How-To Guide for Economic Think Tanks

Lessons in Policy Influence and Organizational Vitality
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONTRIBUTORS

James G. McGann, Ph.D., Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania, United States
Nishan de Mel, Verité Research, Sri Lanka
Alban Hashani, Ph.D., Riinvest Institute, Kosovo
Patrick Mardini, Ph.D., Lebanese Institute for Market Studies, Lebanon
Kwarne Owino, Institute of Economic Affairs, Kenya
Julia Pomares, Ph.D., Centro de Implementacion de Politicas Publicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento, Argentina
Ali Salman, Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs, Malaysia
Robin Sitoula, Samriddhi Foundation, Nepal
Ruslan Stefanov, Center for the Study of Democracy, Bulgaria
Marek Tatała, Fundacja Forum Obywatelskiego Rozwoju (Civil Development Forum), Poland
Anonymous, Unirule Institute of Economics (天则), China

LEAD AUTHOR

Kim Eric Bettcher, Ph.D., Director of Knowledge Management, CIPE

EDITORS

Anna Kompanek, Director, Global Programs, CIPE
Adam Sachs, Associate Program Officer, Global Programs, CIPE
Louisa Tomar, Program Officer, Global Programs, CIPE
This How-To Guide for Economic Think Tanks: Lessons in Policy Influence and Organizational Vitality captures insights from the experience of the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) and its think tank partners from around the globe. CIPE’s mission is to strengthen democracy around the globe through private enterprise and market-oriented reform, fulfilling our vision of a world where democracy delivers the freedom and opportunity for all to prosper. CIPE does this by partnering with local business associations, chambers of commerce, universities, think tanks, and advocacy groups to advance democratic and economic reforms worldwide. CIPE is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and currently has regional offices and representatives in more than a dozen countries, as well as a vast network of partners past and present.

Over the past three decades, CIPE has supported independent economic think tanks to help them become leading voices of reform in emerging democracies and closing spaces for civil society. For example, in 1997 with CIPE support, Riniest in Kosovo began a landmark policy study that introduced a new standard of polling and analysis for economic planning, and helped form and train ten new business associations. In Nepal, CIPE worked with Samriddhi Foundation to develop the Nepal Economic Growth Agenda (NEGA), an annual effort since 2011 to identify short-term as well as long-term policy bottlenecks that hinder Nepal’s economic growth. Samriddhi’s recommendations continue to be implemented and its economic research has become an important source of independent policy analysis. CIPE and Centro de Implementacion de Politicas Publicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento (CIPPEC) in Argentina have collaborated to promote good governance and anti-corruption reforms in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the region and business globally as part of the Think Tank (T20) process of the Group of 20. In 2018, CIPPEC contributed directly to the development of recommendations for the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group on “Promoting Transparency and Anti-corruption in State-Owned Enterprises,” which led the G20 countries to recognize the importance of addressing integrity in SOEs.

The How-To Guide for Economic Think Tanks is aimed to inspire new and nascent think tanks around the world to be a part of the solutions to the world’s greatest challenges. It shows examples of think tanks that have distinguished themselves in challenging political and economic environments and that there are lessons to be learned from their experiences. Without making light of the challenges, it is often in these environments that the talent, ideas, and credibility of think tanks are most needed and most influential. While young think tanks can nimbly navigate many problems, this guide gives them a grounding to orient themselves, build supportive relationships, and assert their voices.

The Center for International Private Enterprise wishes to thank our partners featured in this resource who graciously gave their time and shared their stories with us. We are inspired by the work you do and the work of all our think tank partners across the globe and look forward to supporting your ongoing efforts to shape inclusive, democratic societies that deliver prosperity for all. CIPE and its partner think tanks have contributed to good governance, policy analysis, and reforms at the local, national, regional and international levels.

For more information about on-going initiatives and how to get involved visit the Resources section at the end for links to CIPE’s and each organizations’ resources.
The last decade has witnessed a rapid democratic backsliding marked by declining trust in government, institutions, and business and a shrinking space for a pluralistic civil society. As trust in public and private institutions wanes, increased polarization has greatly reduced reliance on facts, empirical evidence or non-partisan analysis in economic discourse. Even as these trends restrict the development of rules-based, open economies and responsive governance, they highlight the necessity of independent actors who can make sense of policy choices.

During these times of low public confidence, think tanks can help navigate the uncertainty by producing and sharing balanced analysis of policies and their impact. They provide alternatives to information monopolies and misinformation that can distract from meaningful solutions. Whether in day-to-day decision-making or in times of crisis and disruption, policymakers and the public can turn to think tanks for reliable information and structured policy options. Think tanks bring fresh perspectives and attention to new possibilities and policy alternatives and inject authoritative, insightful, and digestible analysis into public discourse.

In young democracies and transitional economies in particular, think tanks play vital roles in raising the quality of policymaking. These institutes bring new ideas to the attention of policymakers and the public, and new perspectives to the assessment and formulation of policies. Moreover, think tanks support cost-benefit analysis by weighing alternatives when government has competing priorities and limited resources.

Think tanks add value by supplementing political debate with policy analysis. Policy analysis clarifies how policy objectives will be met and weighs the implications of alternative solutions. This analysis offers a way out of purely partisan reasoning. Think tanks’ analyses ground political debates in reality and help uncover innovative solutions to societal problems.

Armed with the information that think tanks provide, policymakers and regulators can make better decisions. Civil society and the media can advocate for citizens’ interests. Inclusive markets can thrive. Members of the public can become more effective participants in the democratic process. Each of these groups becomes less dependent on prevailing or partisan sources of information and more empowered to identify policy choices that achieve social objectives in a cost-effective manner.

One of the great advantages of democracy is the freedom to openly debate policy ideas. Open debate allows the processing of complex information that is dispersed throughout society and the economy. Think tanks aid in gathering this information and broadening debate. They raise new issues, voice alternative viewpoints, and expand policy options. In so doing, they contribute to inclusive democratic dialogue for broad-based societal benefit.

This guide provides practical tools and peer experiences to support nascent and new think tanks in emerging democracies and closing spaces to tackle today’s greatest challenges. Illustrative cases from partners in Malaysia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Kosovo, China, Poland, Kenya, Bulgaria, Argentina, and Lebanon are meant to inspire think tank leaders with insights that will bring their organizations to the forefront of the policy process. Each section of the guide focuses on core themes: role of think tanks; strategic positioning; stakeholder relations and communications; and influencing the policy process.
James G. McGann, Ph.D. is director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the Wharton School and School of Arts and Sciences, University of Pennsylvania. He edits the Go To Think Tanks Index and has worked with many think tanks in the United States and globally. In this conversation with CIPE, Dr. McGann answers some key questions frequently asked by individuals starting or managing think tanks.

What advice would you have for new or nascent think tanks, or think tanks operating in difficult environments?

The new business model is that you cannot have a think tank executive that learns the role on the job. Think tanks need leaders who come with a set of experiences in this highly competitive environment. In the past, people who were researchers or were well-organized managers became the presidents of think tanks. That is not going to work anymore. The margins are too thin, the competition is too intense, and for those reasons, the people who lead think tanks must be seasoned executives who are social entrepreneurs.

It is a different type of leadership. Such a person is not an academic, but someone who has social media savvy, who is an effective business manager, and who has an entrepreneurial spirit both in terms of raising funds and as a
policy entrepreneur that can put together a team. Consistently producing quality research is also essential because you are only as good as your last good idea. This is the product of a skilled team that knows where the information is and what technology it can use to provide timely and useful insights to diverse audiences.

What are some considerations for financial sustainability for think tanks in emerging markets?

Think tanks often fall into the trap of focusing on money when discussing their priorities. Yet, having more money by itself does not make for better organizations. Especially now, with the power of data and technological innovation, think tanks may not need a lot of money to be highly disruptive and effective, so it is important to focus on what is beyond the financial aspect.

As the traditional sources of funding for think tanks are drying up, what are the new potential funding streams that they should be thinking about while staying independent?

If you are creating value and targeting the right people and can monetize that, you will reap benefits. In a world where you can raise money online for your sick cat, you should be able to raise money for important think tank work if you can articulate it well. The issues are compelling enough that crowdsourcing can be an option and some think tanks are doing it effectively.

