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L I S B O N

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Think tanks and their value for public policy

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Policy Briefs

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About Institute of Public Policy

Institute of Public Policy is a Portuguese, independent and non-partisan academic think tank, that promotes policy research and debate in four key fields: EU economic policy, public finance and good governance, democracy and accountability, social policy.

Motivation

The lack of understanding of what a think tank does and what their potential impact can be on public policy is in great part due to the vast number of think tanks appearing in a short period. But still today, this type of organization is for many people still a mystery and the lack of knowledge of its potential and applicability is what this policy brief aims to tackle.

In Portugal, think tanks are still greatly unknown, and their concept is constantly dissociated from the organizations. It is important to give praise not only to their work and contributions to society, but also acknowledge the typology of the organization as a think tank, which is unique.

Unawareness of the true purpose and mission of a think tank by the civil society has been the reality faced, among others, by the Institute of Public Policy – a Portuguese think tank founded in 2013. At the time, think tanks in Portugal were scarce and limited to a few fields of work, and their impact was not yet clear to the public.

The Institute dedicates its activities to four key research areas, namely: European Union economic policy, public finance and good governance, democracy and accountability, and social policy. Today, this Lisbon based think tank intends to promote a society in which the public debate is more enlightened and the political decision processes more rigorous and informed.

Being a part of a list of more than 8,000 think tanks all over the world (according to the 2018 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report), the Institute of Public Policy found it essential to clarify its purpose and contribution of this type of organizations.

What are think tanks?

If the aim is to develop a ‘**think tank**’ label, there is one statement that you will find in every academic paper: *there is no unique definition of a think tank*.

When trying to define think tanks, two complexities arise. First, most definitions have been made according to United States parameters – which makes sense if we take into account that these type of organisations have been, up until now, prolific in North America. That is no longer the reality, which is why some attempts have been made to fill the gap by trying to come up with a definition that fits think tanks across the world.

Dahl (2016)¹ has formulated a list of criteria that should apply to all institutions that claim themselves think tanks. This list can be translated into a definition stating that *‘think tanks are organisations which claim autonomy and attempt to influence public policy by mobilising research’*. In a simpler way, one can state that think tanks have the core purpose of enhancing the action of those involved in politics and decision-making processes by carrying out proper research, sharing then the information.

These definitions are now very much in line with the one presented by the american institution **Think Tank and Civil Societies Program** (TTCSP)², the so called ‘think tank’s think tank’, that defines them as *‘organisations of engagement and research analysis that generate policy-oriented research, analysis and advice on domestic and international issues, thereby enabling policy makers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy’*.

The second challenge when addressing think tanks is their confusion with other similar, but different, organisations, such as interest groups

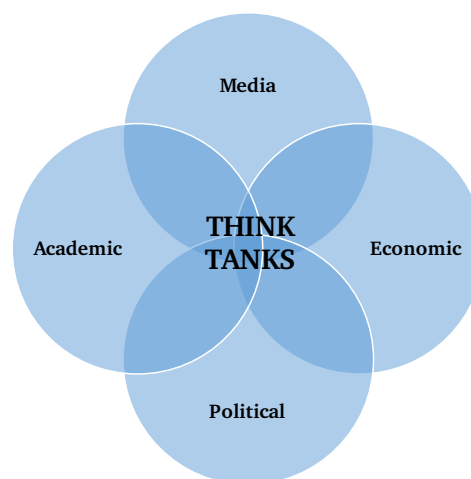
¹ Dahl, J. (2016). *The Politics of Think Tanks in Europe*. Routledge Research in Comparative Politics, vol. 67, pp. 1-15.

² The TTCSP, at the Lauder Institute, University of Pennsylvania, conducts research on the role policy institutes play in governments and in civil societies around the world. See further information at <https://www.gotthinktank.com>.

or academic institutions. Because think tanks share not only one, but a set of particularities from all, it is important to distinguish the meaning of a think tank and establish contrast definitions in comparison with other similar institutions. Otherwise, their existence would not make sense. Whereas academic institutions produce knowledge in the pursuit of an abstract truth, think tanks use knowledge as a means to an end – influencing the political agenda. On the other hand, interest groups use knowledge purely on an instrumental way, to influence a particular audience, while think tanks affect this knowledge to increase the quality of policy-makers decisions. Additionally, whilst the first don't have as priority whether their presentation of the information is biased, think tanks do and tries to avoid it by seeking credibility (De Boer, 2015)³.

Nevertheless, these particularities are specific to each type of institution and do not provide any tool for a general differentiation. This led Thomas Medvetz (2012)⁴ to apply the concept of **boundary organizations** to think tanks. To generate a feasible solution for the explanation and differentiation of think tanks from other organisations. As the word *boundary* clearly emphasises, think tanks should be understood as organisations living between worlds or, as the author claims, occupying a space between fields. Think tanks are, therefore, bridges that unify skills and expertise from distinct disciplines. More precisely, Medvetz mentions four specific fields from which think tanks aspire to obtain four different results: the **academic** world, the **media**, the **political** sphere and the **business** sector. The results expected to be obtained from them are credibility, visibility, political access and financial resources, respectively.

