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Policy Impact: A Think Tank’s Perspective

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[Editor’s note: This post was written by Dr. Annapoorna Ravichander, Head of the Communication and Policy Engagement Team, and Deeksha M Rao, Intern at the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP).]

Introduction

The term Think Tank was first used during World War II to describe a safe space to plan and discuss military strategies (see Britannica). Over the years, the meaning of Think Tanks including their role has changed. Today, Think Tanks are considered Public Policy Research, Analysis and Engagement Organisations in most countries. They play a critical role in political and policy arenas, not only at domestic levels, but also on an international scale.

What are the criteria for a successful Think Tank? How does one measure the performance of a Think Tank? The main objective of a Think Tank is to provide decision makers with high quality and objective policy research on policy relevant subjects. Therefore, one important element of success is “policy impact”.

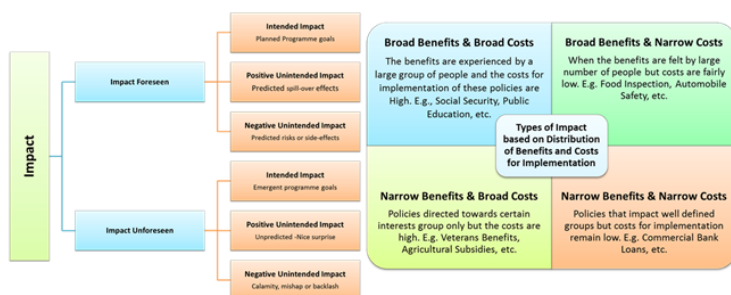
Defining Policy Impact

Different organisations have defined policy impact in their own ways. For instance, the World Health Organization defines impact as “improved health outcomes achieved” (Hearn and Buffardi, 2016). The Department for International Development (DFID) defines it as “the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy” (Becker, Holmes and Wolfe, 2016). This definition is now adapted by several organisations in the UK. The European Commission describes impact as “all the changes which are expected to happen due to the implementation and application of a given policy option/intervention”.

Several organisations/institutes have defined policy impact based on their own missions or goals and then specified appropriate methods to measure it.

Types of Policy Impact

Popular studies classify impact as academic or non-academic, intended or unintended, foreseen or unforeseen. Most researchers focus on the extent of the policy benefits – broad or narrow, and the cost for its implementation. Some are classified based on time. It could be short-term individual impact or long-term collective impact. A brief overview is provided by the following graph.



Source: CSTEP

Policy Impact Parameters

Organisations and Think Tanks often debate on what could be defined as/termed policy impact. Think Tanks are usually supported by grants from donors who naturally like to see visible impacts of their investments. Similarly, the research staff of these organisations is keen to ensure that policymakers take note of the research conducted by them. This has led to acknowledging the need to measure policy impact. However, as

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there is a large diversity in the nature of Think Tanks, it is difficult to have one single metric of impact. Some of the broad plausible parameters are summarised as follows. We emphasise that this is not an exhaustive list and there could be more metrics as well.

- Yes/No • Have **recommendations suggested been considered/implemented** by the **government**?
- Yes/No • Do **policy/decision makers approach/invite an organisation to be a Knowledge Partner**?
- Yes/No • Does the **organisation have a high level of exposure in media (conventional and non-conventional)**?
- Yes/No • Have there been any **citations in scholarly articles and government documents**?
- Yes/No • Has there been an **increase in the number of donors**?

If the answer to one or more of the metrics mentioned above is “Yes”, then it can be stated that the organisation has indeed made a Policy Impact. This perhaps can be a simple method of measuring impact. It is important to highlight that in a healthy democracy, the policy making process involves inputs from a large number of stakeholders, and Think Tanks are just one of them. Ideally a Think Tank can set goals with reference to their work/research and also ensure that these goals are relevant for decision makers.

Indian Scenario

India ranks fourth globally with 268 Think Tanks. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the number of Indian Think Tanks and also a gradual increase in their engagement with the government. For a long time, policy making was confined within the Ministries and the Civil Service. However, this trend is now changing. Several ministries actively engage with Think Tanks for their expertise and solicit inputs for policy framing and implementation. The government relies on these Think Tanks for both quick, short-term analyses and long-term studies. Indian businesses have also begun investing in and establishing such institutions.

There are several illustrations of the important role played by Indian Think Tanks in shaping policy in various disciplines. These include India’s nuclear policy, foreign policy, climate and low carbon policy, etc. For example, CSTEP has been chosen as the only non-government organisation in an Expert Committee to evolve a strategy for self-reliance in critical strategic resource of Rare Earths, constituted by NITI Aayog. The said strategy will focus on individual Rare Earth Metals from mineral exploration to manufacturing end products.

Conclusion

As the Think Tank ecosystem in India continues to flourish, it is imperative to measure the efficacy of these organisations based on their work and interest. Most Indian Think Tanks have begun to realise the usefulness of measuring policy impact and there needs to be more clarity on tangible policy impact measurement indices.

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🔖 CSTEP , indian think tanks , policy impact , policy influence , Think Tanks

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