In terms of both sustainability and independence, diversification of funding is key. The only way to be truly independent is to have a diversified base of funding where no single donor can dictate the research agenda. However, money is not the only dimension that assures independence. Independence is linked to three key factors: legal independence within a proper regulatory framework; financial independence with a mechanism to assure that the institution can be funded; and institutional independence to create a firewall between executives and scholars.

What is more, it is important to understand that diversified funding is meaningless if there is no adherence to basic social science research standards. As is the case with China, for instance, if there is no adherence to critical thinking, replication of results, and access to data, what does independence really mean?
Do you see any positives in this rapidly changing environment?

There are many positives. Clearly, there is a role for think tanks to harness data analytics. Think thanks are uniquely positioned to be the arbiter of what is fact and what is fiction. Increasingly, policymakers are relying on them because they do not know who or what information to trust. Institutions can build on that credibility to reposition themselves and harness those technologies to enhance research and fundraising. Effective communication will then make major contributions toward maintaining relevance.

You mention how crucial the internet and new technologies have become in terms of messaging and marketing. How can think tanks adapt the delivery of their message to be more sustainable in the online era?

From meetings I have had in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa, the reality is that you can do this very effectively and cheaply. The fundamental problem is the academic model of a think tank, which I think is dead. Ideas matter and research and analysis will continue to be the core mission of think tanks but ideas only matter when they are in the right form, in the right hands and at the right time. In an information rich world it is not enough to have great ideas you need to know how to promote and disseminate them. Think tanks need to be smarter, faster, and more mobile to be more successful. For instance, the New York Times created the Idea Lab, which transformed the newspaper in terms of how it presents and delivers content. The content did not change; how they delivered it has changed and they now have more subscribers than ever. That is what think tanks need to do. You can produce a summary of a publication in a digital media format to draw people in, and then hopefully they buy the book or read the policy paper.

In terms of the 8,000 think tanks in the world, the majority are academic but those that are successful and pushing the envelope harness technology to increase resources. The bottom line is that government funding for think tanks globally is going to dry up and international donors are going to dry up as well. It is, therefore, more crucial than ever to develop funding models based on new technologies in those regions where the resources and traditions of civil society and philanthropy are not well developed. The implications can be catastrophic if they do not adapt.

Have you seen successful strategies that think tanks apply to stay relevant with different audiences, be it policymakers, the business community, or the public?

I hate to be negative, but most think tanks are oblivious to this. I think ignoring the general population as an audience is a mistake. You need to have a highly sophisticated and diversified set of products and you need to have sophisticated targeting, marketing, and distribution — and technology makes that possible. There are mechanisms you can leverage to increase your effectiveness in segmenting and reaching target audiences, but most think tanks are oblivious to this.

There are those that have pieces of it, like the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (Fundaçao Getúlio Vargas, FGV) in Brazil. In an election year, they were able to tell in real time, in every state and municipality in Brazil using big data, what the primary interests of citizens were. In Mexico, Ethos Public Policy Lab created a comic book on corruption and had over a million copies in circulation focusing on the importance of confronting corruption. These are encouraging examples.
The Role of Think Tanks

Think tanks act as brokers of policy knowledge, centers of research, and incubators of new ideas. As brokers, they channel knowledge between scholars, policymakers, and civil society. As applied researchers, they convert multidisciplinary theory and empirics into insights and recommendations packaged to inform and meet decision-makers’ needs. As innovators, they expand the policy world’s perspectives and possibilities — for example, showing the power of entrepreneurial solutions. At their best, think tanks provide information that is credible, relevant, and easily understood.

In young democracies and emerging markets, think tanks can play a central role as reform leaders. They catalyze change by raising awareness of key economic issues, initiating discussion, and showing policymakers a way forward. Their expertise and leadership can strengthen and mobilize civil society.

In particular, economic research institutes have established themselves as respected advisors on policy frameworks of market economies. Economic institutes explain the benefits and functioning of market systems, publicize the barriers to open markets, and chart a direction for market-oriented reforms. At times, think tanks are also among the only sources of reliable economic data. In places where governments dominate economic policymaking through a closed process, think tanks enable less centralized decision making by widening access to data and information.

In envisioning reform, think tanks have powerful tools of institutional analysis. Analyzing the “rules of the game” and the incentives that shape economic behavior, they can identify issues affecting long-term development, design alternatives, and develop positive governance frameworks. Instead of treating policy symptoms, think tanks uncover the underlying causes of problems to recommend reforms that can work.

CIPE has partnered with a diverse cohort of think tanks over the years. The institutes featured in this guide provide examples of the numerous roles think tanks can play in addressing needs for objective analysis and creative solutions.

Frequent Roles Played by Think Tanks

- Provide a place where ideas can be developed freely & independently
- Raise awareness of important issues
- Provide alternative policy solutions, supported by evidence
- Inform and educate policymakers, the public, business, & civil society
- Encourage public debate and facilitate exchanges of ideas
- Monitor and evaluate effects of policies and government programs
ENTREPRENEURIAL DRIVE IN A THINK TANK

Selling a Product, Knowing Your Customer

Ali Salman, CEO, Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), Malaysia; Founder, Policy Research Institute of Market Economy (PRIME), Pakistan; CEO, Islam and Liberty Network.

In what ways are new think tanks similar to startups?

New think tanks and startups share the need to mobilize resources and propel a vision in the face of great uncertainty. When launching a think tank, one takes great risks to promote a set of ideas to potential funders, much like when an entrepreneur pitches a business plan to venture capitalists for seed money. In Asian and other societies that lack a charitable culture for think tanks, an entrepreneurial leader is even more crucial for a think tank to succeed.

How is running a think tank similar to operating a business?

As with running a business, managing a think tank requires professionalism, such as the specialization of staff roles. However, while businesses can point to profits, a think tank’s measure of success is much more qualitative. Think tanks are looking at cultural changes, public education, or policy influence as indicators of success.
How should a think tank identify its key product: a research agenda?

The research agenda must be crafted so that it is relevant to the political environment in which the think tank exists. Think tank staff should consult with local stakeholders, such as political parties, academics, and journalists, to ensure the research agenda’s relevance. By engaging with stakeholders, think tank staff will maximize the relevance of its research and eventual publications.

How can think tanks measure success, especially in their first few years?

In the initial years of a think tank, outreach capacity can serve as one indicator of success. The greater the outreach capacity, the more likely one is to educate and influence stakeholders. Other measures of success include building policy communities and fostering dialogue. Though challenging to achieve, a change in legislation would be the superb validation of a think tank’s policy impact.

What is the value of creating a community of like-minded policy researchers?

Creating a community of like-minded researchers helps foster the germination and cross-fertilization of ideas. In a resource-constrained environment, having a network of researchers and scholars working on similar issues in different countries is crucial. Such work need not necessarily involve a lot of labor. For example, my participation in the Islam Liberty Network involves just 1.5 full-time equivalent persons.

How can think tanks cooperate with the private sector?

Think tanks working on economic policy issues will find it especially valuable to build strong relationships with the private sector — including business associations and chambers of commerce. Business and trade groups have a lot of power when it comes to influencing the government policy, but are often lacking in research capabilities and skills. This is when a think tank’s research and analysis can contribute to forging meaningful partnerships with the private sector.
AN INTERVIEW WITH

ROBIN SITOULA

EVOLVING AS A THINK TANK

From Youth Civil Society Organization to Trusted Public Policy Think Tank

Robin Sitoula, Co-founder and Executive Director, Samriddhi Foundation, Nepal

Why was Samriddhi Foundation established?

Samriddhi was founded in 2006 as an economic policy institute. Coming on the heels of a civil war and the reestablishment of democracy, many Nepalese activists were focused on civil and political issues. However, people did not talk about economic rights. The founders believed in addressing sorely needed economic growth and created Samriddhi to focus on Nepal’s economy. Samriddhi means “prosperity” and the founders wanted the think tank to be an advocate for prosperity.

Samriddhi’s message was timely. Nepal’s economy was unstable; there were a lot of labor strikes, and many workers were emigrating. While the mainstream economic development discourse centered around programs to eradicate poverty, Samriddhi was advancing prosperity at a time when “entrepreneurship,” “profits,” and “markets” were considered negative words in Nepal.
Has the organization evolved since?
What are some of Samriddhi’s current areas of work?

Samriddhi’s founding mission was to create a free and prosperous Nepal. That has not changed. However, Samriddhi’s goals have evolved over time to reflect changing public needs and demands. Initially, Samriddhi aimed to shine a positive light on concepts such as markets, profit and entrepreneurship through mentoring young entrepreneurs.

