

Questions

CIDOB



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THINK TANKS

The Importance of Being Relevant

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On 17 January 2013, the 2012 *Global Go To Think Tank Index* was presented both at the World Bank in Washington DC and at the United Nations in New York. This report, issued by the Department of International Relations at the University of Pennsylvania, constitutes the only internationally established index to assess the work and impact of think tanks worldwide. It is the result of an international survey which involves more than 1.950 researchers, public and private funders, politicians and journalists. The present edition surveys more than 6.600 research centers around the world. In it, CIDOB is recognized as the most influential think tank in Southern Europe.

CIDOB ranks 18th in the top 75 think tanks in Western Europe, 35th in the worldwide (non US) category, and 64th in the 150 top think tanks worldwide (US and non US) --thus entering the global elite of think tanks.

Although “policy institutes” (as think tanks were originally called) can be traced back to 19th century Britain, it is generally acknowledged that the history of think tanks starts in 1916 with the founding of the Brookings Institution in Washington DC. For most of the 20th century, independent public policy institutes that performed research and provided advice concerning public policy were found primarily in the United States, with a much smaller number in Canada, the UK and Western Europe. “Think tank” was a term coined during the Second World War: in wartime American slang it referred to rooms where strategists discussed war planning. The end of the Cold War signaled the start of a proliferation of think tanks around the world: two-thirds of all the think tanks that exist today were established after 1970 and more than half since 1980.

Francesc Badia argues that the rise of think tanks worldwide in the last decades is a perfectly logical development, linked to the growing complexity of governance and the quickening pace of the decision-making processes in a globalized world.

What are think tanks for?

Think tanks are laboratories of policy-oriented ideas addressed to public policy players and stakeholders (government, media, civil society, public opinion). Think tanks, as organizations that perform research and analysis concerning topics such as social policy, political strategy, economics, military, technology, or culture, have as a general mission to help/influence policy-making. They have an important social role as bridge builders between the academic and the policymaking world, as well as between governments and civil society. Most are non-profit. Others are funded by governments, advocacy groups, or businesses, or derive revenue from consulting or research work related to their projects. Some think tanks are linked to political parties, others are theme-centered (health, environment, international relations). Within each category, some are more independent than others depending on their founding mission and the nature of their funding. Think tanks, on the other hand, should not be confused with consultancies and lobbies: consulting firms work on specific assignments (studies, reports) commissioned by clients (mainly business, but not only), while lobbies, on their side, defend and promote particular interests (normally, an economic sector). The think tank industry competes in the marketplace of ideas.

Within the knowledge economy, that is.

Right. What has prompted the proliferation of think tanks and their public presence is the result of the emergence of the knowledge economy and of the information/communication technology revolution --both accelerating the globalization processes by putting into circulation, at high speed, not only capitals and goods, but information and ideas --and also sometimes prejudices and propaganda. The base reason for the modern growth of think tanks, though, is increased complexity linked to increased interdependence --so that policymakers, journalists and the general public demand quality analysis to clarify confusion and to help decision taking. Alongside the construction of the EU institutions, for example, a number of "European" think tanks have appeared in Brussels to supply ideas and analysis to policymakers, so that they can take better-informed decisions. Since decisions are increasingly complex and inter-related, the work think tanks do has increased accordingly. Whether the EU institutions actually pay attention to them or not is another matter.

But think tanks are not just about information...

Think tanks are particularly useful to sharpen ideas. Since things are complex, ideas need to be submitted to a distilling and sharpening process, so that they can increase their usefulness and potential impact. Scenario building is another useful contribution: in a world dominated by the short term (election cycles, profit making), there is a need for tools and ideas to take decisions thinking about the future --a need for rigorously-defined future scenarios, so that ideas that are thought out today be sustainable tomorrow and make sense in the long-term. A key issue is that decisions mandated by the short-term do not have a negative impact on long-term objectives. Decisions always have consequences beyond the short term: say the US and NATO decide to depart Afghanistan tomorrow, because this is what their domestic agenda requires them to do. But if they do not measure thoroughly the consequences of such a decision, all the effort that has gone into the Afghan operation will be lost --i.e. if the result scenario of the pull-out is civil war and power to the radical Taliban, the "work" of a twelve-year war, 10.000 casualties and billions of taxpayers' dollars spent will amount to nothing. In order to take this decision, therefore, it is necessary first to build potential scenarios, to evaluate timings, to analyse consequences and to prepare for the day after (strengthening institutions, the army, civil society groups, geostrategic environment and so on). This is the importance of scenario building: it allows you to stay above the day-to-day imperatives, and yield on your political investments.

Let's talk about think tanks in Europe...

