not all be right for you. Identify the organisational size you are comfortable with. In CGD's case maintaining a family-like culture was key.
- **Make it fun:** a good sense of humour should be a key 'competence' in any job description. And beyond fun, CGD strives to be a collegial place.

On bringing about change:

- **Start fresh to stay fresh:** be careful of becoming set in your ways. Encourage new ideas and ways to carry out your work and organise your think tank's operations.
- **Articulate an inspiring mission and aim for results:** don't just aim to know more – what will you do with this knowledge? Your mission should help guide your work, and keep you focused on a goal.
- **Share ideas early and often:** think out loud and benefit from feedback and growing support and expectation for your future results; don't wait until you've crossed all the 't's and dotted all the 'i's: it will be too late by then.

On assessing success:

- **Celebrate and try to measure success:** although measuring success in the evidence to policy environment is difficult, it is much easier when you have a clear sense of why you are doing what you do. What is that new world you want to see? CGD have also tried different (and tailor-made) trackers to understand and measure their impact.
- **Keep asking tough questions:** don't be afraid to rock the boat, both your own metaphorical boat and other people's. You don't need to know the answers to all the questions, just keep on asking them.

Box 51: IRADe's case in India: What makes the think tank credible

Dr. Jyoti Parkih is a founding member and director of IRADe, a think tank in India. He was interviewed by Annapoorna Ravichander and shared what he believes makes IRADe credible and how they achieved this credibility. Read the full interview here.

According to Dr. Parkih the following reasons make IRADE credible:

- Strong focus on multidisciplinary research and analysis
- Evidence based scientific research and sound policy advice/measures
- Working simultaneously at local, national, regional and global levels and trying to converge in thinking and approach, thereby shaping policymaking at all levels
- Consensus building approach by involving all stakeholders and groups of interest
- Strong linkages with policymaking communities
- Extensive assignments with government, ministries and other governmental departments
- Cross-sectoral analysis and generating holistic insights/understanding
- Mix of research and action related work

Establishing credibility is a continuous process. IRADe built its credibility by:

- Being competent and becoming an expert in our field in the areas of modelling and driving regional energy co-operation, gender aspects, etc
- Having the ability to analyse an issue/situation and develop several potential solutions/options and tailor-made recommendations
- Doing rigorous work, and by publishing in journals and other publications
- Being people-centric and consistent in the approach.
- Continuing focus on multidisciplinary research and analysis
- Thinking globally and acting locally

How will it adapt to change?[67]

As we discussed at the beginning of this guide, think tanks are a product of their context (see about the importance of understanding your context). Global changes are affecting the way think tanks operate, see themselves, and engage with their audiences. Here we present some of these changes through the eyes of think tank experts.

67 This section draws on:
- On Think Tanks Annual Review 2019-2020 on technology.
- On Think Tanks Annual Review 2020-2021 on change. How do think tanks react to or foster change?

The future of think tank functions[68]

Mendizabal argues that the future looks bright for the functions that think tanks fulfil: developing solutions to social, economic and political problems; informing decision-makers and the public; promoting ideas; advocating for change; holding decision-makers accountable; training the next generations of decision-makers; creating spaces for informed debate on matters of public interest; and so on. But think tanks as we know them are changing:

- The skills of thinktankers are changing. While think tanks used to prioritise academic qualifications, it is now recognised that it is essential to combine a number of skills such as communications and networking. This means that there are also increasing efforts to participate in activities other than research, such as improving engagement with the public and shaping new narratives.

- The socio-economic make up of think tanks is changing in terms of a (too slow) incorporation of women and younger thinktankers into all levels and aspects of think tanks. And there seems to be a recognition that think tanks need to shed elitist credentials and work to include more culturally and ethnically diverse teams that are more representative of the public they intend to serve.

- Think tanks are facing competitions from individuals who use their analytical skills, use of databases and great command of new communication channels and tools to participate in public debates and who have displaced traditional scholars from spaces previously reserved for 'experts'.

Think tanks may, therefore, look very different in the future. Mendizabal argues that, first, there will be greater diversity in the types and structures of think tanks and, secondly, there will be more temporary think tanks that will run parallel projects or split and form new ones, experimenting with approaches and partnerships.

