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SIX FACTORS THAT CAN ENABLE THINK TANKS TO DEVELOP

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the findings of 2023 Think Tank State of the Sector Report published by On Think Tanks. The author outlines six crucial factors for a prosperous think tank environment. As per the author's perspective, these factors have the potential to stimulate more in-depth research endeavors, ultimately contributing to the advancement and success of the sector.

This year's [Think tank state of the sector report](#) shows that think tanks' outlooks are generally pessimistic. This is particularly evident in the results from Asia, in which the experts' expectations of the political and funding contexts in their countries are far from optimistic. It's noteworthy that the concerns summarised in the report on the Asian region are, in some respects, consistent with the issues and challenges highlighted in my 2022 [article](#) on Armenia's think tank sector.

The report is based on the results of a think tank survey, which is analysed globally and by region. It's a thought-provoking information resource, and a strong foundation for initiating and implementing deeper sector studies. In particular, further research is needed into the causes of the problems identified, as well as the possible solutions. We must also remember that different countries will face specific challenges and contexts, even within a single region.

In this article, reflecting on the findings of the report and my own experience in Armenia, I'd like to outline six that could create a favorable environment in which think tanks could develop. These factors could act as a catalyst for more comprehensive research studies, which could enhance the prosperity of the sector. They could also act as indicators in assessing the state of the sector in specific countries.

1. Public funds

For the natural development of the think tank sector, it's of great **importance that countries have public funds**. This creates opportunities to attract the financial resources necessary for think tanks to operate.

To reduce dependence on foreign donors, such public funds should predominantly be raised locally. This would help to ensure independence in the ideas industry and to guide the intellectual resources of think tanks towards the service of endogenous agendas of national importance and to countries' public policies.

2. Philanthropy

The next important factor is the existence of **a culture of philanthropy**. It's known that the financial inputs of many think tanks around the world are mainly or significantly generated by donations from individual citizens, the business sector or adherent institutions.

Therefore, the existence of such a culture also plays a favourable role in ensuring the continuous activity of think tanks, aiding their functional and institutional stability.

The extent to which the culture of donations exists within a country can also be correlated with the existence of legislation that promotes it, for example, in the form of an appropriate reduction in taxes. It might also be associated with the well-being of a country and of its business sector, and with a country's economic progress. To some degree, these things also correlate with the culture of public policy.

3. Professional management of public policy

The extent of a country's reliance on the professional management of public policy is also an important factor in creating an environment that's conducive to think tanks' development.

In this context, it's important for a country to involve experts in the public administration system through the application of the so-called 'revolving door' principle. This allows experts to invest and apply their expert knowledge in practical policy development and implementation, improving public policy.

Later, they can return to expert work in think tanks, bringing with them richer practical experience, skills and networks of decision-makers in the management system.

4. Openness of public policy

The degree of openness in the public policy of any given country . This implies that think tanks' intellectual products are being used by decision makers, and that there's a culture of evidence-based policy-making and a level of involvement the independent expert community in the decision-making process.

The development of the relationship between decision-makers and the expert community is . However, often, those responsible for practical policy development and implementation are not sufficiently open to hearing alternative opinions and considering the advice of experts.

Bridging knowledge and policy and, thus, improving public policy involves improving the willingness of decision-makers in political and business communities to interact with think tanks. This could create opportunities for think tanks to attract additional funding through research contracts with business and the public sector.

5. Academic institutions and higher education

The quality of academic institutions and higher education is also a significant factor in the establishment of the think tank sector. Such institutions prepare the future professionals, experts and researchers who will later work in the sector.

Therefore, the higher the academic quality and the these institutions in any country, the more opportunities there are to equip think tanks with professionals.

6. The media

Think tanks are of great importance in clearly presenting, explaining, and interpreting complex and multi-layered political processes for a wider audience. Equally, **the media can also play a significant role in familiarising the public with think tanks and expert knowledge.**

Thus, the development of partnerships and professionally organised relationships between the media and the expert community could have a major impact upon the think tank sector in these challenging

times and in a rapidly changing information environment. Such a relationship could enhance the significance of expert opinion and increase the public's trust in it.

Further research

Although the six factors proposed in this article don't represent a comprehensive list – and are certainly not intended as a to solve all the sector's problems – they are universal. Thus, they could help to improve the sector.

A more thorough study is needed to investigate the causes and potential solutions for the problems identified by the experts in this year's state of the sector report. In the case of such research, we should identify and consider a wider number of factors and, based on these, develop and recommend a specific toolkit for improving the think tank sectors in specific countries.