

The Role of Think Tanks in Contemporary Policymaking: Functions, Diversity, and Global Relevance

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Abstract: This article examines the role of think tanks as integral actors in contemporary public policy amid the forces of globalisation, digital transformation, and institutional reform. It focuses on its core functions, ranging from agenda setting and developing strategic policy documents to monitoring, evaluation, and fostering civic engagement. Drawing on international experience and case studies of leading global institutions such as the Brookings Institution, Chatham House, and Bruegel, the author analyses the various forms of influence that think tanks exert on decision-making processes. The paper emphasises the significance of institutional support, transparency, scientific validity, and public communication as key factors influencing the effectiveness of these institutions. In conclusion, the article provides practical recommendations for enhancing the role of think tanks, both in Uzbekistan and beyond.

Keywords: Think tanks, public policy, policy analysis, institutional reform, civil society, monitoring, strategic planning.

In the context of globalisation, digital transformation, and an increasing public demand for accountability, think tanks have come to occupy a pivotal role in the development and implementation of public policy. By delivering evidence-based solutions and promoting civic engagement, these institutions are particularly relevant in countries undergoing institutional reforms.

Think tanks contribute to policy processes by shaping agendas, drafting strategic documents, conducting monitoring and evaluation, and fostering public dialogue. Their work spans various domains, including economic policy, social welfare, environmental sustainability, security, and governance. While many think tanks operate as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), others function within governmental structures or under private sector sponsorship.¹

Serving as intellectual intermediaries between government authorities, civil society, and academia, think tanks are increasingly recognised as a 'fifth estate'—alongside the legislative, executive, judicial branches, and the media—due to their capacity to influence political decisions.²

¹ James G. McGann and Robert Kent Weaver (eds.), *Think Tanks and Civil Societies: Catalysts for Ideas and Action*, Transaction Publishers, (Google Books) <https://books.google.co.uz/books?id=KEsr4yEGZEsC&pg=PA51>.

² The Fifth Estate, Go To Think Tank, March 27, 2020, <https://www.gotothinktank.com/new-blog/2020/3/27/the-fifth-estate>.

Core Functions of Think Tanks

1. **Policy Research:** The empirical investigation of political issues using data analysis, international comparisons, and policy modelling. For instance, climate-focused think tanks assess global temperature trends and develop country-specific strategies for green energy.³
2. **Development of Policy Recommendations:** Based on analytical findings, think tanks produce strategic recommendations, concept papers, and white papers for decision-makers. A notable example is fiscal reform proposals that lead to tax incentives for small businesses.⁴
3. **Public Communication:** Translating complex expert knowledge into accessible formats to enhance political literacy and encourage civic participation. This includes tools such as infographics, podcasts, and social media-based public consultations to explain constitutional reforms.⁵
4. **Dialogue Facilitation:** Providing a platform for exchange among policymakers, academics, civil society actors, and the media to enhance transparency in policy processes. For example, policy roundtables hosted by think tanks enable MPs, journalists, and NGOs to collaborate on examining healthcare legislation.⁶

Organisational Models and Funding Structures

Think tanks exhibit considerable diversity in their institutional forms, funding mechanisms, ideological orientations, and governance structures. Some are embedded in universities, others function as independent NGOs, and several operate under government institutions or corporate sponsorship. Corporate think tanks, in particular, are financed by the private sector and often focus on industry-relevant policy challenges.

Typology of Think Tanks

Think tanks vary significantly in terms of ideological affiliations, funding sources, thematic focus areas, and target audiences. This diversity ensures a broad range of expertise is available to practitioners, with increasingly hybrid models emerging that combine features of academic, governmental, and advocacy-based institutions.⁷ These organisations differ in scale, political ambition, and the extent of their influence on policymaking.⁸

Typology and Influence Mechanisms of Contemporary Think Tanks

Based on their core characteristics, international scholars have classified think tanks into five principal categories:

1. **Independent Non-profit Think Tanks** – Operating autonomously from the government and serving the interests of civil society.
2. **University-affiliated Research Institutes** – Embedded within or closely connected to academic institutions.