New ways of developing policy and programme options[69]

Over the last decade, policy development in think tanks has been changing. Traditionally, think tanks would identify the most desirable policy/programme through a process that broadly consists of:

- The problem being defined qualitatively and quantitatively.

68 Based on Mendizabal, E. (2021), The future of think tanks.

69 Based on Struyk, R. (2021), An evolving wave in think tank policy development.

- Options for addressing it defined after conducting the analyses.
- Criteria for assessing the efficacy of all options defined and applied.
- The most effective option identified.
- Senior level officials and concerned interest groups consulted and the final choice made.

This process includes little consultation with grassroots organisations working with the intended programme/policy beneficiaries.

Over recent years, a new approach has been adopted that varies from this model because in-depth consultations are held with front-line administrators, eligible households or other beneficiaries. Additional data is collected through surveys of these stakeholders to assess inefficiencies. The implementation of pilot programmes is also common so that processes can be monitored and improved.

What this means is that a broader range of actors come together to co-create the intervention so that policy options are built from the ground up.

Most think tanks are not yet adopting this approach but two organisations that are doing so are the Results for Development Institute and New America.

Box 52. From 'think tank' to 'change hub'?

Anne-Marie Slaughter, CEO of New America argues that think tanks need to redefine themselves to adapt to this century. Watch her keynote speech for OTT's Conference 2021 here.

Slaughter argues that we need to rename and redefine ourselves for this century because the concept of a think tank is a 20th century concept. She proposes the term 'change hub' as a shorthand for 'public problem-solving organisations'. In her talk, she makes three points about why think tanks need to change and adapt to this century and how this is already being done.

- Defining her organisation, New America, as a 'public problem-solving organisation', contrasts with the way that American think tanks typically define themselves (often 'policy research organisation'). This way of presenting the organisation shifts the focus away from policy because, she argues, if we focus on policy that means that we are aiming for change from the top down, as it is governments who enact and implement policies. It also means that we are typically located in capitals and that we are a very specialised group of people who focus on their particular areas. Being a public-policy problem-solving organisation means going beyond policy.

- How are public problem-solving organisations different from other organisations such as charities? Think tanks do focus on thinking, knowledge and ideas because ideas matter and drive action, but those working for public problem-solving organisations are thinkers who are more wedded to action than academics and whose solutions and recommendations are deeply rooted in thought.

- Think tanks are developing better ways of thinking by integrating thought and action in new ways. Many are now defining themselves as 'think and do tanks' or 'think and action tanks', and adopting a more bottom up strategy directly connected to people. This approach means moving away from traditional ways in which think tanks work, but although the process is different, the goal is the same: to support policy and practice with evidence.

Therefore, the label that we use matters. Something that may come to mind when you think about 'think tanks' is something closed or impermeable, like a fish tank or a military tank. And this is the way it seems to be in Washington D.C:, where the think tank system is mostly white, far more male than female, and does not resemble the plural country that the US is. So Slaughter offers a version of what think tanks could become – a different label that incorporates a different theory of action: using the label '**change hub**' as shorthand for 'public problem-solving organisations' (just like think tank is the shorthand for policy research institute). Why 'change hub'?

- A hub is a place that connects many different people and networks.
- A hub is open – it invites many different kinds of actors, such as partners on the ground and many other intermediaries.
- A hub is a place where ideas and action come together in ways that create a fertile environment for change.

A change hub because as important as thought is, to adapt to our current context, thought must be connected to a direct theory of change. What we sell is ideas married to action for the purpose of change.

What is clear is that think tanks must evolve if they want to thrive. Mendizabal (2016) explains that, in the long run, the most successful think tanks are not necessarily the most popular, but 'those that have designed effective and flexible governance structures. Those that have scoped and delivered the most relevant and robust research agendas. Those that have told a compelling story about why their evidence matters to the key people they want to reach.'

These think tanks are the ones who are most innovative in trying out new methods, communications channel and tools, and technologies. They are the most proactive in trying to find new sources of income or funders and exploring new business models as environments change.

How will it engage with evolving technology?[70]

Technological advances are causing think tanks to rethink what they do, their business models, their research agendas, how they communicate and with whom, and what skills they need in their teams. Although we do not yet know the many ways in which these innovations will disrupt our lives, we are witnessing that technology is rapidly changing the way many think tanks operate.

