

# The Role of the World's Top Successful Think-Tanks in the Transformation of Societies: Drawing Lessons to Sub-Saharan African Think-Tanks

By: Deribe Assefa  
Lecturer, Ethiopian Civil Service University  
E-mail address: [deribeassefa@yahoo.com](mailto:deribeassefa@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

Empirical studies in developed nations show that think tanks foster the transformation of societies through informed policy research and public outreach. The overall objective of this study is to pinpoint the excellent characteristics of the world's top successful think tanks in the transformation of societies and draw lessons for Sub-Saharan African (SSA) think-tanks. It also aims to explore a range of factors and dynamics that affect think tanks in SSA. Broadly, this research project addresses three main components: (i) Excellent features of successful think tanks in the world, (ii) Challenges that are facing the think-tanks in SSA; and (iii) the way forwards for well-functioning of think tanks in SSA. The study employs in-depth desk literature review and document reviews in order to conceptualize/theorize the excellence features of think-tanks and the role of think-tanks. Following that, structured questionnaire on the nature and role of think tanks was sent for the 100 top ranked think tanks through survey monkey technique. From these 100 think tanks, 30 of the world's top think tanks responded the survey monkey questionnaire. The list and ranking of think tanks were obtained from the data of 2013 Global Go to Think Tanks Index Report by McGann. Similarly, structured questionnaire on the challenges facing think tanks was sent for 250 randomly selected think tanks in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA); 52 of them responded the survey monkey questionnaire. In addition, data have been obtained through various think tank websites and correspondence with their staff. The study findings indicate that the features of successful think-tanks can be analyzed from the dimensions that include organization/structure, orientation/philosophy, dissemination and policy outreach, and funding. The study concludes that the excellent features of the world's top successful think-tanks can be considered as lessons and benchmarks for the think-tanks in SSA. Besides, it highlights think tanks require favorable political environment and local private philanthropic traditions so that they can significantly contribute for the transformation of societies culturally and politically.

**Keywords:** Think tanks, policy influence, Transformation, Societies

## 1. Introduction

Public policy analysis is a rational, systematic approach to making policy choices in the public sector. Its purpose is to assist policymakers in choosing a course of action from among complex alternatives under uncertain conditions (McGann & Johnson, 2005; Walker, 2000). This would turn help for the transformation of the societies. Think tanks have a number of roles in the policy analysis in order to transform the societies. There are parallels in the development of the academic literature on the role of think tanks. In the 1990s, analysis of think tanks was devoted almost exclusively to think tank growth within Anglo-American systems as "third sector" organizational solutions applying knowledge and expertise to public problems. Current research trends are comparative and focused on think tank political roles in developing and post-communist states (McGann & Johnson, 2005), in global governance (Stone, 2006), and addressing issues of think tank influence in policy networks and public discourse (Uhr, 2000; Xufeng, 2009).

Empirical studies particularly in developed nations show that think tanks foster the transformation of societies through informed policy research and public outreach. For instance, studies by (Abelson, 2014; Krastev, 2001; Pautz, 2013) indicate that the common feature of successful countries is not the commonality of the adopted policies but consistency in policy implementation, which is attributed to professional policy deliberation by think tanks. However, the role of think tanks in Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries is not much significant even there are only few such institutions. In this connection, the work by McGann (2012) shows that Africa accounted for only 6 percent of the world's 6,603 think-tanks in 2012.

Furthermore, the absence of strong formal cooperation arrangements among the thinly spread think-tanks in Africa conspires further to deny the continent the opportunity to benefit from these institutions in formulating and implementing evidence-based and home grown objective policy. This partly contributes to policy failure which in turn leads to undesired and unfavorable developmental outcomes. This would necessitate examining the key excellent features of the successful think-tanks so as to draw lessons for African think tanks.

The overall objective of this project is to pinpoint the excellent characteristics of the world's top successful think tanks in the transformation of societies and draw lessons for Sub-Saharan African Think-tanks. Broadly, this research project will address three main components: (i) Excellent features of successful think

tanks in the world, (ii) Challenges that are facing the think-tanks in SSA; and (iii) the way forwards for well-functioning of think tanks in SSA. In line with these three components, the present study has the following specific objectives with respective basic research questions:

1. To examine the key features of successful think-tanks in the world.
  - a. What institutional settings and other features make them successful?
  - b. How do these successful think-tanks participate in policy processes in their respective countries?
  - c. What lessons can be drawn from these successful think-tanks for other think-tanks in SSA?
2. To pinpoint the main challenges that are facing think-tanks in SSA.
  - a. What are the main challenges that encounter think-tanks in SSA?
3. To forward possible recommendations for SSA think-tanks

This study also aims to explore a range of factors and dynamics that affect think tanks and their ability to influence public policy in SSA. It also develops ‘framework’ that constitute excellent features of think tanks on the basis of the world’s top leading think tanks which would in turn becomes lessons for those in SSA.

## 2. Review of Literature and Conceptual Framework

This section explores brief literature review on the meaning, the role and challenges of think-tanks. It also indicates the conceptual framework of the study.

### 2.1. What is a think-tank?

There is no agreement on what essentially defines a think tank. Many definitions have been offered, but not one is entirely satisfactory. Given the prevailing ambiguity and also vagueness of think tank conceptualizations, we often do not really know which organizations should be considered think tanks and which ones should not (Koellner, 2013). The term “think tanks” generally refers to organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy. They conduct and translate evidence-based research which serves the needs of the public for the comprehension and implementation by policymakers. This would in turn can strengthen public policy debates and promote more objective, evidence-based decision-making. These institutions often act as a bridge between the academic and policymaking communities and between states and civil society, serving in the public interest as independent voices that translate applied and basic research into a language in understandable, reliable, and accessible forms for policymakers and the public (McGann, 2012; Rich, 2004).

According to McGann and Johnson (2005), think tanks are ‘policy research, engagement and formulation organizations that have significant autonomy from government and from societal interests such as business firms, interest groups and political parties’. For Stone (2006), the term *think tank* is policy research institutes involved in the research and analysis of a particular policy area or a broad range of policy issues, seeking to advise policy makers or inform public debate on policy issues.

Goodman (2005) as cited in Hart and Vromen (2008) defines think tank as ‘idea factories’ conceived of as ‘organizations that sponsor research on specific problems, encourage the discovery of solutions to those problems, and facilitate interaction among scientists and intellectuals in the pursuit of these goals.’ The political notion of think is best explained in (Rich, 2004): ‘independent, non-interest based, non-profit organizations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and influence the policy-making process.’

Given that the aforementioned are all scholars, we can assume that they are conscious of their particular definitional choices and the conceptual commitments they entail. The point is that a particular definition will broaden or narrow the scope for an organization to qualify as think tank. Boucher conceptualization of think-tank encompasses comprehensive and self-explanatory lists as cited in (Koellner, 2013). He identified nine criteria to define a think tank. To qualify as such, accordingly, one has to: (1) be somewhat permanent; (2)specialize in the production of public policy solutions; (3)have in-house staff dedicated to research; (4)produce ideas, analysis and advice; (5)communicate its findings to policy-makers and public opinion; (6)not be responsible for government operations; (7)maintain research freedom and independence from specific interests; (8) not grant degrees or have training as its primary activity; and (9) Seek, explicitly or implicitly, to act in the public interest.