³ McGann, J. G. (2021). *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*. University of Pennsylvania, Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program. Available at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/entities/publication/9f1730fa-da55-40bd-a1f4-1c2b2346b753>

⁴ Baertl, A., Gilbreath, D., Nicolle, S. (2023). *Think Tank State of the Sector 2023*. On Think Tanks. Available at: <https://onthinktanks.org/publication/think-tank-state-of-the-sector-2023>

⁵ Kolabtree Blog. (2018). *5 Think Tanks That Have Successfully Impacted Public Policy*. URL: <https://www.kolabtree.com/blog/5-think-tanks-that-have-successfully-impacted-public-policy>

⁶ Chatham House. (2024). *About Us*. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us>

⁷ Singer, J. D. (2010, August 13). *Think Tanks, Foreign Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*. Brookings Institution. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20100821094149/http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2010/0813_think_tanks_singer.aspx

⁸ Grindle, S. B. & Thomas, J. W. (2005, September 9). *Think Tanks: Definitions, Development, and Diversification*. Asian Development Bank Institute. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20070206171015/http://www.adbi.org/discussion-paper/2005/09/09/1356.think.tanks/think.tanks.definitions.development.and.diversification/>

3. **Government-sponsored or Government-established Centres** – Functioning under state patronage or institutional frameworks.
4. **Corporate Think Tanks** – Established by or affiliated with the private sector to inform business-relevant policy directions.
5. **Political Party-affiliated Research Units** – Supporting the analytical and campaign agendas of political parties or individual candidates.⁹

Today, think tanks play a vital and irreplaceable role in shaping public policy. They contribute to evidence-based policymaking, provide ideological foundations for political competition, and articulate the necessity and direction of reforms. In doing so, they have become integral components of contemporary institutional governance.

According to the **Open Think Tank Directory**, the thematic distribution of global think tanks is as follows: 12.4% focus on social policy; 11.2% on trade, economy, and finance; 11.0% on governance, transparency, and accountability; 10.4% on environment, natural resources, and energy; 8.5% on law, justice, and human rights; 8.2% on international relations; 6.2% on education; 6.1% on defence, peacebuilding, and security; 4.7% on healthcare; 4.1% on technology and innovation; 4.0% on gender equality; 3.9% on food security and agriculture; 3.4% on private sector development; 2.8% on media, culture, and sport; 2.3% on transport and infrastructure; and 0.7% on other areas.¹⁰

Key Mechanisms of Policy Influence

Think tanks exert their influence on policymaking processes through a variety of channels, including:

1. **Agenda Setting.** Think tanks play a strategic role in identifying and analysing pressing societal issues, elevating them to the public and political discourse, and helping to define the national and sectoral policy agenda. As thought leaders, they introduce and advance new policy concepts, such as raising awareness on climate change, digital transformation, or gender equity, thereby shaping the future of public policy.
2. **Policy Recommendation Development.** Grounded in empirical research and international best practices, think tanks produce tailored policy recommendations for decision-makers.¹¹ White papers, policy briefs, and strategic frameworks developed by think tanks often serve as the basis for government initiatives and reform strategies.¹²
3. **Dialogue Platforms.** By convening policymakers, civil society representatives, business leaders, and the broader public, think tanks facilitate inclusive decision-making through forums, roundtables, and public consultations. These spaces enable deliberative processes and consensus-building on key policy matters.
4. **Independent Monitoring and Evaluation.** Think tanks assess the implementation and effectiveness of existing policies and government programmes, thereby enhancing public accountability, supporting anti-corruption efforts, and informing future policy revisions.

⁹ See McGann, J. G. (2021). *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*. University of Pennsylvania, Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program. Available at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/entities/publication/9f1730fa-da55-40bd-a1f4-1c2b2346b753>; Also see: Baertl, A., Gilbreath, D., & Nicolle, S. (2023). *Think Tank State of the Sector 2023*. On Think Tanks. Available at: <https://onthinktanks.org/publication/think-tank-state-of-the-sector-2023>

¹⁰ On Think Tanks. "Topics Covered by Think Tanks Worldwide." *Open Think Tank Directory*, <https://onthinktanks.org/topics-covered/>.

¹¹ Ramya Sriram, "5 Think Tanks That Have Successfully Impacted Public Policy," *Kolabtree Blog*, 2018, <https://www.kolabtree.com/blog/5-think-tanks-that-have-successfully-impacted-public-policy/>.

¹² *Think Tanks. Resources for Policy Briefs*. 2025. University of Pittsburgh Health Sciences Library System. <https://hsls.libguides.com/policy-briefs-resources/think-tanks#s-lg-box-34214279>.