Samriddhi currently focuses on enabling the market mechanism and entrepreneurship in Nepal through policy reforms. Other areas of focus include economic governance and fostering values to support a free society. The goal is to promote the entire entrepreneurship ecosystem, and to nurture policies that will catalyze entrepreneurship.

How do you leverage Nepali youth in your current policy work?

Youth have been an integral part of Samriddhi since its founding. The Foundation has been successful because it continues to welcome new youth through its internship programs, while retaining ties with the thousands of graduates of its programs — many of whom have created their own businesses. Many interns and former Foundation staff have also built careers in public policy. They are contributing to an intellectual environment that favors business, entrepreneurship, and democracy.

How did Samriddhi transition from a youth-focused organization to a public policy think tank?

Samriddhi began as a youth-oriented entrepreneurship organization. Many young participants in Samriddhi’s nascent stages then became involved in politics, public policy, and the media, creating an important alumni network that has helped grow the Foundation.

Aided by its alumni network, Samriddhi started to receive requests for policy ideas and advice from the political and business community. The Foundation has also been nimble in responding to changing demands. For example, with the help of CIPE, Samriddhi developed a Nepali economic growth agenda, as well as an Investment Board.

What were some of the biggest challenges for building trust with policymakers?
What are some lessons learned?

In the early days of the Foundation, the biggest struggle was understanding how the policy process in Nepal works. Building relations with the various stakeholders — politicians, bureaucrats, business leaders — involved in Nepal’s economic policy process was also challenging. Large businesses, in particular, did not warm to Samriddhi’s mission as they wanted to protect their markets from entrepreneurs.

To meet these challenges, Samriddhi built its credibility by always being there to support policymakers when they needed research help or ideas. Samriddhi also remained politically neutral and independent of political parties or particular business interests by focusing on the national interest. By continuing to provide policy-relevant insights, Samriddhi has been able to build a reputation for delivering timely and useful advice.

What advice would you give other civil society or youth-focused organizations interested in transitioning to public policy?

Building a think tank is challenging and requires a lot of patience and having a good team to see through these challenges is absolutely essential. Staff should believe in the organization’s mission, and the think tank should have a clear and simple mission. While the think tank should respond to the demands and needs of its audience, it must maintain independence and be seen as a credible source. Finally, it is important to have a good board of directors.
Can you describe the motivation behind the founding of Verité?

Verité was founded to address the closing of democratic space during a pivotal period in Sri Lanka’s history. While 2009 saw the end of the 26-year civil war in Sri Lanka, the brutal military defeat of the Tamil Tigers also presaged a new era where the government gained license from the populace to pare democratic norms and institutions. As the government began to dominate social and political narratives, charisma and power, rather than information and data, increasingly emerged as the foundations of truth. Verité — which is the French word for truth — was founded to fill Sri Lanka’s need for accurate information and data.

What are some key areas of focus for Verité?

Verité works in four major areas: economics, law, politics, and media. These four areas are interconnected. For example, discussing the media requires an understanding of economics, law and politics. Assessing the media is quite fundamental because it is a source of understanding varied perspectives on politics in Sri Lanka. Discussions in English, Tamil, and Sinhalese are quite different from one another in Sri Lanka.
What is the difference between the “think tank” and “do tank” parts of Verité?

Think tanks work on a spectrum that is bounded on one end by research (discovery), and the other end by deployment (solutions). In the middle lies the design (development) space. Think tanks can serve all three areas, but universities tend to have a comparative advantage in the discovery space, and to some extent in the design space. Think tanks have a comparative advantage in the deployment space, with a distinct ability to influence the design of policy as well. One analogy that helps to paint the distinction is that of the physicist and engineer. While the physicist most often works on discovery, the engineer is most often involved in proposing solutions.

Verité combines both research and consulting services. On a spectrum ranging from discovery to solution, Verité works more towards the solutions.

How does Verité work to provide solutions?

In practical terms, this means that Verité leverages its access to the conversation, instead of being reliant on access to power. This is important as think tanks have traditionally depended on access to political power. In a country such as Sri Lanka, where political power is not stable and constant, the way to build influence is through conversation-building with the public. The ability to inform and influence the conversation matters more in day-to-day life as elections generate accountability only once every six years. As such, presenting research in a way that builds public understanding and public conversation is a critical element of success.

How does Verité engage with various actors, such as the media, policymakers, or the private sector?

Verité often begins to influence the conversation with short (3-page) documents or articles produced for social media and the press. These initial writings will sometimes pique the interest of others, who ask Verité for more detailed analyses. In the end, what started as a few media posts resulted in Verité helping to draft legislation. For example, Verité helped design Sri Lanka’s maternity leave scheme, whereby the government contributes 50% to maternity leave funds to deter employers from a bias against hiring women of childbearing age.
Strategic Positioning

Every think tank makes strategic choices and trade-offs that depend on its purposes, constituencies, and context. A good strategy differentiates a think tank from its peers but aligns the components of its operations toward a common purpose. Ultimately, CIPE views think tanks’ success in terms of policy relevance, intellectual leadership, contribution to the public good, and sustainability. This all starts with the mission.

Defining the Mission

A think tank’s mission captures the reason for its existence and drives all its actions. Through the mission statement, the organization establishes its identity: internally, by expressing a common purpose, and externally, by stating what it stands for. Adhering to the mission builds consistency, momentum, and credibility. A good mission statement is clear, concise, and operational. It should be featured in the institute’s products and activities.

SAMPLE MISSION STATEMENT

Institute of Economic Affairs, Kenya

“To inform decision-making in Kenya through policy innovation, research, analysis and dialogues.”

The mission statement declares the need that the institute was created to serve. In defining its mission, the institute makes a claim about where it can really make a difference. It may also express any guiding principles that it espouses.

As part of mission development and strategic planning, think tanks must contemplate the appropriate breadth or focus of issues that fall within their scope of activities. A sharper focus allows greater specialization, as well as closer relationships with target audiences. However, it reduces the ability to adapt and attract wide support. Too broad a menu of issues, on the other hand, may weaken identity and limit depth of expertise. One solution is to establish a set of core principles that guide an institute without wedding it to short-lived issues.

To carry out its mission, an organization must be able to visualize the change it seeks, then chart a path to realize that change. The strategic plan flows from the mission statement and establishes a limited number of core competencies. These are areas of strength that can be developed, that advance major objectives and differentiate the institute from other organizations.

Identifying Audiences

As brokers of knowledge, think tanks require a thorough understanding of their audiences. According to McGann and R. Kent Weaver, knowing the audiences can be challenging because think tanks operate in two distinct markets: a market for funding and a market for policy advice. Both markets are essential to the functioning of an institute, and both comprise multiple audience segments.

Within the policy market, important audiences include:

- The government. Legislators, executive officials, and regulators need information and solutions to make quality decisions. In order to influence policy, think tanks must influence the thinking of decision makers.
- The public. Think tanks inform the public about government activities and educate them on important issues. They also may tell policymakers what citizens want.
- The media. Through the media, think tanks reach other audiences, raise awareness of issues, shape policy debates, and increase their own visibility.
- The business community. Many think tanks brief businesses on current policy issues and help them keep abreast of upcoming legislation. Some think tanks offer services to business associations.
Within the funding market, think tanks’ audiences and supporters include foundations, international donors, corporations, private individuals, and sometimes government. Think tanks must attract and retain funders and provide them information according to their interests.

Think tanks must identify what distinct value they bring to each of their key audiences, or “customers.” Through researching and listening to their policy customers and their funding customers, they determine customers’ priorities as well as specific interests and knowledge. Think tanks’ activities should be directed toward providing value to the customers, capturing value from customer relationships for their organizations, and building these relationships.

Positioning the Think Tank

Think tanks can be classified according to three main attributes: their activities, their sponsors, and the issues they address. The organizational choices made by a think tank or by its founders influence what the think tank can do and how it is perceived.

Choices about advocacy in relation to research - When research is applied in advocacy, evidence can be incorporated into policy. Credible research findings provide a strong basis for advocacy. However, a short-sighted focus on promoting a think tank’s positions and preferences at any cost can lead to neglect of research standards and a perception of bias.

Choices about sponsorship in relation to research - A research program requires funding to operate. The funders are important consumers and beneficiaries of research. However, funders can exert influence on research agendas, suppress adverse findings, or divert an institute from its mission.