The precise definition of think tank is given by Talbot (2007) cited in (Teitz, 2009) as ‘an organization that conducts research on policy issues and then makes its recommendations available to policy makers, opinion leaders, and the citizenry’.

### 2.2. Waves of think tanks development

The term “think tank” dates back to the 1940s in the United States, when American government elites-borrowing from the military jargon for secure rooms where plans could be discussed – encouraged the establishment of dedicated places (‘tanks’) to think strategically about the post-war world. The first such place was notably the RAND (R& D) Corporation, then very close to the Department of War/Defense. Yet it can be argued that – apart

from the various centers devoted to advocating social ‘progress’ created at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in both the US and Europe (the London School of Economics was one) – it was the Great War that first prompted the creation of independent centers of research to focus on topics of public interest, notably the prevention of future armed conflicts (Missiroli & Ioannides, 2012). There are three broad waves of think tank development: the first generation of think tank prior to World War II; the second wave of Cold War; and third, the global think tank boom from the 1980s onward (Abelson, 2000; Stone, 2006).

First generation think tanks were responses to societal and economic problems caused by urbanization, industrialization, expansion of universities with increased literacy and professionalization of public service, and economic growth. At this time, think emerged in North America and British dominions. The favorable political opportunities and policy niches for these think tanks were: the strong philanthropic sector, a conducive tax system, weak political parties, a pluralistic political system, and the division of powers in its federal structure as well as between executive and legislature of the United States. Organizations such as the Brookings Institution, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fund, and the Russell Sage Foundation in the United States, and the Fabian Society and National Institute for Economic and Social Research in the UK are typical of the first wave.

The second wave of think tank developments during the post-World War II era was characterized by the emergence of government contract research institutions. These think tanks had the mission of researching and analyzing social problems such as the inner city and urban decline, state work-welfare programs, Medicare payments, transport policy, and so forth. Many of the second generation think tanks pioneered applications of new statistical techniques, economic modeling and cost-benefit analysis.

From the 1980s, a world-wide boom of think tanks was apparent. In Anglo-American political systems, think tank communities matured. In this period, specialization has evolved into the issues like environment, women’s policy, business ethics, and concern for democracy promotion.

### **2.3. The Role of think tanks**

Study indicate that demand for policy advice has been increasing for the past two decades: on a general level, factors such as the rising complexity of issues, globalization and globalized policy problems from climate change to international terrorism, interdependence of the world nations after the end of the Cold War. More specifically, the pressure on political and administrative officials to take decisions in various policy areas simultaneously and rather quickly has triggered demand for outside help. There is insufficient policy-developing capacity of administrative units and other participants in the policy process as a major push factor for the importance of think tanks. Decision-makers and the media as well as the wider public in developed nations seem to agree in principle, that science and scholarship can make a positive contribution to the development of sound policies. There is also a genuine interest in “best-practice”-reports, in comparative studies how neighboring countries are coping with similar problems and how experts see the potential for policy transfer across nations or regions(Thunert, 2008) .

Think tank serves as a bridge between knowledge and policy (power). The law of specialization and the constraint of time in the modern political systems amplify the need for think tanks. Academics mainly focus on the production of knowledge as they do not have the time to deal with the full range of different issues that policy makers necessarily cover. Similarly, policy makers do not have the time and expertise to conduct in-depth research into all of the topics for policy formulation and evaluation. These institutions link the roles of policy maker and academic by conducting in-depth analysis of certain issues and presenting this research in easy to-read form for policy makers (McGann & Johnson, 2005).

Think tanks have sought to fill the “operational gap” of policymakers’, lack of access to the information and tools needed to respond to contemporary issues. It is here, in part, that think tanks are so important in filtering, sorting, synthesizing and providing information to policymakers (Edwards, 2010; McGann, 2012). These institutions often act as a bridge between the academic and policy-making communities and between states and civil society, serving in the public interest as independent voices that translate applied and basic research into a language and form that is understandable, reliable, and accessible for policymakers and the public (McGann, 2012).

One of the most important functions of think tanks is the specialized research activity that leads to policy analysis which is another very important role of think-tank (Stone, 2006). For Kraft and Furlong (2004), policy analysis is a systematic and organized way of evaluating policy alternatives or existing government programs. It is also argued that the main objective of policy analysis the systematic comparison and evaluation of alternatives available to public actors for solving social problems. The style employed is the synthesis of existing or would-be policy situations to predict consequences of the alternative policy options (Weimer and Vining 2011). Policy analysis is also considered as the description and explanation of the causes and consequences of government activity. It therefore, attempts to focus on providing explanation and suggestion rather than prescription which leads to sound policy decisions. The interplay of applying knowledge to policy problems is complemented by strategic practices to develop advisory ties to government, industry or the public

as brokers of policy analysis. This implies that think tank policy analysis is not simply an intellectual but it is also action-oriented, reliant on policy entrepreneurship, institution building, and the competitiveness of think tanks in the market-place of ideas (Stone, 2006). They can further play the role of promoting more objective, evidence-based decision making; strengthening public policy debates; and they are so important in filtering, sorting, synthesizing and providing information to policy makers.

Their function is unique, as they provide public policy research, analysis and advice, are non-profit, and operate independently from governments and political parties. While the primary function of these civil society organizations is to help government understand and make informed choices about issues of domestic and international concern, they also have a number of other critical roles, including:

- Playing a mediating function between the government and the public that helps build trust and confidence in public officials;
- Serving as an informed and independent voice in policy debates;
- Identifying, articulating, and evaluating current policy issues, proposals and programs;
- Transforming ideas and emerging problems into policy issues;
- Interpreting issues, events and policies for the electronic and print media thus facilitating public understanding of domestic and international policy issues;
- Providing a constructive forum for the exchange of ideas and information between key stakeholders in the policy formulation process;
- Facilitating the construction of “issue networks”;
- Providing a supply of personnel for the legislative and executive branches of government;
- Challenging the conventional wisdom, standard operating procedures and business as usual of bureaucrats and elected officials.
- framing policy issues,
- researching and writing books, articles, policy briefs and monographs, conducting evaluations of government programs;
- disseminating their research findings and conducting various outreach activities (public testimony before congress, media appearances and speeches); creating networks and exchanges via workshops, seminars, and briefings; and supporting midcareer and senior government officials when they are out of office.

According to Haass (2002), think tanks in USA have five important roles that enhance the transformation of societies, namely, generating original ideas and options for policy, supplying a ready pool of experts for employment in government, offering venues for high-level discussions, educating citizens about the world, and supplementing official efforts to mediate and resolve conflict.