Think tanks appeared later in Europe than in the US, but they have now reached an equal number (2.000 aprox), after a period of rapid growth over the last thirty years. There are today increasingly influential European think tanks. The multiplication of players in the public sphere (not only governments, but also firms and corporations, civil society organisations, etc.) has stimulated even further the proliferation of think tanks in Europe. As regards Spain, the number of think tanks (55) is relatively small, and the more relevant ones are somehow dedicated to international relations—much as in the world at large.

Why is that?

Because of various reasons. International relations being the field in which there is potentially a high demand for analysis that can complement the information accessed with the classical tools of diplomacy and the state information services, think tanks have an added value. The international society is a complex entity that often requires complex approaches. Politics are local, but problems are global and think tanks can provide alternative tracks and innovative ideas to a better understanding and better answering to complex questions. They can also provide the required “neutrality” of being independent expert bodies able to promote second track diplomacy initiatives or encourage soft power strategies, actions that harder powers could find much more difficult to carry on.

How are think tanks financed?

Best ideas are clearly in pressing need in a crisis context such as the one we currently experience. But this is a context in which the *res publica* is being privatized, and this has negative consequences for both the independence of think tanks and their output. To ensure the independence of think tanks, a core funding (structure, not projects) must be guaranteed, and be combined with public/private funding of projects and activities and also, increasingly, think tanks' own resources (book sales, services, paid content access, etc.). The crisis has also some positive effects, though: it forces organizations to re-define their size and scope, and re-shape their structure, to diversify the sources of funding –and thus to work for their own relevance (for a very good reason: if what they do is not relevant, the market –even if it is the marketplace of ideas- will not have it). So, if your aim is to place ideas and influence the agenda, you must make sure you deliver a product which has quality, relevance and, increasingly, timeliness. The ideal think tank is more of an agenda-setter than an agenda-follower. And it must be, of course, independent: you have to be independent in order to influence and re-direct policy issues you consider are going the wrong way (non-independent organizations could fall more into the “cheerleading” side of the agenda).

Yes, but the term “independent”, in the media sector for instance, has been devalued...

The media have turned into a business (rather than a public service) and are mostly profit-oriented. An ideal think tank works for and on behalf of a set of values and has no business objectives. It is supposed to strive for the common good. The Fourth Power having incurred in dereliction of duties, here comes the Fifth –to counteract and feedback the other four with ideas for the improvement of governance and the public sphere.

This year is CIDOB's 40th anniversary. Celebrating the "Global Go to Think Tanks" report which has placed it as the most valued think tank in Spain, Carles A. Gasòliba, President of CIDOB, insisted in looking to the way ahead: "The big challenge is to consolidate the position and try to improve it"...

CIDOB has managed to build a competitive think tank, independent, globally connected –and be among the world elite think tanks. This is, obviously, the result of the work of many years, of its allegiance to the values of the civil society it comes from, and of an ongoing concern for quality, relevance and opportunity. Within the vast field of international relations, CIDOB has been sensitive to the rapid changes that have occurred globally, specializing in potentially relevant issues and topics where it could provide a clear added value (the Mediterranean, the European construction, migrations and human movements, human security –among others). Now that it plays the Premier League, the challenge –as ever– is to keep on climbing and aim for excellence –for in such a competitive market, the moment you are satisfied with your position, you start to lose it. Increased global exposure means that CIDOB must be even more demanding in terms of quality and excellence. An error now entails many more consequences than previously: when you come out of the woods into the open, you are exposed, you cannot hide. Being higher in the ranking means being more time under scrutiny, more time on the spot. If you indulge yourself in relaxation, you are done.

So what's next?

As I see it, the next stage for CIDOB is a very positive one. The motto "Putting People at the Heart of International Relations" has proved to capture CIDOB's identity, but we need more. A new strategic plan will be drafted this year, based in a twofold strategy: to be more present locally –and stay close to citizens– and to be more relevant globally –and stay close to the international agenda, with Europe as a permanent reference. One of the strategic visions that is being considered (as others have done) is to imagine the development of a global think tank.

Could you explain, please?

Some think tanks have been opening delegations in different parts of the world (the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace or the International Crisis Group are obvious examples; the European Council on Foreign Relations was conceived from the start as a European think tank, with offices in the capital cities of some EU member states). This responds to the following logic: the construction of ideas is not the private field of particular experts anymore; globalization and increased complexity mean that ideas –if they are to capture the reality and be relevant– must be built from shared knowledge –that is, collectively, by means of a global net. If you want to be relevant today, you either do things by networking, joining others and sharing, or decide to work on a more ambitious project –such as a global alliance of related think tanks, in cosmopolitan cities not necessarily located next to state power, so as to shield its independence, its influence capacity, and (this is important) its competence to think "out of the box".

The Economist described "good think tanks" as those organizations that are able to combine "intellectual depth, political influence, and flair for publicity, comfortable surroundings, and a streak of eccentricity." Do you agree?

Yes, I certainly do.