Tanner (2020) suggests that think tanks in the 2020s will thrive if they can grasp how new technologies will change the way they work and adapt accordingly. Here are some of the ways in which think tanks work may be disrupted by technology in the coming years:

- There is a great opportunity to produce research about the implications and applications of technology. Not only in how technology affects sectors like education or health, but also in the use of new technologies such as big data or machine learning.
- New technologies will bring new ways of conducting research. The ability to understand algorithms will be key in understanding how the world around us is constructed.
- New ways of communicating and of consuming information means that different skills and approaches are needed from communicators, who will need to carefully think about how to frame emerging issues in post-truth and mistrustful environments. Similarly, there is a decline in the centrality of text in favour of audio, and podcasts and live videos will be much more important in the coming decade.
- It will be easier to create and operate think tanks with staff located all over the world using new software and more flexible administrative burdens.

Take some time to reflect on how you might incorporate these new technologies into your operations and whether this is an issue that you would be interested in researching. Also, consider including in your team staff with tech expertise and the skills to stay up to date on technological advances. Few think tanks have yet started working on identifying the many ways in which technological innovations might change our societies to provide guidance to policymakers and inform debates on the many dimensions that governments will have to grapple with.

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70 Based on:Tanner, J. (2020), Think tanks versus robots: How technology is likely to disrupt think tanks and Mendizabal, E. (2020), Editorial, in OTT's Annual Review 2019–2020: Technology.

Box 53. Data collection in the time of COVID-19

Paul Wang and Krishanu Chakraborty from IDinsight discussed about data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic. Listen the full interview here

Krishany Chakraborty: *I am based on New Delhi. The objective of the Data of Demanding is to make original primary data collection more debugged, faster, cheaper and also maintain a high-quality part from the data that is coming. This is very important even before COVID and still is very relevant because normally the data cycle for primary data has been really slow, it is very expensive and more less suffers from the same quality problems .... We are trying to solve this problem through a combination of technological and technical innovations that we have of real strong data system that we have and then rely primarily from the data collection .... We have primarily focus on helping development monitoring programs in about 27 of the poorest districts of India. We have been doing this for about two years, apart from other different projects across nutrition and health trying to provide data which is very fast, cheap and of high-quality.*

WHEN?

The When? questions

These questions will help you:
- Understand that there is no right moment to start your think tank and know the challenges that other leaders have faced at the beginning.
- Acknowledge that leaders need to change at some point and how to manage this transition process within the organisation.

When to start?

Start now. If you are waiting for everything to be in place you will most probably never start. That being said, you should ensure that you are somewhat able to carry out this work and that you have some of the skills needed. If not, invest some time in working on the knowledge and skills you need. But don't overdo it. Start the thinking and planning stages and work your way from there. There is no need to do everything at the same time. Choose an entry point and start there. What makes for the best entry point depends on you.

Here are a few easy (and cheap) recommendations to start with. These can be done alongside your main research work and will help the think tank to start gaining recognition before your first research output is ready (Mendizabal, 2016):
- **Get started before seeking big funding.** There is no need to wait until you have funds to start. With a light and flexible structure, you can start right away.
- **Publish while you read.** You do not need to wait for the big report to be ready. You can start to publish articles, book reviews or blogs about the books or papers you are reading.
- **Publish other people's ideas, if you agree with them.** Using content produced by your board members, associates, and even third parties, is a perfectly valid way of 'producing content'. Think tanks often miss the opportunity to be present in policy debates because they want to wait until 'they' have something to say.

Windows of opportunity can open at any time and if a think tank is not ready to say something it will miss it altogether. There is nothing wrong with saying: 'As so and so said, the best solution is to ...'.

- **Use research you have done before.** New think tanks sometimes say that they have little need for a website because they have little to publish, or that starting with an event is not possible because they do not have any research to present. This is not exactly true. Think tanks are all about their people and it is unlikely that the people making up a new think tank (however young they are) do not have any previous work and ideas, published or not. All of this can and should be used by the new think tank. You do not have to take credit for it (if a paper was written by the director or a researcher while working for another think tank, for example, do not delete the original logo) but can certainly republish it and add it to the list of studies written by the think tank's staff. An event, too, can be organised to 'broadcast' guests' work via the new think tank's YouTube channel or website. You are not stealing; you are helping to give 'old' researchers a longer shelf life. And this is great.
- **It won't break – don't be afraid to publish.** Before you start you will face an almost existential question: are we ready to publish? In other words, are we ready to say what we think? Unless your outputs are of such a terrible quality that getting to this point has been an indisputable miracle, then our advice is to go for it. Your outputs may not be perfectly diagrammed and they may have typos, but you can always publish new versions (digitally, of course) and by repeating the process you will get better soon.