Think tanks contribute in the transformation of societies to the status where the benefits of development can be achieved. First, research organizations may be influential in producing new policy ideas, in addition to research. For instance, ideas ranging from welfare reform, deregulation, school vouchers, and privatization have been originated and publicized by think-tanks in USA. Second, research and its dissemination may play a significant role in the formation of public opinion, indirectly influencing decision makers; third, there are other realms of decision making, including administrative and judicial, in which important choices are made.(Teitz, 2009)

With reference to the work by Braml (2006), the role of think tank can be summarized into three categories: research role, transformation and interpretation role, and convocation and networking role. (1) *Research role*: It seeks to have a distinct (type of) message that is intended (and perceived as) to “make a difference,” and especially to make a think tank’s voice distinct from other organizations’ and think tanks’ contributions to the public debate, which may be based on its own “independent” original, or synthesized research and expertise. (2) *Transmission and interpretation role*: It seeks to get this “message” out and across and acted upon by transmitting and interpreting its research and advice through different channels of communication. (3) *Convocation, networking, elite transfer and recruiting role*: Given the specific gate keeping mechanisms associated with each of the channels of communication they are dependent upon makes it more often than not necessary for think tanks to make a convocational effort of assembling people, providing them with a forum for exchange and networking, or identifying, recruiting, hosting and sending messengers to convey their ideas and expertise into the public debate.

In nut shell, think tanks play a key role in shaping policy agendas and in generating and communicating relevant research findings to policy actors in a timely fashion. There is growing recognition in the literature of the knowledge-policy interface about their key role. They are organizations that (1) produce knowledge products which inform decision making on specific policy issues and (2) seek to influence policy content.

#### 2.4. Think tanks and Social transformation

Social transformation lies at the radical end of conceptions of social change (Brennan, King, and Lebeau, 2004). It implies at the very least some fundamental changes in society's core institutions, the polity and the economy, with major implications for relationships between social groups or classes, and for the means of the creation and distribution of wealth, power and status. Within these broad features of social transformation, it is possible to discern dramatic moments of transformation in particular societies or regions. The collapse of communism in the late eighties in Central and Eastern Europe and the demise of the apartheid regime in South Africa a few years later are two such cases. There are others, for example, when dictatorial or colonial powers fall. At more local levels, the collapse of a traditional industry and employment may have equally dramatic and transformative effects.

For the transformation process, two distinct stages can be captured. There is firstly the period of 'removing the old': of regime overthrow and the events leading up to it. The second period is of 'building the new': of reconstruction, of institution-building, of forming new social relationships at home and new alliances abroad, of (attempted) economic regeneration and redistribution. The second period is of uncertain length because the initial dramatic changes of transformation will gradually merge into more evolutionary processes.

Generally speaking, the transformative roles of think tanks can be put under four broad dimensions (Brennan et al., 2004):

- *the economy*: the formation of human capital;
- *the polity*: the creation and sustenance of state and civil institutions; the selection and socialization of political and social elites;
- *the social structure and cultural*: the basis of social stratification, the extent and mechanisms of mobility for different groups. This entails the production and dissemination of ideas, exerting influence upon and providing critique of the above.

#### 2.5. Competences of think tanks and Factors affecting the success of think tanks

There are a number of competences required by think tanks. Some of notable competences include credibility, independent research, autonomy status, relevance in policy analysis, and public engagement.

- **Credibility**: providing "products" that are sound and of high standard.
- **Independent Research**: think tanks must be able to set their own research agenda, determine their own methodology and theoretical framework, and pursue the investigation of issues independently.
- **Autonomy Status**: think tanks should enjoy a good degree of autonomy in matters related to their core responsibilities.
- **Policy Analysis**: engaging policy relevant research for the purpose of informing decision - makers and making appropriate interventions in the policy process.
- **Public Engagement**: encouraging public participation in the decision - making process.

The political context has a strong influence on the potential role of policy research institutions. The structure and operations of political institutions are critical determinants of the level of activity and type of think tanks in a given country. Governments that resist the voicing of independent opinions and any form of policy dissent are least likely to have a flourishing think tank sector. The other important fundamental situation that facilitates the success level of think tanks is reliable philanthropic culture. Philanthropic culture entails the legal, tax and organizational structure that makes private, independent support for non-governmental organizations possible. This culture presents in Canada, British and USA where there is the implementation of tax incentives and legal framework that supports charitable giving and philanthropy (McGann & Johnson, 2005).

Factors affecting the success of think tanks broadly can be grouped as organization variables and exogenous variables (Alcázar, Balarín, Weerakoon, and Eboh, 2012). Endogenous/ organizational variables include the following:

- a. **Mission statements**: whether the organization considers itself to be more inclined towards independent, academically sound, research production; advocacy of particular ideas and/or policies: or knowledge transfer towards the policy sector
- b. **Main functions performed by the organization**: - whether the organization is mainly concerned with Information production, Policy advocacy, Networking, Academic production and/or educational activities;
- c. **Organizational characteristics and resources**: This entails issues related to:
  - **Origins and evolution of the organization**;
  - **Governance structures**: Strategic management and administration;
  - **Funding**: Level, types, quality and stability of financial support; Financial sustainability is perhaps the biggest challenge for think tanks across the globe. The situation is more acute in developing countries in the South. McGann and Weaver (2000: 16) observe, 'In the Middle East, Africa, Asia

and Latin America, think tanks face the problem of not having either tax laws or philanthropic traditions that favor support for independent public policy research.’

- Human resources (Entry requirements, ability to recruit and retain leading scholars and analysts, Incentive structures)
- d. Research management: are topics defined on the basis of the availability of funds and/or in relation to important issues in the national/regional/global political agenda?
- e. Type of research produced: Applied research, Academic research, Data/information, Producing and analyzing arguments, considering also the degree of domestic/international (regional/global) focus of the research produced.
- f. Primary audiences of the research produced: Politicians, Civil society and Academia
- g. Communication and diffusion strategies deployed by the organization, including strategies and tools for institutional outreach, strategies and tools for research dissemination, relationships with policymakers and relationships with other relevant actors
- h. Networks: Proximity and access to decision-makers and other policy elites, academic communities and the media

In addition to the endogenous variables affecting the roles of think tanks, there are exogenous variables that include:

- a. Political-institutional variables including: extent of civil and political freedoms in the country, existence of political demand for research, windows of opportunity for TTs to make an impact on policy (economic, political or social crises), characteristics of the bureaucracy and degree of government capacity, degree of political stability/instability and existence of a structured and competitive political party system
- b. Media: characteristics of the local media and relationships between research producers and the media (if there is independent credible media).
- c. Policy linkages: general relation of TTs with the policy making community, policy environment and its openness to research

## 2.6. Some observations about think-tanks in Ethiopia

As in previous sections, we describe think-tanks broadly as ‘organizations’ that produce research products with the aim of creating policy debates, informing decision-makers and making appropriate interventions in the policy process. They may encompass non-governmental organization (NGO) think-tanks, government-affiliated research institutes, university research centers, consultancies, informal groups of academics and individuals who advise governments, such as intellectuals, consultants and foreign experts.

Although the think-tank sector in other parts of the world has been well established ever since the 1960s, in Ethiopia context, it took time for the sector to be well established and to flourish. This was mainly due to the growing suspicion and marginalization of the sector and the fear that its growth will agitate for regime change and thus pose threat to the power of the ruling elite. The establishment of think tanks and their growth appears to be at least partially tied to a series of major political, social and economic events.

