

## **Think tank | Britannica**

think tank, institute, corporation, or group organized for interdisciplinary research with the objective of providing advice on a diverse range of policy issues and products through the use of specialized knowledge and the activation of networks. Think tanks are distinct from government, and many are nonprofit organizations, but their work may be conducted for governmental as well as commercial clients. Projects for government clients often involve planning social policy and national defense. Commercial projects include developing and testing new technologies and new products. Funding sources include endowments, contracts, private donations, and sales of reports.

### **Origins**

The term think tank was first used in military jargon during World War II to describe a safe place where plans and strategies could be discussed, but its meaning began to change during the 1960s when it came to be used in the United States to describe private nonprofit policy research organizations. It has been proposed that the first think tank was the socialist Fabian Society, founded in Great Britain in the late 19th century, which sought to influence the country's public policy. For many years, the majority of scholars studying think tanks considered them a uniquely American phenomenon that boomed in the United States because of the perceived exceptionalism of its political system and its rich tradition of private rather than public funding, which benefited think tanks. The organizations have also flourished, however, in other industrialized countries, such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where normally, they have

tended to be fewer in number and less well funded than those in the United States. In the early 21st century, more than half the world's think tanks were in Europe and North America. European think tanks vary considerably. In Germany, for example, large, influential think tanks exist, but they are often state funded and associated with political parties or universities. In France organizations similar to think tanks are related to the government in Paris and have a conflictual but subordinate relationship with political parties. In southern Europe, think tanks began to appear in the 1970s. Research on think tanks outside the Western world indicates that an even greater variety of organizations may exist globally.

### **Characteristics of think tanks**

These organizations have a number of common characteristics. First is their policy focus, which means that their objective is to bring knowledge and policy making together by informing and, if possible, influencing the policy process. Think tanks conduct and recycle research that aims to solve policy problems and not solely to advance the theoretical debate. The second common characteristic is public purpose, which refers to the reason for the existence of think tanks. Most think tanks claim that they conduct research to inform the public and the government on how to improve public policy. Their rhetoric often claims that their work is for the common good and to educate the public. Third, the expertise and professionalism of their research staffs are the key intellectual resources of think tanks and a way of legitimizing their findings. Finally, the key activities of think tanks are usually research analysis and advice, which come in the form of publications, conferences, seminars, and workshops.

### **Typology**

The diversity of organizations that fall under the term think tank has led to the creation of typologies. At least four types of think tanks can be observed. The first is the ideological tank, which refers to organizations that have a clearly specified political or, more broadly, ideological philosophy; they resemble “advocacy tanks,” institutions founded to research and solve problems and to lobby legislators to adopt their solutions. Examples include think tanks that provide economic and political ideas for the Conservative and Labour parties in the U.K. and the think tanks affiliated with political parties in Germany. The next type is the specialist tank, which includes institutes that have a thematic focus. The most common subjects are foreign and public policy, but think tanks also specialize in other issues, such as the environment. The third category includes institutes that work not at the national level but at either the regional level, such as the U.S. state-level think tanks, or the supranational level, such as the those based in Brussels that are concerned with the affairs of the European Union (EU). The final category is that of “think and do” tanks, which, apart from their traditional research activities, are active at a more practical level, such as in the funding of charity projects. This type of think tank bears some similarity to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Think tanks can be distinguished from other organizations that are involved in the political arena. They are different from university units that offer courses but also conduct research. They are different from philanthropic organizations that place a lower priority on the funding of research than on the funding of actions directed to society in a more straightforward way. They also are different from government advisory organizations because they play a distinctive and

unique role by providing more independent intellectual support to, or new alternatives for, public policy. Nevertheless, there have been government research institutes—for example, in France—that are often described as think tanks. Finally, think tanks are different from pressure groups and interest groups. This division has become less obvious, because pressure groups increasingly develop in-house well-researched critiques of existing policy. One of the most important differences is that pressure groups have a membership of individuals as one of their central characteristics. When they do get involved in research, they do it to support their campaigns, and it does not constitute their preliminary interest.

### **Think tanks in practice**

It has been argued that think tanks do not always conform to the characteristics described above. One concern is the policy focus of some think tanks and their role as bridges between knowledge and government policies. The distinctions between think tanks and organizations such as interest groups, professional associations, consultants, and university institutes can be blurry, with the result that it is not always easy to identify an organization as a think tank. Further, in many countries, the directors and experts of think tanks are closely tied to politicians and bureaucrats; thus, in reality, they belong to the same elite. Given such circumstances, it could be difficult for a think tank to maintain a distinct enough identity as such to allow it to serve as a bridge between knowledge and government policies.

Think tanks often characterize themselves as serving the public interest, but they also have their own private interests and are dependent on their sources of

funding. Often, their concern about their image and reputation limits the spectrum of their policy proposals. It is even doubtful to what extent think tanks can determine their own research agendas, which often depend on contracts and funding opportunities.

The knowledge resources of think tanks may also be limited. Although think tanks do normally recruit experts and provide policy analysis, they often recycle rather than produce academic knowledge. Their aim is to make academic findings more palatable for busy politicians and policy makers. This means that think tanks play an important role in setting the research and policy agenda and in prioritizing some subjects over others.

### **Think tanks on the international stage**

Globalization has affected think tanks, especially by increasing their appetite and capacity for international networking. International think tanks and global networks have emerged since the 1990s. International think tanks, although they are based in one country, claim not to have any specific national links. An example is the European Policy Centre in Belgium, which declares a “multi-constituency approach” in its analysis of the EU and the effect of global policy making without preference for any particular member state. Additionally, there is a tendency for transnational communication between think tanks to occur through the creation of regional and international forums such as the Global Development Network, headquartered in New Delhi, which fosters international research and collaboration on development issues. International organizations, such as the World Bank, encourage such activities through the sponsoring of regional and international conferences that promote think tanks and their work.

Similarly, think tanks offer their services to international organizations, such as the World Bank and the EU. All this international activity has translated into a proliferation of the number of such organizations globally.

## **Challenges**

The challenges, but also the opportunities, that think tanks face are many. First, funding can be precarious, and at times of economic recession, obtaining it can be difficult. Second, the proliferation of think tanks and other NGOs has meant increased competition but also more possibilities for collaboration, better productivity, and greater audience reach. Third, the rise of the Internet has multiplied communication possibilities, but it has also facilitated the spread of information that is not always accurate. Fourth, the emergence of specialist think tanks—in areas such as biotechnology and genetics, for example—has facilitated the provision of more-focused analysis. Finally, globalization has meant an increased demand for policy advice and a new role for think tanks that are forced to study policy alternatives from around the globe and then adapt them to their local context.

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