Choices about issues in relation to research - Research deepens understanding of policy issues and can serve to advance points of view, values, or ideologies. However, dogmatic adherence to ideological positions can create pressure to predetermine research outcomes.

ACTIVITIES

Research
Professional research generates knowledge and credibility. Some institutes emphasize rigorous application of social science research methods and detailed presentation of results. Traditionally, think tanks pursued academic research with the aim of increasing policy knowledge over the long term.

Advocacy
Advocacy generates opportunities to influence policy. Institutes that prioritize advocacy make specific policy recommendations, publicize them, and seek access to decision makers. Many such organizations subscribe to particular values or principles.

Education
Education shapes the understanding, attitudes, and behavior of future leaders and the public. It does not typically influence current policy decisions. Some think tanks train business leaders, government officials, political parties, or journalists.

ISSUES

Multiple Issues
Think tanks that research a wide range of issues can adapt as issues come and go on the public policy agenda. They may struggle to establish a clear identity and a reputation for specialized expertise.

Single Issue
Think tanks that define themselves by one issue can find a competitive niche, but may have trouble attracting wide support.

Single Interest
An institute that advocates on behalf of an interest group can represent part of civil society, but may not be seen as an objective research organization.
To sum up: for research to add value in the policy process, the integrity and quality of research must be preserved. Think tanks must insulate their research from pressures that would lower standards and undermine credibility. On the other hand, think tanks must maintain certain relationships to ensure their research products are relevant, meaningful, and funded. Research in a vacuum contributes nothing to the policy world. Think tanks must therefore balance their relationships and set parameters on what they will do or accept.

Steering the Think Tank

Governance refers to how board leadership steers an organization in concert with management and key stakeholders. It creates a framework for better decision making and accountability for results. Good governance defines leadership roles and responsibilities and facilitates constructive working relationships.

The board leads by setting the vision for the think tank and developing a strategic plan. The board is responsible for:

- Overseeing the activities, health, and ethical behavior of the organization.
- Ensuring that the organization is well-resourced to fulfill its mission, with adequate finances, capable staff, and esteemed reputation.

The staff brings the strategic plan to life by managing the daily tasks necessary to fulfill the goals. The staff is responsible for:

- Executing the decisions of the board.
- Administering daily details; procedures and project completion.
- Monitoring and reporting on progress toward goals.
- Managing organizational affairs including personnel, property and finances.

Two interviews with CIPE partners illustrate how think tank leaders worked to strategically position their organizations in complex environments: Kosovo and China.
AN INTERVIEW WITH

ALBAN HASHANI

MANAGING TRANSITIONS IN THINK TANK LEADERSHIP

Alban Hashani, Ph.D., Executive Director, Riinvest Institute, Kosovo;
Lecturer, Economics, Riinvest College

Why was Riinvest founded?

A group of enthusiastic academics founded Riinvest in 1995 to promote discussion and policies that would advance Kosovo’s chances of becoming a viable, independent state. At the time, ethnic tensions amplified already daunting challenges related to economic development and democratization. Riinvest aimed to fill the need for policy-relevant and evidenced-based studies in response to these ethnic conflicts and tensions.

What are the think tank’s current key areas of focus?

Riinvest focuses mostly on subjects that relate to Kosovo’s socio-economic development. Specifically, working on four main areas: research and advocacy, market development, education and training, and academic research. Research and advocacy compose the dominant activities and research-based advocacy has had a lot of impact on policymaking. Riinvest studies are cited by government, members of Parliament, international organizations, and businesses. Education and training programs, and academic research by staff aid advocacy and market development efforts.

Over the years, Riinvest has produced numerous reports related to privatization, employment, public procurement, and other socio-economic topics. Riinvest—
with the backing of CIPE—also introduced principles of corporate governance in Kosovo back in the early 2000s.

How do you maintain objectivity when it comes to researching more contentious or controversial topics? Have you ever been stuck in the middle of two opposing viewpoints regarding an issue?

As public policy issues frequently involve the allocation of scarce resources, Riinvest has often found itself caught between two opposing perspectives. Our analysts navigate these tense debates by producing research and recommendations based on data and evidence. To promote a balanced perspective, Riinvest recruits like-minded organizations to further convey such evidenced-based messages.

Riinvest is Kosovo’s oldest think tank. What has been the key to maintaining success and relevance over the years?

One of Riinvest’s biggest successes is simply having survived for 25 years. It is not easy to survive as an independent, non-partisan organization in an environment like Kosovo’s. Remaining a mission-driven organization has been a key to Riinvest’s success. The Institute hires people who relate to the organization’s mission, and has created a supportive work environment where people feel at home.

Creating a diversified work portfolio has also aided in Riinvest’s success, and helped the Institute to ply a competitive environment. Riinvest has cemented its credibility by remaining faithful to the principles of evidence-based and data-driven research.

How do you ensure that leadership transitions and other external events don’t endanger the mission or organizational stability?

It is important to have a corporate governance structure in place. With the assistance of CIPE, Riinvest created a sound corporate governance structure that helped the organization manage the departure of its founder. Although the departure was a shock, the transition was not very difficult as systems and reporting lines had already been in place. Attracting people who are loyal to the organization and remain for long durations also helps with stability. The long tenure of many Riinvest staff contributes to robust institutional memory—a quality that has helped to maintain smooth leadership transitions.

Riinvest’s board oversees and guides the Institute’s corporate governance structure. The board also helps to ensure that the Institute maintains its independence despite temptations to do otherwise given a challenging environment.

Could you give an example of these systems or policies?

To maintain organizational stability and staff morale, Riinvest has a system where new hires have a clear path for career development. Staff receive support to advance their careers. For example, Riinvest provides scholarships for staff to obtain master and doctoral degrees. Relating to the board, no member can serve more than two terms. After each term, the director must also be re-elected by the board.

How have generational perspectives influenced the research focus or succession planning?

Riinvest has been able to benefit from fresh perspectives that come with bringing in new people. Younger staff can challenge old ways of doing business, and people of different backgrounds add a diversity of approaches to solving problems. These newer hires strengthen succession planning as they will eventually become Riinvest’s future leaders.
Unirule Institute of Economics

Note: In 2019, government pressure led Unirule staff to close the think tank and cease operations. This interview was conducted in 2018 and has been edited slightly to account for the closure.

Why and how was Unirule established?

A group of economists working at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences founded Unirule in 1993 because they wanted an independent, alternative voice to represent civil society. The founders intended to use their knowledge of economics to benefit society, but later found that working in the public interest was financially difficult. Through perseverance and by soliciting contributions from the business community, the founders evolved the organization into a think tank.

How did Unirule Institute of Economics raise funds?

In its early days, Unirule secured funding and in-kind support from business and a broad cross-section of Chinese society, as well as from foreign donors. Foreign funding dwindled because of regulatory changes, and even securing support from domestic sources got more challenging because of political pressures.

Did the Institute encounter challenges in the funding environment?

In its early days, Unirule secured funding and in-kind support from business and a broad cross-section of Chinese society, as well as from foreign donors. Foreign funding dwindled because of regulatory changes, and even securing support from domestic sources got more challenging because of political pressures.
Fee-based consulting services provided over half of Unirule’s income, while domestic support covered the rest (often anonymous to avoid government pressure). The Institute also fundraised in small amounts by attaching “donations welcome” messages to publications and newsletters.

How did Unirule transition from relying on overseas to domestic sources of funding?

Unirule had built a strong reputation in the field of economics, and its staff were well regarded. When foreign sources of funding dried up, businesspeople stepped in to contribute. Many in the business community identified with Unirule’s mission, and thus took risks to donate. Unirule’s economists also contributed directly to the organization.

How did Unirule build its relationships with the business community?

Unirule’s research products and training programs were of keen interest to the business community, providing a natural means of developing ties with businesspeople. If participants have positive impressions after trainings, they are likely to introduce colleagues to the Institute, thus creating a virtuous cycle of networking.

What were Unirule’s key areas of work?

Unirule worked in public policy, public governance, and urban planning. The Institute provided urban planning consulting to local governments, implemented training programs through its culture center, and fundraised through international exchange activities. Unirule’s academic committee drafted the annual macroeconomic report, annual reports on the performance of China’s private and state-owned enterprise (SOE) sector as well as special projects.