The mushrooming of think tanks in Ethiopia in 1990s occurred due to the change of government system from unitary-dictatorship to the current federal arrangement. The typologies of think-tanks can be based on their affiliations. This basis yields five possible groupings of Think tanks: (i) academic research centers in universities; (ii) government research centers; (iii) party think tanks (NGO non-profit) and (iv) associated research centers of various interest groups (e.g. lobbies) and (v) Free standing or independent think tanks. According to the Global Go to Think Tanks Report 2013, there are 25 think-tanks in Ethiopia (McGann, 2013). Think-tanks can be categorized under two-main types in Ethiopia: government initiated/party-affiliated and civil society affiliated. In order to distinguish their similarities and differences, let us briefly see each separately.

### 2.6.1. Civil society affiliated think-tanks

Until the mid-1990s, the growth of the voluntary sector was quite slow by international standards, and by the end of the 1980s the strength of the sector was relatively small compared to many African countries as well as to the size of the country’s population. By the latter part of the 1980s there were perhaps sixty to sixty-five NGOs operating in the country of which the great majority were international organizations. After the fall of the Derg, there was a steady increase all through the 1990s, and accelerated growth from the end of the decade onwards. Think tanks under this category are independent, non-partisan, and nonprofit membership organization, which have been engaged in undertaking policy-oriented research, delivering training and promoting public debate for the transformation of Ethiopian economic, political and social situations. Like government initiated think tanks, civil society affiliated think-tanks have been created in 1990s following the current government (Ethiopian Federal Democratic Republic Government) in Ethiopia in taking over the power. Forum for Social Studies (FSS), Ethiopian Economics Association (EEA), and Ethiopian Initiative for Development, Association of Ethiopian Microfinance Institutions (AEMFI), Ethiopian Development Research Institute, and Inter Africa Group (IAG)

are some of the notable think tanks in this category. Following the enactment of the new government proclamation on charities and civil societies (Proc. No. 621/2008), the constitutions of civil society affiliated think-tanks have been revised by incorporating the requirements and provisions of the law and many of these think-tanks have been registered as ‘Ethiopian Residents Charity’.

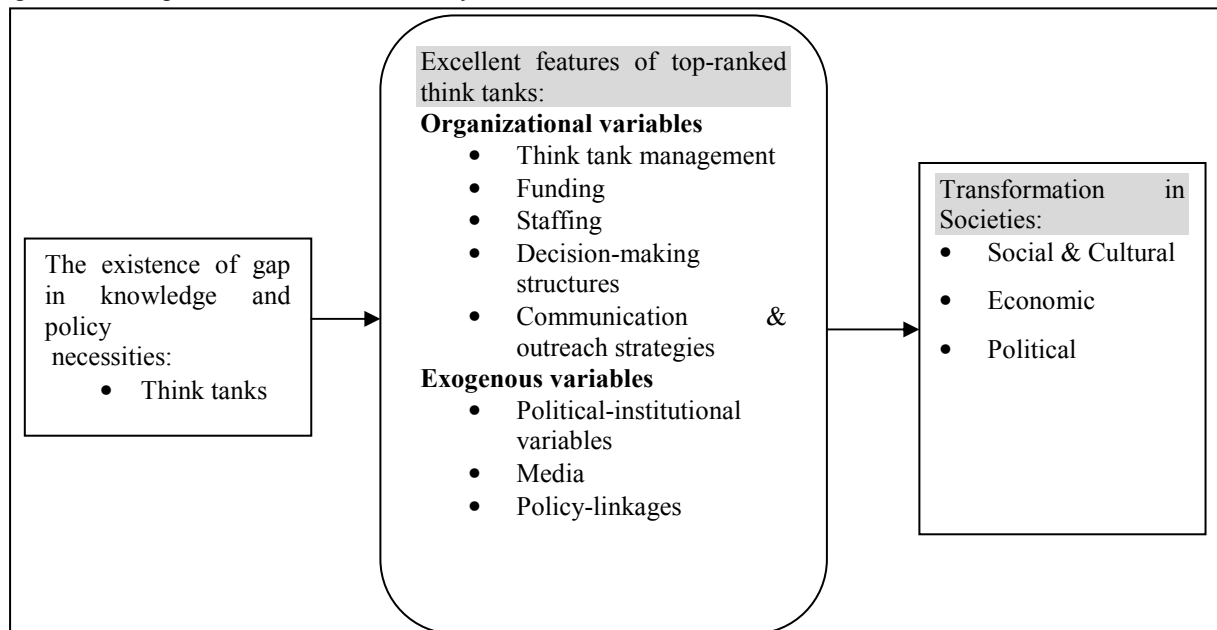
**2.6.2. Government affiliated/party affiliated think-tanks**

They have been created by the initiative of the current Ethiopian Government since 1996 and they are semi-autonomous research centers. Their primary mission is to conduct research on the development of the Ethiopian economy, social, and political aspects and to disseminate the results. Under this category, the think-tanks in Ethiopia are: Ethiopian International Institute for Peace and Development, Ethiopian Development Research Institute (EDRI), Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research (EIAR), and Environmental Economics Policy Forum for Ethiopia.

**2.7. Conceptual framework of the study**

The study of think tanks can be viewed from institutional (organizational) and policy process dimensions. The institutional view explains what makes a think tank successful where as the policy process tries to address the question, ‘how do ideas influence policies(Krastev, 2001). Transformation involves structural changes in the major institutions of governance and the society at large. It should guarantee improved living standard, Per Capital Income, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and other basic Socio-economic indicators such as food, shelter, clothing and health for the substantial majority of the citizenry. Thus, on the whole, transformation can be said to be a total package that involves every facet of the individual, organization or society. It is meant to be a vehicle for a better society where virtually everyone will be reasonably comfortable. For the purpose of this study, transformation in societies can be viewed from social/cultural, economic and political dimensions. Think tanks can play the transformative roles and to bridge the gap of knowledge and policy to the extent that they have some competencies or excellent features (internal and exogenous factors). The conceptual framework is shown by figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study



(Source: adapted from Thunert (2008) ; McGann and Johnson (2005)

**3. Methodology of the study**

The study employs in-depth desk literature review and document reviews in order to conceptualize/theorize the excellence features of think-tanks and the role of think-tanks. Following that, structured questionnaire on the nature and role of think tanks was sent for the 100 top ranked think tanks through survey monkey technique. From these 100 think tanks, 30 of the world’s top think tanks responded the survey monkey questionnaire. The list and ranking of think tanks were obtained from the data of 2013 Global Go to Think Tanks Index Report by McGann. Similarly, structured questionnaire on the challenges facing think tanks was sent for 250 randomly selected think tanks in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA); 52 of them responded the survey monkey questionnaire. In addition, data have been obtained through various think tank websites and correspondence with their staff.