Strategic planning[71]

Based on the reflection and analysis you have carried out in the previous steps, define your strategy – but don't overdo it. A strategic plan does not need to be too prescriptive. It clarifies what a think tank does and why, but it should not read like a log frame. After reflecting on the questions in this guide (and answering them) you should be ready to draft your strategic plan. Here is an example of a simple plan (based on Mendizabal, 2013 c):

- **Vision and mission** (1/2 a page). The reader should understand the contribution that the think tank is attempting to make.
- **Things we will do to fulfil our mission** (2–4 pages). The activities that the think tank will do, for example research, communications, capacity development. Alternatively, you could frame it in more original terms: generate knowledge, share knowledge, promote public debate/understanding, develop capacities, etc.
- **Things we need to deliver the mission** (2–4 pages). These are the inputs or the back-

71 Based on Mendizabal, E. (2013b), Strategic plans: A simple version

office to the mission. Here you can describe its governance, business model, human resources, organisational change projects, etc.
- **How will we know we are on the right track** (1–2 pages). An outline of the MEL strategy.
- **How will others know how we are doing** (1/2–1 page). For instance annual reports, website transparency, etc.

Another example of a starting strategy is that of PMRC – ZAMBIA. The 'PMRC series' consists of:[72]

- A background note, followed by:
  - A snapshot (a nice innovation by them)
  - A reading list
  - A blog or a series of blogs
  - Videos and podcasts
  - A cartoon (another innovation)
  - An infographic (developed in the last week)
- One or more policy briefs based on the background note, and followed by:
  - A snapshot
  - A reading list
  - A blog or a series of blogs
  - Videos and podcasts
  - A cartoon
  - An infographic

For more on strategic planning read Mendizabal, E. (2013b), Strategic plans: A simple version and Datta, A. (2016), Strategic planning: It's just as much about the present as the future.

Now we present some examples of the challenges that founders faced when they started their think tanks. Some of these challenges surrounded getting people to know them and their work, or recruiting and retaining qualified staff; others arose around ensuring the availability of funds or building the very idea of think tanks in a context where they are barely known.

72 Based on Mendizabal, E. (2013), A Zambian think tank start-up: A possible model

Box 54: Nicolás Ducote on the challenges faced when setting up CIPPEC Argentina

Nicolás Ducote is a co-founder and former executive director and general director of CIPPEC Argentina and was interviewed by Leandro Echt in 2012. Read the full interview here.

The main challenge was for people to get to know us, which is why we put a lot of effort into communicating 'face to face' and into grabbing their attention so that they would have us on their radar. We would generate products, like the Legislative Directory, that didn't have great aggregate value but that allowed for a lot of people to know about us. For example, all of the legislators, who we would go visit one by one, got to know us during the process. At the same time, the Legislative Directory was a tool used by all of those with some connection to public policy: the institutional departments, the executive branch, the media; in relation to which we placed ourselves as a bridge that many people wanted to cross.

We also worried about communication and the press, although, at the beginning, it was beyond our capacities: we tried working with a news agency, but we didn't have the capacity to produce the press releases that they would ask for every week. So instead we found out who were those people who wrote about our topics, and we created links with them, we put ourselves at their disposition: when they asked us about a fact regarding some topic, we would kill ourselves to get it, even if it meant distracting ourselves from other projects, because we thought that if we delivered they would be more willing to talk to us in the future. Therefore, we became a habitual source of reference, and naturally, other actors began to recognise us as knowledgeable in certain subjects, and so we gradually became a mandatory source of reference.