How did you balance your consulting business with your public policy work?

How did you manage the changing regulatory environment overseeing non-government organizations for so long?

The Institute confronted challenges in the regulatory environment by evolving over time. After government regulations in 2004 stipulated that all non-profits had to have a government sponsor, Unirule could no longer operate under such status as no government agency was willing to sponsor the Institute. Because registering a business in China is easy, several Unirule staff registered two companies to continue operations. While the government closed down one of these companies relatively quickly, the other continued until 2019. While Unirule did not avoid sensitive topics, it recognized that there are limits to what can be publicly discussed. Even for sensitive topics, the manner in which the debate was framed was always very important.
Stakeholder Relations and Communications

A think tank has no greater asset than its reputation. A good reputation attracts supporters and resources, opens access to decision makers and audiences, influences how its message is heard, and protects the organization during crisis. A think tank builds its reputation through the way it conducts itself, the way it promotes itself, and the brand identity it defines for itself. A strong brand communicates the distinctive value an institute provides and is familiar to its audiences.

Protecting Independence

Independence is a precious asset for a think tank, as it buttresses credibility and frees the think tank to pursue its mission. Excessive dependence on particular funders or interests potentially constrains the set of activities an institute can perform or the messages it can deliver. An institute therefore must clearly prescribe the forms of support it will accept and carefully manage its relationships.

Independence can be threatened by:

• Aligning with a political party or the current government.
• Allowing funders or interest groups to direct an institute’s research agenda.
• Linking the identity of the institute to its leading personality, who may have political ambitions or other interests.

Some keys to protecting independence are:

• Setting the research agenda through a pre-defined process.
• Separating revenue functions from research and advocacy functions.

Managing Relationships

Messaging must be consistently tailored to each audience, especially for decision makers. An effective message is relevant, persuasive, appeals to the audience’s self-interest, and inspires action. Each recommendation to policymakers should include a list of people and groups that support it, and information on how the proposal will affect the policymaker’s political base.

GOVERNMENT AND POLICYMAKERS

Since government is often the primary audience, think tanks must establish productive relationships with policymakers. However, to preserve their independence as providers of alternative policy advice, think tanks must tread carefully. This can be a delicate balancing act—remaining relevant to policymaking without falling into government’s orbit or becoming partisan.

Opportunities to respond to government initiatives should be evaluated against the mission and strategic objectives. While areas of common interest can be pursued, the institute should take seriously its roles as watchdog and critic. Transparency and consistency in pursuit of the institute’s objectives help clarify its behavior to government and other audiences.

A think tank should strive to advocate concrete policy recommendations—to be relevant to the policy process—while maintaining an outside perspective. It should be neither harshly critical nor closely aligned with particular personalities in government. Rather, it should maintain focus on the policy issues. By including all parties in its activities and adhering to its mission, an institute builds a reputation for integrity, fairness, and reliability.

MEDIA

In working with the media, think tanks draw attention to important issues, make the case for reforms, and raise their profile as expert, effective organizations. High visibility bolsters advocacy efforts and attracts funding. A think tank cannot neglect the media without risking irrelevance and allowing others to shape opinion.

A staff member should be assigned as a media liaison. Maintaining relationships with journalists serves to familiarize them with an institute, its themes, and experts. Journalists turn to think tanks for information and expert opinions. By being prepared to comment and making itself available, an institute
can become a regular source. An institute should organize newsworthy events, invite journalists, and issue press releases.

Communications with the media should always fit within an institute’s communications strategy and advocacy plan. When given opportunities to comment, an institute should deliver core messages and keep to subjects on which it has expertise and evidence. The temptation to comment on any issue without regard for an institute’s focus should be avoided, as this can undermine credibility.

DONORS
Young think tanks often find themselves dependent on a limited number of large donors, often international donors. They must learn to attract donor support, and equally important must manage support to stay on mission and develop future income streams.

Donors bring benefits such as international experience and technical advice, but also have their own objectives and requirements. These may or may not promote the long-term development of a recipient institute. With planning and good communication, an institute can better reconcile project objectives and donors’ priorities with its own organizational and strategic priorities. It should decline funding opportunities that cannot be reconciled with its mission.

An institute can limit donors’ influence on its identity in the following ways:
- Diversifying funding sources and seeking funds from domestic sources.
- Setting priorities prior to seeking funding.
- Discussing ways to incorporate organizational development into donor-funded projects.

As a step toward developing new supporters, a think tank may consider a membership model. Having members allows a think tank to conduct market tests of its services, generating new insights into the value it can provide.

BUSINESS COMMUNITY
Generalized support from business strengthens an economic think tank, while individual corporate contracts may tarnish credibility. Business associations, especially multi-sectoral associations, can act as valuable partners. Associations have networks of members that may disseminate a think tank’s positions, and because of their numbers are powerful allies in advocacy. In return, think tanks provide associations with much needed expertise to inform and advance advocacy priorities and proposals.

Designing & Delivering Products

**DESIGN**
Each product should be tailored to the audience. This involves:

- Recognizing diverse informational needs.
- Avoiding excess background information.
- Focusing on conclusions rather than methods.
- Using language that is understandable to a non-specialist, educated readership.
- Using graphics to explain concepts.
- Adapting formats such as print publications, multimedia, or discussion groups.

**DELIVER**
The distribution strategy for each product should be tailored to the audience. This involves:

- Identifying media targets to reach the largest possible audience.
- Reinforcing each publication or message with personal contact.
- Tracking the response to each product.
- Matching products to recipients according to their expressed areas of interest.
- Arranging working groups or distribution channels to reach diverse constituencies.
EXAMPLES OF TAILORED PRODUCT CHOICES:

**Policy papers**
recommendations and information to facilitate discussion.

**Issue briefs**
summaries of key points for decision makers.

**Brochures**
simple, attractive, and educational materials for the public or coalition members.

**Discussion forums**
newsworthy events; opportunities to involve key stakeholders.

**Editorials and columns**
connection with a wide educated audience.

**Talk shows on radio or television**
connection with a mass audience and casual observers.

**Newsletters**
connection to members and networks.

**REACHING DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS**
A strong communications program combines elements of wide and targeted outreach. Wide outreach matters—even when an institute has access to top decision-makers—because it builds understanding and a constituency for ongoing reform. It also raises the profile of the institute and contributes to a transparent policy process. Targeting is necessary in order to reach key decision-makers, to reach opinion leaders who will connect with other audiences, and to build relationships and coalitions. Thus, while seeking a broad range of supporters, an institute must prioritize audiences so as to make the most effective use of finite resources.

Once audiences have been selected, a think tank sets the communications objective for each audience, crafts the appropriate message, and determines the best channels for delivering the message. Communication works best as a two-way conversation, so channels should be opened for feedback and new ideas.

In the following interviews with CIPE partners, these think tank leaders explain how they have maintained the independence of their organizations while delivering impact.
MAREK TATAŁA

AN INTERVIEW WITH

STRONG MESSAGING ON ECONOMIC ISSUES

Marek Tatała, Vice President and Economist, Fundacja Forum Obywatelskiego Rozwoju (FOR) (Civil Development Forum), Poland

Why was the Civil Development Forum (FOR) founded?

Professor Leszek Balcerowicz, former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, founded FOR in 2007 to support non-partisan, evidenced-based public policy analysis in order to strengthen economic freedom and markets in Poland. Balcerowicz also wanted to engage Polish entrepreneurs in projects crucial to enabling stable economic growth. Another of Balcerowicz’s goals was to improve levels of economic education to prevent populist and irresponsible policymaking in Poland.

What are the think tank’s key areas of focus?

The Civil Development Forum’s primary mission is to promote economic freedom and rule of law in Poland. Three types of activities—analytical research, communication and education, and civil society mobilization—work in concert to achieve the Foundation’s mission. Specific topic areas include public finance, the labor market, and business regulations and laws.
The Foundation is keenly interested in enhancing the quality of Polish democracy, and assessing Poland’s role in the European Union. It also runs youth education and teacher training programs on economic topics.

What are the biggest challenges to presenting a viewpoint that counters popular sentiment?

The best strategy to combat false information and various myths promoted by some politicians, media, and organizations is to start by employing very basic definitions and explanations. This is especially relevant to economic arguments as the level of economic literacy in Poland is quite low—a phenomenon that causes many to be susceptible to popular but untrue ideas. To overcome some of these challenges, the Foundation also uses relatable publication titles, and reaches out through traditional as well as social media platforms.