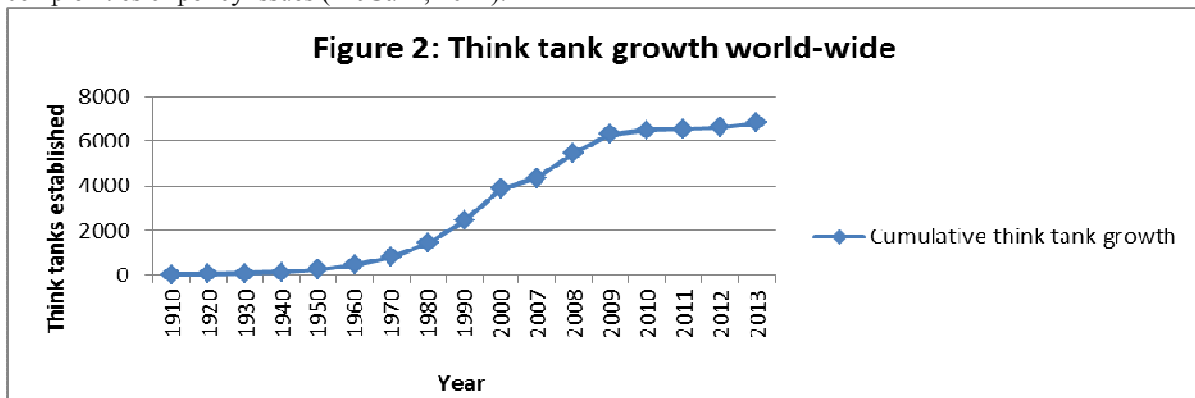
For analysis purpose, the study employs both quantitative and qualitative data techniques by using the

analytical software of SPSS. Quantitative data collected from the field survey through interview were analyzed by using the analytical software SPSS for windows (version 17). Excel was also used in some cases for computation of data. Descriptive statistics, particularly percentage and frequency were computed and presented by using tables and graphs/figures. According to the nature of this study, some of data sets were qualitative in nature. This necessitated transformation of attributes through aggregation and quantification by weighting, scoring and computing index values. For all variables that were designed and collected by likert-scale in level of agreement, the mean was applied by summing all the answers or scores and dividing by the total number. In addition to the quantitative data analysis techniques, narration and content analysis were done for qualitative with reference to the literature review.

#### 4. Results and Discussions

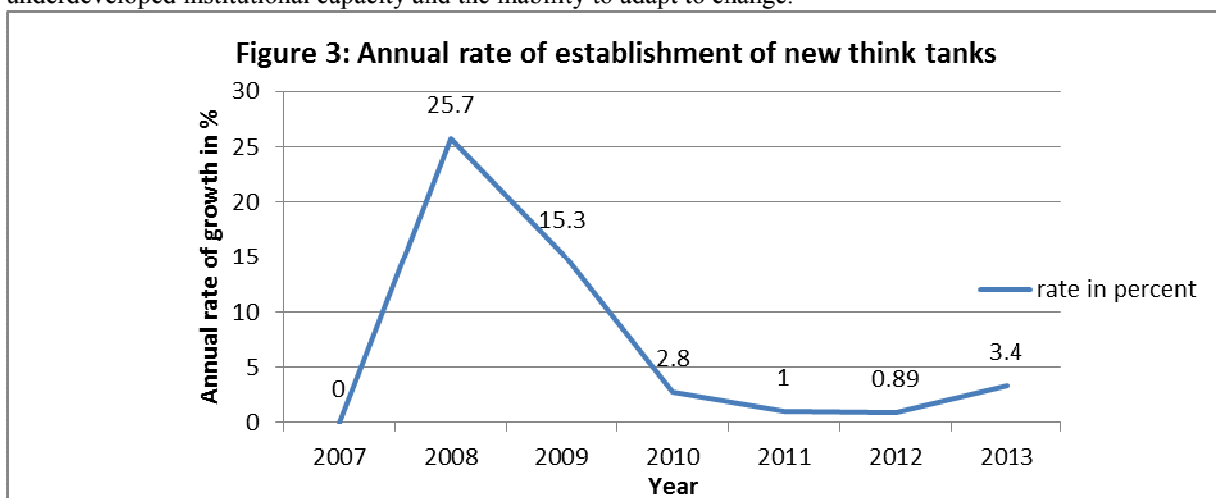
##### 4.1. Think-tank sector at the global level: An organizational overview

The cumulative number of think tanks has been increasing from year to year as shown by figure 2. In 2013, the total number think tanks in the world become 6826 though many of them are found in United States and Europe. Some of the driving forces for the growth of the think tanks include the growth of the knowledge-based economy as a result of globalization, the increase in demands of independent information and analyses by number of institutions including international actors, democratization and decentralization of power, and the ever increasing complexities of policy issues (McGann, 2012).



Source: (McGann, 2012); McGann (2013)

In despite of the increased cumulative number of think tanks in the world, the annual rate of establishment of think tanks has declined in the recent years. For instance, considering 2007 as a base year, the annual growth rate of think tanks declined from 25.7 percent in 2008 to 3.4 percent in 2013 even 0.89 percent in 2012 (see figure 3). According to McGann (2012), such decline trend in annual rate of growth of think tanks in recent years is attributable to factors such as political and regulatory environment hostile to think tanks and NGOs in many countries; decrease funding for policy research by public and private donors; public and private donors move to short term, project specific funding instead of investing in ideas and institutions; and underdeveloped institutional capacity and the inability to adapt to change.



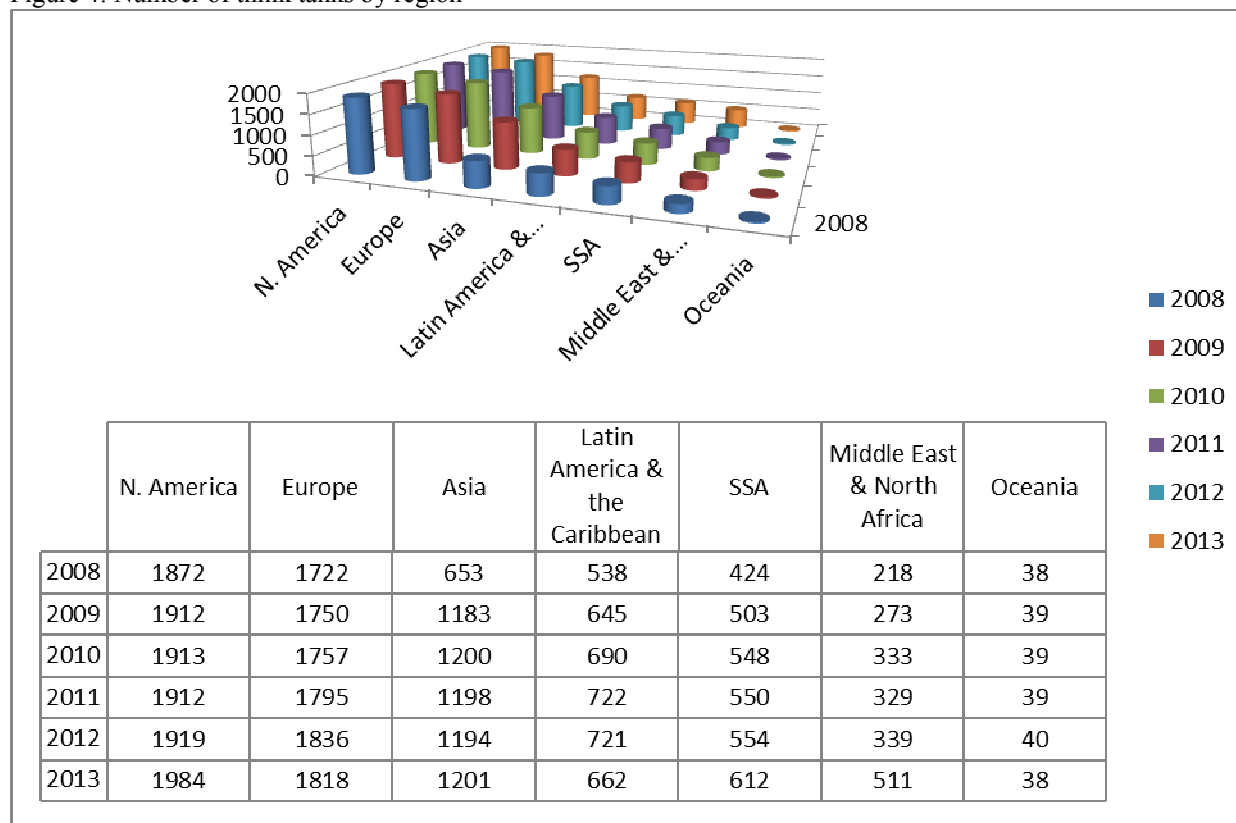
Cumulative No of think tanks	4348	5465	6305	6480	6545	6603	6826
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Source: (McGann, 2012); McGann (2013)