Figure 1 – Medvetz's fields of power



Source: Medvetz (2012).

In short, if think tanks belong to the academic scope, it is because of their structure and aim to produce reliable research. In addition, they could be understood as media organizations due to their goal of visibility, by approaching the public through media channels. Moreover, they undoubtedly have a political side due to their effort of obtaining political access, to bring forward their findings in the policy agenda. Finally, think tanks can be included in the business field, when it comes to institutional and financial resources. Hence, these four fields contain the key aspects that define a think tank and can be useful indicators when it comes to identifying which organisations can be deemed as truly think tanks. For instance, if we take the case of academic institutions as an example of how Medvetz's criteria can be applied, we should consider the *visibility* criteria: whereas think tanks clearly want to have an impact on the public, academic institutions do not have a great interest in making their work accessible, nor have they any feature from the media field that could define them.

The fact that think tanks should act as boundary organizations does not mean that they cannot be classified into those that already have ideological identification (Selee, 2013)⁵. For instance, numerous European think tanks were

³ De Boer, J. (2015). *What are Think Tanks Good for?* United Nations University: Centre For Policy Research, Articles & Insights.

⁴ Medvetz, T. (2012). *Murky Power: "Think Tanks" as Boundary Organizations*. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, vol. 34, pp. 113-133.

⁵ Selee, A. (2013). *What Should Think Tanks do? A Strategic Guide to Policy Impact*. Stanford Briefs.

born from already consolidated institutions, which may or may not have already build up ideologies, such as NGOs, big corporations or political parties.

Nowadays there is a fever among some organizations to call themselves think tanks. Despite the fact that this can be a threat for the work that real think tanks perform, some state that self-definition implies joining the *think tanks community*, and, when entering this community, you must behave as the rest of it. In this sense, every organization self-labeled as a think tank will have to support the same kind of scrutiny and will fight to reach the same levels of quality of other think tanks. This might mean more competition for think tanks, and greater sources of qualitatively valuable information for the society and policy-makers.

How do they develop their work?

The work of a think tank consists on **generating and sharing ideas that are able to influence policy-making and public thinking**. In three words, consists on producing, analysing and sharing ideas. The way in which the production and analysis of information is carried out has, overall, no difference from regular academic research. However, the paramount ability of a successful think tank is how and to whom it channels the information, that is, the sharing phase.

De Boer (2015) puts it this way: *think tanks have two main roles; on the one hand, they serve as catalysts for ideas and, on the other hand, they help to set the policy agenda*. However, entering the policy agenda is not easy and depends greatly on the network of each think tank.

Think tanks' impact capacity and influence depend on their capability in making the information reach key policy audiences, which can be a challenge. Think tanks with greater power positions have more chances of joining

the policy agenda. Thus, the way think tanks make ideas travel is crucial for their effectivity. This is the point when belonging to certain circles of power pays off: think tanks that emerged from forceful influential institutions or those counting with influential personalities within its members are more likely to make an impact. In this way, think tanks do not only work with the purpose of influencing others, but also use their own influence capacities in order to do so. Partnerships and reputation are then two key elements of the sharing ideas phase.

Another element that could be deemed as one of the key aspects of a think tank, one that separates it from the academic field, is language. In their role as boundary organizations, think tanks have the mission of making their investigations accessible to policy-makers and to the public at all levels. This means using an intelligible, clear and accessible language, delivering the information in an understandable manner without much technicalities. Thus, whereas genuine academic papers might be written in a language only fully understood by the academic elite, think tanks' studies⁶ try to expose the outputs as simple as they can, so that they can reach all kinds of audiences. The reason for using this language lies on the think tanks' efforts of approaching wider audiences that are source of highly valuable information, and can be useful in the future and current development of their work.

Think tanks and the policy-making process

Think tanks should focus their research to influence three different phases of the policy-making process: **framing ideas and issues, providing policy alternatives and/or shaping decision-making**. These steps are not exclusive, which means that think tanks are hybrid

⁶ Among others, think tank studies can take the form of policy papers, proposals, warnings, forecast, and analysis.

institutions that might try to make an impact in more than one area using the same means. Nevertheless, while most think tanks are used to focus their work and efforts in the first two types of contributions, the last stage tends to be more influenced by interest groups. This happens because shaping decision requires intimate knowledge of the political system and organic relations with decision makers. While interest groups can be more identified with the so-called behind-the-scenes lobbying, think tanks are known for being focused on the aim of changing policies through intellectual argument.

Figure 2 – Stages in the policy cycle



Source: Selee (2013).

According to Seele’s stages in the policy cycle theory, ‘*framing ideas and issues*’ refers to helping policy-makers better understand ideas and problems through analysis and public dialog. In contrast, the contribution of the ‘*providing policy alternatives*’ phase consists on developing ideas regardless of their current political importance, that is, given that think tanks do not count on much political influence such as interest groups, most tend to develop alternative policy projects and have them ready in case the political opportunity eventually appears.