How does the Civil Development Forum approach social media?

The Foundation’s approach to social media complements its strategy of simplifying messages for the public, and augments the use of traditional media. All of the Foundation’s work, including appearances of experts on traditional media, is promoted on social media platforms. Staff use social media to disseminate simplified and/or graphical versions of research, and are active on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. As Twitter is quite popular among Polish politicians, staff presence on the platform provides an additional opportunity for discussion and engagement.

How do you instill an appreciation for civics?

Framing seemingly distant or esoteric economic issues as being directly relevant to the well-being of people is one approach the Foundation takes to motivate civic engagement. It is important to show that certain policies not only improve productivity or investment, but also lead to a higher quality of life.

Through its outreach and youth education efforts, the Foundation encourages political participation, and promotes transparency of public institutions. The Civil Development Forum also lowers the barriers to civic participation through innovations such as its tax calculator—a tool that improves awareness about taxation and public expenditures.

What advice do you have for young think tanks addressing controversial public issues?

First and foremost, do not be afraid of controversial public issues. While a think tank is not a political party and does not have to win elections, it still needs to be relevant and credible. Therefore, it is important to understand what is acceptable to an organization’s stakeholders and the general public. Second, be sure to cultivate relations with traditional media. Third, learn and seek inspiration from bigger and more established institutions—even ones abroad. Finally, use time wisely by developing better ideas and communication methods, not by complaining.
Why was the Institute of Economic Affairs founded?

A group of Kenyan professionals established IEA in 1992 to inform democratic debate around economic and social policy in Kenya. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the wave of democratic reforms that swept Europe also catalyzed democratic changes in Kenya, leading to a reversion to multi-party democracy. The IEA’s founders wanted to harness the voices of business and other professionals at this critical juncture in Kenya’s history.

What are IEA’s current areas of focus?

The Institute’s programs comprise five thematic areas: public finance management, trade and development, regulation and competition policy, Constitution, law and the economy and “futures”—which examines trends through futures methodologies and techniques in order to create plausible narratives around possible futures. To promote informed debate and improved policy and decision making in each of these five domains, IEA staff conduct
research and policy analysis, engage in capacity building efforts, advocacy and policy dialogues, public education, and scenario modeling.

The public finance management program is IEA’s largest, and analyzes issues such as public expenditures and revenue mobilization while also providing independent policy analysis to the Kenyan Parliament. The Institute has been particularly active in flagging Kenya’s rising levels of public debt as a risk to growth and stability.

How does the Institute identify and recruit members and experts?

Given that IEA is a membership-based organization, its programs and research must serve the needs of members as well as the public. The Institute’s conferences and events allow members to participate in the policy debate and enlarge their professional networks, providing an organic way for IEA to increase membership. These members play an integral role in the Institute’s activities by electing the board of directors. As stakeholders, members also help facilitate staff recruitment.

How do you set your organizational strategy to maximize impact?

Members, the board, and the secretariat (staff) work together to establish IEA’s strategy, which the staff interprets into annual work plans. In this iterative process, members first provide feedback to the board as well as the secretariat. Staff craft a strategic blueprint, which is then sent to the board and membership for feedback before finalization. The finalized strategy then serves as the foundation for IEA’s workplan.

What is your biggest public policy or public outreach success?

The Institute’s Citizen Alternative Budget has been a success in that it has impacted decision making, providing an avenue for citizens to propose viable alternatives to government policy. In addition to seeking ideas as to how the government should establish its budget from IEA’s membership, Institute staff also solicited broader public comment by reaching out to business groups and the public. Staff then identified spending priorities, and developed a cost structure that formed the basis of the Alternative Budget. Kenya’s National Treasury found the Alternative Budget useful and has invited IEA to comment on the national budget every year.

How has the Institute cultivated relations with the Kenyan government?

The Institute strives to maintain its professional relationship with both the executive and legislative branches of government by providing quality research and alternative policy options. So long as government stakeholders recognize that IEA provides viable alternative policies, the Institute considers its efforts as successful.

How do you engage the public?

The Institute’s public education, advocacy and policy dialogues serve as avenues for engaging the public at large. The IEA’s communications team works with both traditional and social media platforms to disseminate staff research and opinion pieces. To strengthen communication with the public, IEA maintains an open email where anyone can ask staff questions related to the economy, and also hosts public open houses where people can talk with staff. Finally, we frame all research with the public in mind.

Has any of the Institute’s work proven controversial?
If so, how was that managed?

Although IEA is an economic think tank, its mission is to inform public policy and affairs. Accordingly, some research—though not controversial on its own—might become entangled in the electoral process. During the highly disputed election in 2017, IEA staff continued to express views and communicated in good faith. The Institute’s approach is to let the research and evidence speak for itself. If an error has been made, IEA will admit the mistake and immediately correct it.
What advice do you have for young people who want to start a think tank or engage in the public policy process in a changing environment?

Having a clear purpose and mission is particularly important. After deciding on the area(s) of work, be sure to build the organization’s capacity, institutional memory, and profile. For example, IEA has established itself as the “go-to” institution for public budgets in Kenya.

The governance of a think tank is also crucial to its success. As having an independent oversight board is an ingredient of good governance, it is important to find and retain dedicated board members who believe in the think tank’s mission. Finally, be sure to benchmark against other, internationally reputable institutions.
Beyond Research – Think Tanks in the Policy Process

Think tanks become active participants in the policy process when they engage in advocacy. By pursuing advocacy strategies, think tanks greatly increase the likelihood that their ideas and research will be incorporated into policy. In contrast, if research findings are released without an advocacy plan, policymakers most likely will not be aware of the research, will not know how to respond to it, and will have no incentive to act on it.

Advocacy is an effort to influence public policy in an open, transparent manner. It addresses issues of broad concern to the country or community, and makes the case for change by presenting evidence, as well as support from civil society. Advocacy supports decision making while informing and empowering the public, including the private sector.

Think tanks that excel at advocacy bolster a position with objective data and analysis, and navigate the policy process to promote their recommendations. To be both credible and persuasive, think tanks must conduct rigorous research that informs their recommendations, and package their analyses for political consumption. For example, think tanks should consider applying rigorous tools such as a cost benefit analysis.

The research agenda should incorporate the following criteria:

**MISSION:** Keeping to the mission reinforces an institute’s identity and ensures that its programs will be meaningful to the community. The institute’s principles, such as democratic and market-oriented reform, should be respected.

**WIDEST BENEFIT:** By avoiding issues that narrowly concern one sector and concentrating on issues that affect the economy widely, an institute builds credibility and broad support.

**STRATEGY:** Strategy dictates priorities for the institute. The strategy may focus on selected pivotal issues—issues that have the potential to catalyze wider change.

**TIMELINESS:** Issues often capture policymakers’ attention for brief periods, during which they are receptive to advice. A think tank should be prepared then with recommendations. Reacting to every issue on the public agenda, however, is a mistake.

**CONSTITUENT INTEREST:** An economic think tank should consult key audiences, such as its members, the business community, or the public, on what they consider to be the most pressing issues. Surveys, focus groups, and advisory boards keep the institute in touch with current needs.

**FEASIBILITY:** An institute should concentrate its efforts where it has a chance of achieving results. This does not mean an institute should abandon issues that are critical to its mission.

Conducting Advocacy

A think tank must actively campaign to see its recommendations adopted. Advocacy makes the difference between an institute having policy relevance or being confined to a research community. Once policy recommendations have been published, a think tank must deliver its products to the right audiences, focus attention on its recommendations, and follow through on implementation.

After disseminating policy research findings and recommendations to key players, an institute should follow up with personal contact to discuss the issue and present its arguments. It should create both formal and informal opportunities to interact with decision makers. These may include policy roundtables, orientation sessions for new legislators, or invitations to respond to a think tank’s findings in a public forum.

The choice of particular advocacy methods
PHASES OF THE POLICY CYCLE

1. **Agenda Setting** – Before an issue can become the focus of a decision, it must emerge as a salient topic in the minds of decision makers and the public. A think tank can raise awareness of an issue and elevate it on the public policy agenda. It can define the problem, diagnose the cause, and frame the issue. During this phase, a think tank may facilitate debate and shape opinion.