The other reason for the decline in the rate growth of think tanks is the disproportional distribution of think tanks across the regions of the world. If we simply consider the 2013 number of think tanks by world region, 29 percent, 26.6 percent, 17.6 percent of the total 6826 think tanks are found in North America, Europe, and Asia respectively where as only one fourth of the think tanks are found in the remaining four the world regions (only 9.7 percent, 8.9 percent 7.5.percent and 0.6 percent of think tanks are found in Latin & the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Middle East & North Africa and the Oceania respectively). Figure 4 shows the number of think tanks by regions from 2008 up to 2013.

Figure 4: Number of think tanks by region



Source: the Global Go to Think Tank Index Report, 2008-2013

#### 4.2. The distribution of the world top-ranked think tanks

So far the comprehensive and the structured rankings of think tanks at global level have been produced by think tanks and civil societies program since 2007 (McGann, 2013). In the recent 2013 ranking index, 150 are ranked as Top Think Tanks Worldwide. The ranking criteria include “access to elites in the area of policymaking, media and academia,” the “number of recommendations to policymakers,” “staff serving advisory roles to policymakers,” “awards given to scholars,” and “success in challenging the traditional wisdom of policymakers and in generating innovative policy ideas and programs.”

Before moving to the transformative roles of the top ranked think tanks, let us look their distribution by major countries and world regions. In reference to the 100 top ranked top think tanks in 2003, both United Kingdom (UK) and the BRICS had 16 percent of the top ranked think tanks; United States (11%), Germany (9%), Belgium (5%), Republic of Korea (4%), Spain (4%) and Singapore (3%). The remaining 32 percent of the top ranked think tanks were found in different 23 countries with utmost of 1-2 think tanks in each of these countries. Table 1 reveals the top ranked think tanks by major countries.

Table 1: The top ranked think-tanks (n=100) by major countries

Home country	Frequency	Percent
United States	11	11.0
UK	16	16.0
BRICS <sup>1</sup>	16	16.0
Germany	9	9.0
Belgium	5	5.0
Republic of Korea	4	4.0
Spain	4	4.0
Singapore	3	3.0
Other countries <sup>2</sup>	32	32.0
Total	100	100.0

Source: data from McGann (2013)

For further analysis of the distribution of the world's top think tanks, table 2 shows the cross tabulation of home country of the think tank and the top-ranked think tanks by quartile. The first quartile of the top ranked think tanks (20%) are found only in seven countries, namely United States having 9 top ranked think tanks, UK (4), Germany (2) and Belgium (2), Sweden (1), Japan (1) and china(1). This shows that there is clear relationship between the country's level of development and the presence of top-ranked think tanks. In this regard, Abelson (2000) concludes that highly fragmented and decentralized nature of the political system, combined with a weak party system, have contributed to the development and proliferation of think tanks including the top-ranked ones in the countries like United States, UK and Germany. In this highly permeable environment, think tanks have numerous opportunities or access points to reach policy-makers.

Table 2: Home country of the think tank \* the top-ranked think tanks by Quartile Cross tabulation

Home country of the think tank	The top-ranked think tanks by Quartile					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
United States	9	2	0	0	0	11
UK	4	2	6	2	2	16
BRICS	1 <sup>3</sup>	4	3	3	5	16
Germany	2	3	2	0	2	9
Belgium	2	2	0	1	0	5
Republic of Korea	0	0	2	2	0	4
Spain	0	0	1	2	1	4
Singapore	0	0	0	2	1	3
Other countries	2 <sup>4</sup>	7	6	8	9	32
Total	20	20	20	20	20	100

Source: data from (McGann, 2013)

The distribution of top-ranked think tanks by the world regions is depicted in table 3. Majority of these think tanks (62%) are found in Europe and North America. In Asia, there are 24 percent of the top-ranked think tanks. The other world regions represented by a few countries have only 14 percent of the top-ranked think tanks. For example, only 6 percent of the top ranked think tanks are found in SSA represented by only two countries (South Africa and Kenya).

<sup>1</sup> BRICS is the acronym for an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> . Under this category, there are 23 countries which means each country has only 1 or 2 top-ranked think tanks

<sup>3</sup> This think tank is found in China

<sup>4</sup> One is found in Sweden and the other one is in Japan

Table 3: Top-ranked Think tanks by Region

World Regions	Frequency	Percent
N. America	13	13.0
Europe	49	49.0
Asia	24	24.0
Latin America & the Caribbean	5	5.0
SSA	6	6.0
Middle East & North Africa	2	2.0
Oceania	1	1.0
Total	100	100.0

Source: Data from (McGann, 2013)

### 4.3. The Role of Think-tanks in the transformation of Societies

Currently, public policies involve a large number of domestic and international players looking to influence them, such as international organizations, foreign governments, interest groups, experts, academics and think tanks. Think Tanks (also called policy institutes) are becoming increasingly more important in a world of growing complexity where decision making isn't exclusively in the hands of the government (Abelson, 2014). They are mainly responsible to conduct independent research, engage in advocacy and develop innovative solutions to problems in areas such as economics, social sciences, public policies and foreign policy.

Table 4 indicates the key roles played by the world's top think tanks on the basis of their responses by likert-scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being 'not at all important' and 5 being 'most important'. In this regard, all of the sampled think tanks assume that producing original public policy oriented research and offering advice for policy makers on immediate issues as their most important role with the mean value of 5. The next most important role of think tanks are: collecting and disseminating existing research for policy makers (with the mean of 4.67), evaluating existing or proposed government programs (the mean of 4.67); facilitating a dialogue among networks of decision makers (the mean of 4.33). Following these, think tanks consider translating academic ideas into terms understandable to the public and producing original academic ideas as roles by the mean values of 4. The training and encouraging talented people for public service as a role of think tank was mentioned by the mean of 3.67 like conducting government contract research.