At the same time, our efforts in getting people to know us were linked to our search for funding: it would be easier to get financing as more and more individuals knew us. Alongside all of this, we put forward a process of institutional investment that wasn't visible: we would put 10% of all of our revenue each year into creating an anti-cyclical fund; we sought to buy our own offices, etc. Sustaining institutional strength was a challenge because donors, particularly those who had a strong outlook on impact, like the international cooperation, had no incentive to finance institutional strength, and CIPPEC was always expensive for donors: we had all of our employees on the payroll, we did everything in a neat and demanding way, etc.

In summary, the mix of effective communications, fundraising, and strengthening the institution made a lot of very talented people want to approach CIPPEC. When we communicated, they got to know us; when we raised funds they knew that they could count on a good salary; and they knew that we were a ship that had all of its flotation devices put in place in order to continue with its course.

Box 55. Challenges faced by ISET Nepal: Retaining staff and ensuring funds

Ajaya Dixit is the executive director of ISET Nepal, and was interviewed by Annapoorna Ravichander in 2017. Read the full interview here.

Retaining qualified human capital and ensuring financial sustainability are our two major challenges. In fact, retaining qualified professionals is a major challenge for many research agencies and think tanks in Nepal. We find ourselves competing with international NGOs, bilateral donors, and multilateral agencies for qualified human resources. This has forced us to be creative: we invest in training a young generation of professionals and provide them with new opportunities. This has helped maintain our staff retention rates.

The changing in-country regulatory context presents another challenge. Any research organisation or think tank must comply with national laws. In Nepal, regulators inquire about the specific contributions that our research has made to meet the country's development objectives. We reiterate that our role is to produce knowledge and argue that research findings should be aimed at improving policies and practices – but are not directly responsible for them. But we have a hard time making a case.

Regulators use the same yardstick to judge research organisations as they do to judge a development organisation that, for example, works on building schools or planting saplings. This is like comparing apples and oranges. One of our biggest challenges right now is to change the perceptions of government regulators regarding the importance of critical research and the role it can have on the policy landscape.

Box 56. Challenges faced by GPTT in Iran: Developing the concept of a think tank

Seyed Sadegh Emamian is the founder and director of the Governance and Policy Think Tank (GPTT) in Iran and was interviewed by Andrea Baertl.

My main function as a founder not just as a director was to establish the institution. We defined ourselves as a university accredited think tank, so I started to approach former colleagues who had graduated from the best universities in the world and had returned to Tehran and I asked them to join the initiative. One of the main challenges was attracting prestigious academic figures who were interested in the policymaking process, rather than just being academics, and also attracting young, talented, recent graduates as policy researchers.

The second challenge was the challenge of the unknown. The concept of think tanks in Tehran was very new when we started. It wasn't a national concept that everybody knew about. We tried to define what a think tank is, the reasons behind establishing one and why we need to have think tanks when we already have research institutions within public departments or academia. So, defining, rationalising and legitimising our institution was an important challenge.

> *Other challenges that I can mention were how to establish and maintain ourselves as an independent think tank that is not politically biased or academically attached to a specific school of thought. And also fundraising. This was challenging at the beginning and continues to be a challenge.*

As these examples show, most think tank founders will face challenges at the beginning. We hope, however, that the recommendations provided in this guide, together with the lessons learnt from other founders, can help you better navigate them.

When to let go?[73]

There will come a time when you might need to step down from leading the think tank (if you are the executive director) either because it is best for you or for the organisation. Executive directors lead on a wide range of issues: staffing, fundraising, budgeting decisions, communication issues. And after a time in the role a change is needed to infuse new ideas into the organisations and also for the director to rest (Echt, 2018).

The skills that an executive director needs to have are varied, and most importantly are acquired by experience. And so it is a good idea to plan for a leadership transition early on in the think tank's life. Successful experiences of leadership transitions show the value of investing in internal leadership (e.g. CIPPEC, Fedesarrollo, Grupo Faro) to guarantee 'a supply of highly qualified candidates for future transitions' (Mendizabal, 2013g). In all of these cases, organisations chose leaders from within their ranks. Indeed, it is very common in think tanks in the global south for executive directors to take up this position in organisations where they worked in previous roles. This has the advantages of a leader who is familiar with the organisational structure, the staff, the donors, and so on. But a limitation is that this could reduce the chances of bringing change to the organisation (Ramos 2021).