2. **Assessing Existing or Proposed Policies** – As issues move toward actual decision points, policy alternatives must be weighed. A think tank can estimate the impact of legislation and regulations, and compare the benefits and costs. It may provide information support to decision makers or act as a watchdog on behalf of civil society.

3. **Formulating Alternatives** – A think tank can put forward its own policy recommendations and assist in drafting legislation or amendments. It can advocate for its positions and provide supporting evidence to proponents of favorable legislation.

4. **Evaluating Policy Performance** – A think tank can monitor the implementation and results of policy changes, and provide feedback for future revisions.

POSSIBLE ADVOCACY TOOLS

- **Legislative Advisories** – Provide cost-benefit assessments of proposed legislation to help legislators make informed decisions.

- **Policy Roundtables** – Foster discussion of research findings, the exchange of views among stakeholders, and development of policy recommendations.

- **Policy Papers & Issue Briefs** – Identify policy challenges, explain the consequences, and recommend solutions; papers present additional evidence.

- **Media Partnerships** – Furnish regular content, involve media in events, and keep media informed.

- **Coalitions** – Demonstrate support for reform; mobilize, inform, and assist networks of supporters.

Having implemented an advocacy campaign, a think tank follows up on results and prepares for its next action. Supportive officials must be acknowledged, and any adopted policies must be monitored. Proposals that have not been adopted require persistent attention. Finally, a think tank must periodically review its advocacy strategy—including issues, audience, and techniques—and either reinforce efforts or shift its approach.

Below, three CIPE partner think tanks share their experiences and advice on maximizing influence through a combination of advocacy, innovative research, and partnerships with stakeholders.
Ruslan Stefanov, Director, Economic Program, Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), Bulgaria

Why was the Center for the Study of Democracy founded?

After the fall of communism in 1989, a group of enthusiasts created CSD to accelerate and smooth Bulgaria’s transition to a democracy and market economy. The founders saw an opportunity to leverage their own knowledge to help Bulgarians defend their own rights and freedoms. Although the nascent Bulgarian government was creating markets, exchanges and other institutions of democracy, the founders realized that the country also needed to develop a culture of transparency and accountability in order for these institutions to succeed.

What are CSD’s current areas of focus?

The Center for the Study of Democracy currently focuses on advancing institutional good governance counteracting corruption in Europe. In partnership with CIPE, CSD is also examining malign foreign economic influence, and how countries such as Russia and China are taking advantage of governance gaps in Central and Eastern Europe to penetrate their economies and/or change their political orientation vis-à-vis the European Union and NATO.
Another major CSD program examines human rights and media freedom by assessing the suppression of media freedoms in Central and Eastern Europe. The Center also promotes democratic and market development in the Balkans by sharing lessons learned during Bulgaria's post-1989 transition and the country's EU membership in 2007.

How do you view your role in the region more broadly?
How do you balance the national focus on Bulgaria with the regional focus on Europe?

Many of the challenges confronting Bulgaria and other European Union (EU) nations are similar. In Bulgaria, the transition to a market economy has exposed its society to both the benefits and downsides of globalization. The CSD staff have observed that small to medium-sized European countries—such as those in the Balkans—have had a more difficult experience adjusting to the rapid forces of globalization and the onslaught of disinformation coming from social media than larger European states. The CSD has been able to apply some of the lessons learned from Bulgaria more broadly to the EU, while the CSD's studies on regional issues—such as malign disinformation—also apply to Bulgaria.

How does the Center for Study of Democracy organize its research agenda?

CSD combines academic with practical policy research to deliver on its mission of building bridges between scholars and policymakers. The Center's main focus is on governance, so all its research informs challenges related to governance and corruption. While quantitative measures offer precision, they are not always applicable to CSD's efforts in measuring and monitoring corruption, the concentration of power, or institutional and state capture.

What advice do you have for think tanks that are just getting started in terms of creating a research agenda or establishing a methodology?

For the leaders of a new think tank, it is important that they pick an issue that is relevant to society, and one that they really care and know about. Second, they should rely on research methods they deem credible. The quality of research is crucial to establishing the credibility of any think tank. Furthermore, it is important to establish internal rules that ensure the integrity of a think tank’s work and operations. For example, a think tank that researches transparency and corruption should establish internal controls that ensure all sources of funding are publicly disclosed.

How does CSD maintain its independence?
If a research project’s findings go against the interest of the donor supporting that research, what do you do?

Peer review and soliciting the feedback of others are the best ways to maintain the integrity of a think tank’s work. A larger think tank can leverage colleagues in different departments to conduct peer reviews, while a smaller organization can rely on external reviewers, such as university researchers, to conduct independent assessments. Another approach is to invite stakeholders, such as those in the government or business, to provide feedback.
AN INTERVIEW WITH

JULIA POMARES

EFFECTIVE POLICY OUTREACH
Translating Data for the Public

Julia Pomares, Ph.D., Executive Director, Centro de Implementacion de Politicas Publicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento (CIPPEC), Argentina

Why was CIPPEC founded?

Several former graduate students from Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government founded CIPPEC in 2000 as a think tank to connect research and evidence with the policy domain. While there were think tanks specializing in various issues, as well as advocacy organizations, there were no institutes bridging the gap between theory and policy practice.

What are CIPPEC’s main areas of work?

CIPPEC has three policy departments: economic, social, and institutional and good governance. CIPPEC’s value stems from taking a multi-disciplinary approach to policy issues, helping it to generate better responses to policy challenges. The social department comprises two programs: one on education, and one on social protection, which also deals with some health issues.

The economic department has two programs, one focusing on urban planning and economic development in cities, and the other on fiscal issues and programs to stimulate economic growth. CIPPEC’s institutional and good governance department develops public management training programs, as
well as an electoral reforms program. CIPPEC’s monitoring and evaluation program assesses public policies to allow for better allocation of resources.

How does CIPPEC use data to guide its work?

CIPPEC engages with the public policy process through the use of data in two ways. In Argentina, government agencies do not always disclose information, leading to big gaps in data availability. When data is disclosed, it needs to be analyzed and interpreted. CIPPEC advocates for greater information disclosure, and then processes the data that is released.

How do you deal with questions of how the data was gathered, and how do you maintain objectivity?

CIPPEC has a rigorous peer review process for its papers and policy briefs. A CIPPEC study will be reviewed by several of the CIPPEC staff members, or individuals with particular technical expertise in the subject of the study. The peer review process helps to improve the quality and objectivity of CIPPEC products.

How does CIPPEC ensure that its studies and research findings are easily understandable to the broader public?

CIPPEC uses a variety of traditional and social media tools to translate the findings of complex research studies into terms easily understood by the public. CIPPEC’s new website provides visual tools to highlight key findings of complex studies. In addition to Twitter and Facebook, CIPPEC also communicates infographics of research results on Instagram. Turning to traditional media, CIPPEC partners with major newspapers, such as La Nación, to produce papers and visualize data.

If there is a disagreement between CIPPEC and one of its media partners over how to present data, how do you manage that?

CIPPEC sees this as an opportunity to build trust and improve the way it communicates its research. If a media partner comes back with a data visualization tool that does not translate the findings of the paper as originally intended, CIPPEC sees this as a good way fine tune its communications skills.

How does CIPPEC manage the relationship with policymakers?

CIPPEC has navigated the complex equilibrium with policymakers by maintaining the independence of its research while building trust and dialogue with policymakers. In addition to maintaining ties with all political parties, CIPPEC organizes informal briefings with policymakers to present research findings before a paper is published. This allows CIPPEC to solicit feedback from the policy community, and ensures that policymakers to not feel they have been blindsided by research findings after publication and reporting by the media.

What recommendations do you have for newer think tanks?

It is important to maintain a balance between working on short-term and long-term issues. If you focus only on the short-term, you can easily get lost in the media cycle. But if you only work on long-term issues, you may not get media attention. It is also important to build trust with different stakeholders.
Patrick Mardini, Ph.D., President and Founder, Lebanese Institute for Market Studies (LIMS)

PICKING THE RIGHT "WEDGE ISSUE"

When, and how, did LIMS decide to tackle Lebanon’s chronic electricity shortage?

The founding team of the Institute realized that in order to devise solutions to frequent power blackouts in Lebanon, it was necessary to create a reputable Institute as an organization would be more effective in driving change than an individual. The Institute wanted to develop and promote evidence-based, "scientific" solutions for Lebanon’s various problems.

What is LIMS’ zero-dollar solution for Lebanon’s electricity sector?