The least represented roles of think tanks are providing a venue for past and current government officials (with the mean of 3.33) and improving political participation within the general public (2.67).

Table 4: The key roles played by the top-ranked think tanks (N=30)

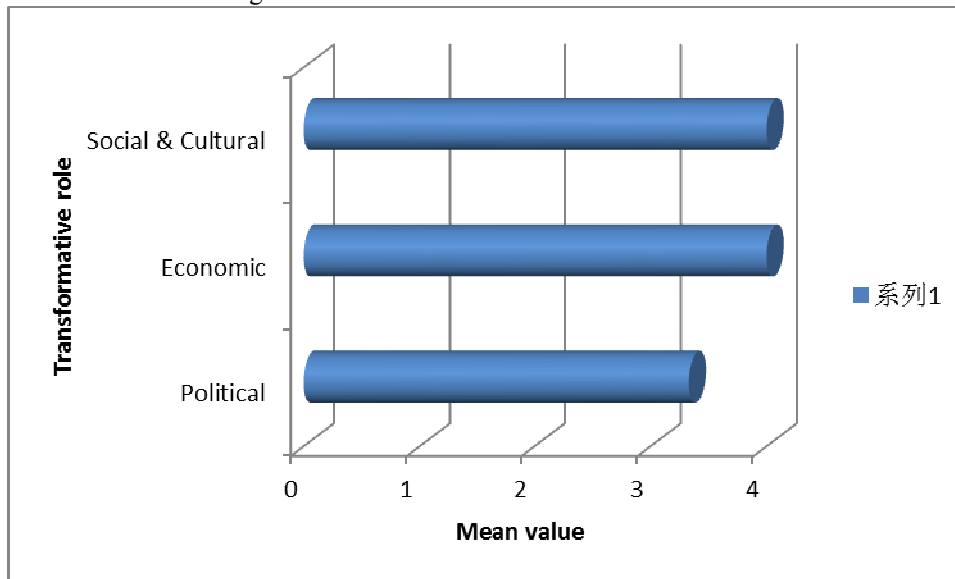
Potential roles	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Producing original public policy oriented research	5	5	5.00	.000
Offering advice for policy makers on immediate issues	5	5	5.00	.000
Collecting and disseminating existing research for policy makers	4	5	4.67	.479
Evaluating existing or proposed government programs	4	5	4.67	.479
Facilitating a dialogue among networks of decision makers	3	5	4.33	.959
Translating academic ideas into terms understandable to the public	3	5	4.00	.830
Producing original academic research	2	5	4.00	1.438
Training and encouraging talented people for public service	3	4	3.67	.479
Conducting government contract research	3	4	3.67	.479
Providing a venue for past and current government officials	3	4	3.33	.479
Improving political participation within the general public	2	3	2.67	.479

(Source: Survey monkey, 2014)

More specifically, the transformation roles of think tanks can be depicted by figure 5. The top-ranked think tanks claimed that they are playing transformative roles in the societies. As measured by the mean value of rating scales (1-not significant, 2-slightly significant, 3-fairly significant, 4-very significant), think tanks have contributed very significantly (mean of 4) for the economic transformation in terms of formulation of human capital. Similarly, their social/cultural transformation roles in terms of the production and dissemination of ideas, exerting influence upon and providing critique of the policies and polity systems rated as the mean value of 4.

On the other hand, they have played minimal role in the political transformation as manifested by enhanced participation in policy making processes which results in informed policies and enhanced good governance and democracy

Figure 5: The transformation roles of think tanks



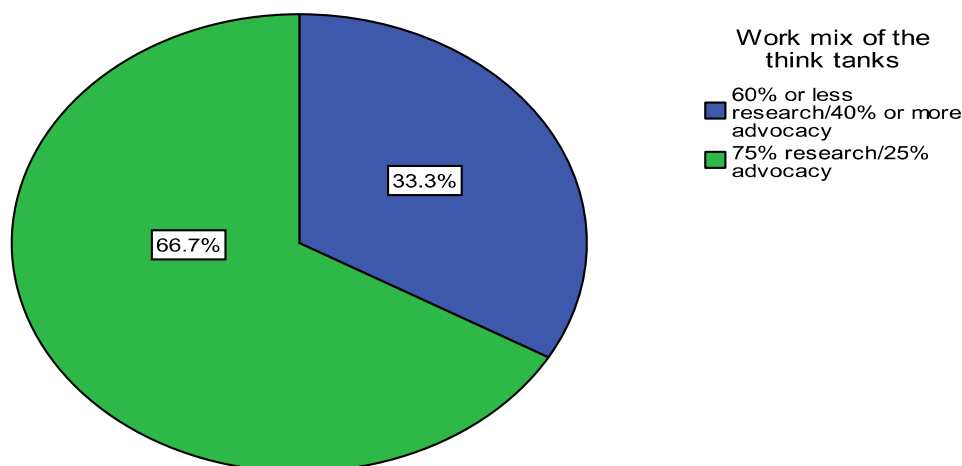
(Source: Survey monkey, 2014)

#### 4.4. Excellent Features of the World’s top think-tanks

The excellent features of the world’s top think tanks can be analyzed from the dimensions that include the work mix, organization/structure, orientation/philosophy, dissemination and policy outreach, and funding.

One of the important excellent features of successful think tank is whether it gives due attention for the policy oriented research activities. In this regard, 66.7 % of the sampled top-ranked think tanks engage in the mix of 75 percent of their time and budget in the research and 25 percent in the advocacy works. The remaining 33.7% of the think tanks engage in the work mix of 60% or less research/40% or more advocacy works (see figure 6).

Figure 6: Work mix of the think tank



(Source: Survey monkey, 2014)

Almost, all sampled top think tanks engage in applied research reflecting policy-oriented analysis. The scope of their researches addresses ranging from domestic perspectives to the global level. The majority of the top-ranked think tanks in the sample (66.7%) produce their research in-house. The majority of think tanks can be classified somewhere in between. Nearly 70% of think tanks work on economic issues; 26% specialize in labor market issues and 22% focus on social policy. In addition, 27% of institutes deal with foreign and security policy, and 24% devote themselves to issues of International politics and policies. Approximately 20% of think tanks deal with issues such as education, the environment, urban politics and globalization. There are fewer think tanks (approximately 10-15%) focusing on health care issues, sociology, development policy, finance and local

politics as well as science, technology and energy.