5. **Public Communication and Civic Engagement.** Through strategic collaboration with the media and the use of accessible formats, such as podcasts, infographics, video content, and simplified publications, think tanks broaden the public's understanding of complex political issues and cultivate a culture of civic participation. The Development Strategy Centre of Uzbekistan is one such institution that actively engages with the public through consultations, public discussions, and civic monitoring of the country's development strategies.¹³

6. **The Global Landscape of Think Tanks: International Practices and Leading Institutions**

According to the *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*, the United States is home to 2,203 think tanks, representing the overwhelming majority of the 2,397 located across North America.¹⁴ Complementing this, the educational evaluation platform *AcademicInfluence.com* compiled a ranking of the 50 most influential think tanks globally. Notably, the top fifteen are all headquartered in the United States.¹⁵ These include:

- **Brookings Institution**, whose affiliates include former U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice;
- **The Heritage Foundation**, known for its cooperation with Forbes Chairman Steve Forbes;
- **Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)**, counting among its members U.S. President Joe Biden, former President Bill Clinton, and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev;
- **Cato Institute**, which has employed Nobel laureates such as James M. Buchanan, Friedrich Hayek, and Vernon L. Smith.

The list further features:

- Ten think tanks from the United Kingdom,
- Two from Belgium,
- One each from Germany, Canada, India, Australia, and France.

Profiles of Leading Think Tanks

- **Brookings Institution (USA):** Regarded as one of the world's most influential think tanks, Brookings covers areas such as economics, foreign policy, global development, governance, and urban policy. Despite claims of political neutrality, over 90% of its staff's political donations support Democratic Party candidates. The institute employs over 300 international experts.¹⁶
- **Chatham House (UK):** Established in 1920 as an independent non-profit organisation in London, Chatham House focuses on international affairs, migration, cybersecurity, race and gender equality, and post-Brexit policy analysis.¹⁷
- **Bruegel (EU, Belgium):** Founded in 2005 in Brussels, Bruegel is a premier European think tank specialising in economic policy within the EU context and is internationally recognised for its economic research.¹⁸
- **European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR):** A pan-European think tank based in Berlin with offices in London, Paris, Madrid, Rome, Warsaw, and Sofia. It was founded by British political scientist Mark Leonard in 2007 and concentrates on EU foreign and security policy.¹⁹

¹³ See Strategy.uz (2025). *Activities of the Development Strategy Centre*. Available at: <https://strategy.uz>

¹⁴ McGann, J. G. (2020). *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*. TTCSP Global Go To Think Tank Index Reports, no. 18, University of Pennsylvania, 2021. <https://repository.upenn.edu/entities/publication/9f1730fa-da55-40bd-a1f4-1c2b2346b753>.

¹⁵ AcademicInfluence.com. "2018–2023 Influential Think Tanks." *AcademicInfluence.com*. Accessed 2025. <https://academicinfluence.com/inflection/study-guides/influential-think-tanks>.

¹⁶ Brookings Institution. (2025). *Brookings Institution*. <https://www.brookings.edu>.

¹⁷ Chatham House (2025). *Chatham House*. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>

¹⁸ Bruegel (2025). *Bruegel*. <https://www.bruegel.org/>

Human Capital and Capacity Building Initiatives

Many prominent think tanks operate training and capacity-building programmes aimed at civil servants, young analysts, and researchers. Programmes such as fellowships, internships, and leadership development initiatives—prominently offered by Brookings²⁰ and Chatham House²¹—help cultivate a culture of policy analysis and build human capital for effective governance. These initiatives also strengthen the institutional role of think tanks in shaping state policy.²²

Think Tanks as Intellectual Resources for Policymaking

In the face of global challenges, think tanks have become pivotal institutions that provide a scientific foundation for informed decision-making. They generate evidence-based policy options, advance accountability principles, and shape the architecture of modern governance, acting as intellectual bridges between government and civil society.²³

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Think tanks increasingly serve as vital contributors to public policy development and implementation, facilitating dialogue among academia, government, and society. In light of growing institutional reforms, geopolitical complexity, and rising public demand for accountability, think tanks are well-positioned as sources of evidence-informed decision-making and drivers of sustainable development.

To enhance their impact and institutional sustainability, the following strategic measures are recommended:

- Expanding mechanisms for public and private grant funding, encouraging philanthropic and corporate support, and fostering long-term partnerships with international donors will reduce dependence on single funding sources and protect the analytical independence of think tanks.
- Systematic integration with universities and research institutes can provide access to scientific resources, qualified personnel, and innovative methodologies—thereby cultivating a new generation of analysts and promoting evidence-based governance.
- Establishing open-access infrastructure for statistical and administrative data is critical for enhancing the reliability of research and building public trust. Transparency reinforces accountability and strengthens the authority of think tanks in public discourse.
- To maximise societal impact, think tanks should invest in modern information dissemination channels. Multimedia formats such as podcasts, video briefings, infographics, and popular science publications will make policy analysis more accessible to the broader public and amplify its relevance in national debates.

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²¹ Chatham House. *Academy Fellowships*. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/our-people/academy-fellows>

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