It is generally understood that think tanks, due to their condition as less political and powerful organisations, focus their work on tackling long-term issues rather than short-term ones. In this sense, think tanks and academic institutions are better prepared for long-term policy advice, while interest groups are more suited to provide short-term advice.

Following on this idea, Fraussen and Halpin (2017)⁷ carried out an investigation to sort out the way in which think tanks contribute to the policy advisory system. Their results showed that

⁷ Fraussen, B. and Halpin, D. (2017). *Think Tanks and strategic policy-making: the contribution of think tanks to policy advisory systems*. Policy Sci, vol. 50, pp. 105-124.

most think tanks tend to prioritize the issues in which they have **long-standing interest**, rather than the ones being discussed on that moment at the political arena. In addition, their findings sustain the description of the second phase of the policy cycle, since the study reveals that almost all think tanks work on topics that get little or no attention at all from other political actors, expecting them to become important in future occasions.

How does an effective think tank look like?

Still following the results of Fraussen and Halpin (2017), they establish four typologies of think tanks according to two main parameters: research capacity and level of organizational autonomy.

Figure 3 – Typologies of think tanks (TT)

	High autonomy	Low autonomy
High research capacity	Strategic TT	Advocacy TT
Low research capacity	Amateur TT	Sole-trader TT

Source: adapted from Fraussen and Halpin (2017).

Strategic think tanks are the most desirable type. They are equipped think tanks with great capacity to make substantial contributions to strategic policy-making. On the other hand, sole-trade think tanks are understood as those held by on-person on a website, with little influential capacity. Advocacy think tanks, also called partisan, are those harder to differentiate from interest groups. Finally, amateur think tanks are those with the highest levels of freedom, so they can push work in the direction they wish, yet they lack resources to make impact on the policy agenda.

In addition to the previously discussed contributions that think tanks bring to the community, these kind of organizations also

have the ability to fulfil other positive functions, apart from developing and promoting evidence-based policy recommendations. Thereby, at the same time that a think tank develops and promotes ideas, it can also: perform as training grounds for future policy-makers; go beyond the elite to educate the general public; create new spaces in which policy debates can be carried out together with new opportunities of networking; and represent a reliable and neutral voice where political debate might be ineffective. These secondary actions are possible because think tanks act as boundary organizations that fill the space in the borders of other institutions.

Think tank's contribution

Think tanks' genuine audience are **policy-makers and the policy advisory system** itself, given that they are the ones with enough knowledge to understand and power to apply think tanks' ideas (Dahl, 2016). In this context, the general public does not represent a core

priority, depending on the think tank, although it can also benefit from the openly provision of information and knowledge.

Nevertheless, **society** is indeed getting more attention as a source of opinion and information for think tanks. For instance, Foraus, a Swiss think tank on foreign policy, has recently launched the Policy Kitchen project, which consists on a digital platform in which any person can express and comment ideas related to current policy challenges.

In contrast, though the public might be gaining importance for think tanks, the latter are still of little meaning for the general public. According to two surveys carried out in 2018 by the consulting firm We Are Flint, one in the [UK](#) and one in the [US](#), to uncover public's perceptions about think tanks, the gap between public's demand for good policy communication and the lack of efficient supply it is a unique opportunity for think tanks. However, in order to fill the gap, think tanks must primarily earn the public's trust, which is a goal that seems to be left aside at a general level.

Appendix1 – Some European economy-oriented think tanks

Name	Object of study	Location
Adam Smith Institute	Promotes neoliberal and free market ideas	London
CESifo Group Munich	Consists of the Center for Economic Studies (CES), the ifo Institute and the CESifo GmbH (Munich Society for the Promotion of Economic Research)	Munich
DIW Berlin	Analyzes the economic and social aspects of topical issues	Berlin
The Centre for Economic Policy Research	Fosters high quality, policy-relevant economic research within Europe	London
Institute of Economic Affairs	The UK's original free-market think-tank	London
Institute for Fiscal Studies	Britain's leading independent microeconomic research institute	London
Bruegel	European think tank specialised in economics	Brussels
Círculo de empresarios	Free enterprise and the free market	Madrid
Elcano Royal Institute	Specialised in international and strategic studies conducted from a Spanish, European and global perspective	Madrid
The European Policy Centre	Analyses and promotes discussion and reflection on the issues dominating the Union's agenda	Brussels
European Centre for International Political Economy	Dedicated to trade policy and other international economic policy issues of importance to Europe	Brussels
Friends of Europe	Makes a contribution towards a better understanding of the challenges facing Europe	Brussels
German Economic Institute	Analyses, comments and press releases on economic, social and educational topics	Berlin, Brussels and Cologne
Chatham House	Engage governments, the private sector, civil society and our members in open debate and private discussions about the most significant developments in international affairs	London
European Institute at the London School of Economics	Has four interdisciplinary research themes; political economy within them	London
Lisbon Council for Economic Competitiveness	Economic and social challenges of the 21st century	Brussels
Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis	Economic scientific research	Netherlands
Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation	Research areas: democratization, social inequalities and inclusion, good governance, sustainable development, foreign relations	Istanbul

Source: www.eu.thinktankdirectory.org/

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