There are alternatives to choosing leaders from within the organisation. Here are a few recommendations for when that moment comes (Mendizabal, 2013g):

- Headhunting companies can be useful, but use your networks and go beyond your usual communication channels to find candidates (explore other sectors and even countries).
- The board is critical to the process and must own it.
- The staff should also be involved, and be invited to parts of the interview process.
- Give candidates a chance to get to know the organisation (even disclosing private

73 This section draws from: Echt, L. (2018), Leadership transitions: Lessons from three Latin American think tanks and Mendizabal, E. (2013g), Director's profiles and how to replace them.

information) before their final interviews (it makes the process richer and easier to choose the best candidate).

- Expect a long process and prepare the staff, partners and audiences for it.
- Former directors should keep their distance (after the handover process). This is even more important if the director was also the think tank's founder.

Box 57. How to plan for a transition process? Leadership transitions: lessons from three Latin American think tanks

In 2012 and 2013 Leandro Echt interviewed some former and current directors and discussed strategies for planning for a transition process. Here are the lessons from these interviews:

1. Identifying the new leader.
    - Professionals with working experience in the organisation are a plus. In some organisations, it is the tradition to hire someone from within.
    - Investing in internal leadership may offer a supply of highly qualified candidates for future transitions.
    - Experience in politics and knowledge of the policymaking process are important assets.

2. Managing the transition process.
    - Support from the outgoing director and the board is critical for a smooth transition.
    - Keep the outgoing leaders engaged with the organisation (internally but also externally with key stakeholders such as donors or policymakers) until the new director is fully settled.
    - New directors need to gain the support of their former colleagues and the staff: give them space and time to express their concerns and ideas.

3. Caring about the external image and sustainability.
    - Depending on the reasons for leaving and the context, the organisations needs to choose between a private or public transition. Both are adequate but it needs to be decided and managed in the way that the think tanks sees fit.

In short, if you have a clear understanding of what a think tank is and you are sure that you want to set up one: start now.

CHECKLIST

Checklist: Establishing a think tank

Starting a new think tank is a daunting process and will require commitment and hard work from you and your team. But it is an objective worth pursuing. And to do it we advocate for this approach:

Think–Plan–Start–Adapt

With this guide you have started thinking (and learning what needs to be done), and ideally you might have also started developing a plan. Now is the time to start, and if the approach taken does not work, have the monitoring mechanisms and reflection spaces to think and plan how to adapt to the challenges that you are facing.

We have covered many questions in this guide. Here is a summary to help you bring it all together. When thinking about setting up your own think tank, we recommend that you:

Have a clear understanding of why you want to set up a think tank:

- Reflect on and clarify your motivations.
- Learn from other think tank founders about what moved them to set up a think tank.
- Understand what a think tank is and what its most common functions are.

Reflect and define on what kind of organisation it will be and what it will do:

- Understand the context in which your think tank will operate and how it will affect the organisation.
- Reflect and define the mission, vision and values of your organisation.
- Have clarity on the topics and themes the think tank will focus on.

- Define the levels and types of impact the think tank aims to achieve.
- Identify the sort of activities it will carry out.
- All of this will help you clarify your organisation's business.

Define who will be involved in it:

- Understand the different roles that a board can play for a think tank and the different types that exist.
- Think about who you can reach out to be part of, or support the setup of, your think tank
- Understand the functions of the leader, the challenges the role faces and the different skills he or she needs to have to deal with them. Then define whether it will be you or someone else who will take on this role.
- Reflect on your audiences and begin mapping the best ways to reach them.
- Define the staff that you will need and how you will hire them.
- Begin a reflection on the best types of funding streams, based on what you want to achieve.

Plan how you will manage your think tank:

- Reflect on office locations (and whether an office is even needed) and what approach best suits your needs.
- Understand the different ways to carry out research, the importance of policy-relevant research, and the options to ensure its quality.
- Know the concept of credibility and how to cultivate it.
- Plan communications from the beginning. Highlight the importance of communications for a think tank and reflect on the different channels and tools available for it.
- Think about a MEL system and process.
- Reflect on the factors that relate to the credibility of your think tank. The quality of your research is important, but it is not the only factor that matters.

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Here you will find all the references mentioned in the guide plus further resources for you to keep exploring. These include recommended articles, templates, and useful examples on various topics.

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