The Institute understood that the crux of Lebanon’s electricity shortage was one of spending and mispricing. Heavy government spending to solve Lebanon’s electricity shortage was not working as public electricity generators continued to incur heavy losses. Not only did the government have to support insolvent state-owned generators, it also had to subsidize the price of electricity— which encouraged over-consumption. Meanwhile, consumers suffered as they had to pay two electric bills: one for the government, and one for backup generation.

Why was this concept important in LIMS’ advocacy efforts?

LIMS zero-dollar solution was to highlight the inefficient use of tax money by the government and the need to address the subsidy issue. LIMS advocated for the government to redirect public electricity spending to more efficient solutions. They proposed the concept of a "wedge issue"—a solution that could shift the balance of power and influence policymakers.

Patrick Mardini, Ph.D., President and Founder, Lebanese Institute for Market Studies (LIMS)

Note: The Lebanese Institute for Market Studies (LIMS) is a non-profit research institute that provides policymakers with market studies, economic proposals, and research support. It initiated a project with CIPE to address Lebanon’s chronic electricity shortage.
The Institute coined the simple, zero-dollar term as it captured the basic argument that no additional government spending on electricity should occur.

How did LIMS convince the government to cut electricity subsidies?

The Institute staff conducted research based on evidence from other countries that encouraging private electricity production would offer consumers greater choice, and solve Lebanon’s electricity shortages. By providing data driven research, LIMS convinced some political parties to adopt this line of reasoning, which countered prevailing arguments that the government should produce more electricity.

What are the key ingredients to a solid and scientific policy proposal?

Every LIMS policy paper has a clear structure that identifies and describes the policy problem, addresses its root cause, assesses the role of stakeholders, and proposes a solution. The description of the problem should be clear and grounded in evidence. It is also important to clearly identify the potential winners and losers of any policy proposal, as every policy issue involves stakeholders. If the policy proposal identifies how winners might compensate losers after a reform is implemented, the proposal will have a higher chance of being considered.

How did LIMS approach these political parties and convince them of the zero-dollar solution’s merits?

First, LIMS produced research papers and presented them at conferences, where feedback helped to improve them. Second, the Institute organized two debates, one of them on Facebook, which helped the think tank collect additional feedback and engage with the public. The Institute then held a press conference, which attracted the attention of political parties that in turn solicited LIMS for advice regarding the electricity sector.

How important was the role of media in the success of the zero-dollar solution? How did LIMS build relations with the media?

The Institute’s outreach to media was crucial to the success of the zero-dollar solution, as well as other LIMS policy proposals. Policy makers and political parties follow the media closely as they are sensitive to public opinion. The Institute’s media presence has helped advance its policy influence.

The Institute’s director had connections to members of the media, and helped to facilitate ties between the media and other members of the Institute’s staff.

How does LIMS work to ensure that its policy ideas are adopted and implemented by the government?

There is a difference between the government adopting a measure and implementing it. While the government adopted LIMS’ zero-dollar solution by deciding to cut subsidies and opening the electricity sector to private producers, the actual implementation of these decisions has been slow. Politics and competition between political parties is one reason for the delay, and LIMS has been talking with politicians who are reluctant to implement the zero-dollar solution to change their mind.

How do you see LIMS’ role in the policy process moving forward?

The Institute continues to engage with the media and government officials regarding the zero-dollar solution to Lebanon’s electricity shortage. The Institute has established itself as a credible resource vis-à-vis electricity markets. Government officials, such as the Ministry of Energy, as well as media continue to invite LIMS staff for consultations and interviews.
Getting Started

As the suggestions and cases in this How-To Guide for Economic Think Tanks illustrate, there is no “one-size-fits-all” formula for any think tank. However, there are traits that are common to many leading think tanks around the world, including CIPE partners. These nine keys to success are:

1. **DEFINE THE MISSION**
   The mission statement must clearly describe a think tank’s purpose. It is an essential tool for running a focused, coherent program and communicating the institute’s message to all audiences. By adhering to the mission and its underlying principles, a think tank builds integrity.

2. **ESTABLISH CREDIBILITY**
   Credibility brings value to a think tank’s recommendations; without credibility, its work will be ignored. Credibility depends on the quality of evidence and analysis presented, the professionalism of researchers, the identity and external relationships of the institute, and transparency in operations.

3. **ENGAGE IN ADVOCACY**
   Think tanks must take steps to put their ideas into practice. Only when backed by advocacy can research influence policy change. Think tanks engage in the policy process by contacting decision makers, educating the public, promoting discussion and debate, and mobilizing key constituencies.

4. **MANAGE RELATIONSHIPS CAREFULLY**
   Independence is a key ingredient of credibility. Think tanks must manage relationships with funders, government, and others so as to avoid excessive dependence. Appropriate partnerships strengthen think tanks by providing resources and support for reform objectives.

5. **DEVELOP A MARKETING STRATEGY**
   Think tanks must maintain visibility, communicate their message, and attract supporters. They must identify target audiences, match products to customer needs, engage audience attention, and work effectively with the media.

6. **BUILD A BROAD FINANCIAL BASE**
   Growth and sustainability require diversified, dependable sources of income. Think tanks should avoid excessive concentration of revenue sources, which would reduce independence and potentially increase volatility.

7. **ATTRACT AND RETAIN TALENT**
   Professional staff such as researchers and communications specialists create value for an institute, build its credibility, and serve as its public face. Staff must be committed to the mission and motivated to drive change.

8. **DEVELOP LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE**
   Often founded by capable and prominent individuals, think tanks must develop leadership to ensure the future of the organization. They require governance mechanisms to promote accountability and quality decision making.

9. **LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE AND ADAPT**
   Leaders must regularly assess an institute’s successes, failures, and changing environment in order to update strategic plans, strengthen operations, and satisfy funders.
Closing Thoughts

Think tanks shape the policy space in many ways, from analyzing ideas and policy performance to educating decision makers and fostering debate. A wise think tank leader, though, will not dive into every contest and opportunity that is presented. It is too easy for the power of ideas to get lost in the cacophony of issues, actors, and decision points, not to mention the challenges in operating sustainable organizations. A leader of a think tank therefore will do well by remembering the following:

• Focus on the fundamentals. Use the nine common keys to success.
• Act as a broker of knowledge. Link and leverage policy assets and point to opportunities for change.
• Position the institute strategically. Then execute the strategy and build momentum.
• Be creative, nimble, and learn from experience.

Time and again, CIPE sees the value and versatility of think tanks in driving democratic policy processes and winning market reforms. They bring analytical skills that the business community typically lacks. They bring a distinctive, credible voice to policy advocacy. And they bring a rare clarity to issues, which assists decision making for the benefit of all concerned. In many parts of the world, there is still a shortage of strong, independent economic think tanks that advocate for change. If you are on this path, CIPE someday may be telling the story of your policy work that expands prosperity and freedom for all.

The Resources section provides links to our partner think tanks and additional resources.

Links to Additional Resources

CIPE’s Cost-Benefit Analysis: A Practical Guide for Civil Society Organizations
Global Go To Think Tank Index Reports
Atlas Network Think Tank Navigator free online course
Think-Tanks Its Either Innovate or Die

Examples of Think Tank Products

IDEAS (Malaysia): Inspiring Change, Achieving Results — Annual Outcome Report 2018
PRIME (Pakistan): Role of Provincial Finance Commission in Pakistan’s Municipal Finance: is it too early to talk about it?
Samriddhi (Nepal): Fiscal Federalism in Nepal
Verite (Sri Lanka): Poison In The Air: Monitoring Sri Lanka’s Air Quality
Riinvest (Kosovo): Supply Side of Corruption From a Business Perspective
Unirule Institute of Economics (China): Unirule Research "A Theoretical Analysis, Performance Evaluation, And Reform Solution on Health Care"
Civil Development Forum (Poland): The Prosecutor’s Office is in the hands of the authorities, that is, what the law allows
IEA (Kenya): Crytocurrencies
Center for the Study of Democracy in Bulgaria (Bulgaria): Annual Report 2019
CIPPEC (Argentina): Accountability Report 2018
Lebanese Institute for Market Studies (LIMS) (Lebanon): LIMS Policy Research
CIPE Governance Roadmap, created for CIPE by Association Options LLC.


For more information about CIPE, visit www.cipe.org and follow us on Twitter @CIPEDC. and Facebook @CIPEDC.