Table 5: Type, scope and nature of researches undertaken by the think-tanks (n=30)

Items	Response options	Frequency	%
1. Types of research produced	Academic research	-	-
	Applied research	30	100%
	Mixed approach	-	-
	Total	30	100%
2. Scope of the research produced	Domestic	-	-
	International at regional level	-	-
	International at global level	-	-
	Mixed	30	100%
	Total	30	100%
3. Ways of determining the research topics	On the basis of the availability of funds	-	-
	In relation to important issues in the national/regional & global political agenda	-	-
	Mixed approach	30	100%
	Total	30	100%
4. Ways of undertaking research projects	Internally	20	66.7
	Externally	-	-
	Mixed	10	33.3
	Total	30	100%

(Source: Survey monkey, 2014)

Most of the world's top think tanks in the sample are active on three levels: within the scientific community, in direct policy consulting and in contacts with the general public via the media. 90% of these think tanks produce books to disseminate their research. An equally large percentage of 87% potentially uses television and radio interviews to achieve similar goals. 67% of think tanks publish articles in scholarly journals, while 40% are involved in publishing journals themselves. Half of the sampled think tanks edit and distribute newsletters. One third of the think tanks use conferences and seminars, but only 14% of the institutes contribute to newspapers, publish policy briefs. While there is a global increase in the production of policy briefs and position papers, the move away from producing books. The summarized form for the targets of think tanks is presented in table 6 using the mean values as computed from likert-scales.

Table 6: Targets of think tanks

Target of think-tanks	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
The extent to which think tanks are engaged with direct policy makers	5	5	5.00	.000
The extent to which think tanks are engaged with bureaucracies of government ministries	4	5	4.67	.479
The extent to which think tanks are engaged with scientific community	4	5	4.67	.479
The extent to which think tanks are engaged with international level of governance	4	5	4.33	.479
The extent to which think tanks are engaged with members of the public affected by the policies	3	5	4.33	.959
The extent to which think tanks are engaged with media	3	5	4.33	.959
The extent to which think tanks are engaged with private sector	3	5	4.00	.830
The extent to which think tanks are engaged with NGOs	3	5	3.67	.959
The extent to which think tanks are engaged with political parties	3	4	3.33	.479

(Source: Survey monkey, 2014)

#### 4.5. The Major challenges facing Think-tanks in SSA

Organizational issues and factors are the key to understanding the phenomenon of think tanks and evaluating their effectiveness. Some of the key organizational issues that are relevant for think tanks in SSA include financial sustainability, maintaining autonomy in all areas from selection of research agenda to publication and communication of findings etc. These issues are discussed below on the basis of survey monkey result indicated in table 7 (factor analysis output).

**Financial sustainability:** Financial sustainability is perhaps the biggest challenge for think tanks across the globe. The situation is more acute in developing countries in SSA. Think tanks face the problem of not having either tax laws or philanthropic traditions that favor support for independent public policy research. Funding is also a major issue for think tanks in SSA. Much of the growth of think tanks is attributable to donor

funding. Apart from some government funded think tanks, most of the think tanks depend on consultancy contracts from donors and other agencies. Without steady sources of income, some think tanks struggle to recruit and retain qualified staff to carry out research initiatives. Funding constraints, thus, can affect quality of research outputs. The most important source of income for think tanks in SSA is still the state as 52% of think tanks in our sample received primarily public funding and 23% enjoy mixed public and private funding. Only 25% the think tanks are funded more or less exclusively by private sources.

**Maintaining long term research agenda:** the majority of think tanks in SSA are dependent on funding of individual research projects. Donor agencies and other organizations contract think tanks to carry out specific research initiatives. These types of contracted research originate from the requirements of the donor agencies. Thus, some think tanks function more like consultancy agencies, who for fund raising purposes are obliged to accept the terms of reference that are offered by the donors. The majority of the policy research organizations function as a hybrid of think tank that set and retain a sense of their own research agenda and those who do consultancy type of work, with terms of reference set by external agencies.

Greater dependence on finances derived from donor funded research projects makes it difficult to retain focus on a long- term thematic agenda. Think tanks are forced to take up research projects in a variety of thematic areas, which donors are interested in. Sometimes, they even depart from their core research interests and competencies. Furthermore, there are little synergies between the various projects for which consultancy contracts are taken up by the think tanks. Long term work on any specific theme is difficult under these circumstances. Project based funding can also limit the scope to build longer term organizational capacities (Abelson, 2014; Alcázar et al., 2012).

**Maintaining structural autonomy:** Structural autonomy is a specific issue for public think tanks because of the nature of their affiliation with the government. These organizations encounter the challenge of retaining policy autonomy, and manage the relations with government in power. Especially, public think tanks have found it extremely difficult to be critical of government policies.

**Communication:** Communication is a challenge for many think tanks in SSA. Some of the institutions have not developed the skills needed to design and implement effective communication and advocacy strategies. Such challenges often arise because of resource constraints. Furthermore, some researchers do not perceive the need to actively communicate their findings. They see themselves as researchers and not as communicators or advocates of their research. There might be circumstances in which researchers do want to communicate their research, but they may lack the skills to do it.

Some of the other institutional challenges include the capacity to handle the managerial and technical tasks involved in implementation of partnerships, scaling up, policy monitoring, responsiveness to policy contexts, and so forth. Issues related to governance and professional integrity can also affect think tanks. These factors can undermine research quality and affect organizations' credibility.

Table 7: Factor analysis by Rotated Component Matrix<sup>1</sup>

Items	Components and their Eigen values			
	1	2	3	4
Lack of sustainable funding as a challenge facing think tank	.911			
The problem of financial independence	.911			
Restrictive political environment for think tanks	.821			
Philanthropic culture is underdeveloped		.832		
Difficulty of getting qualified experts		.659		
Shifting priorities of international donors		.659		
Weak collaboration and networking with other think tanks			.766	
Weak autonomy status in determining the research agenda			.747	
The think tank is too technocratic and elitist			.659	
Demand for applied policy research/policy advice is low				.575

(Source: Survey monkey, 2014)

#### 4.6. Lesson Drawn for think-tanks in SSA

This study indicates that the top-ranked think tanks continue to play a critical role in the processes of agenda setting and policy making and in their transformative roles. The excellent features of the top-ranked think tanks can be lessons for the think-tanks in SSA. Particularly, SSA think tanks should give emphasis for policy oriented research works and employ a number of communication and outreach mechanisms to disseminate their research outputs. This would be very significant to improve knowledge and capacity for better understanding and

<sup>1</sup> Rotation converged in 7 iterations.

reporting on ideas and policy proposals put forth by think tanks.

On the basis of the data collected through survey monkey technique from 52 think tanks in SSA, the following factors are considered to be the critical success factors for their performance in order importance by mean value: improved quality of research, diversified sources of funding, the use of effective communication and range of dissemination strategies, the availability of experienced staff, friendly presentation of research findings, improved governance, more media coverage, increased volume of research conducted, and greater awareness of the services. This is depicted in table 8.

Table 8: Factors improving the performance of thinks in SSA

Potential factor as a factor of improving the performance of think tanks	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Improved quality of research	5	5	5.00	.000
Diversified sources of funding	5	5	5.00	.000
Effective communication and range of dissemination strategies	4	5	4.81	.398
Increased availability of trained/experienced staff	4	5	4.19	.398
More audience and friendly presentation of research findings	4	4	4.00	.000
Improved governance	4	4	4.00	.000
More media coverage	4	4	4.00	.000
Increased volume of research conducted	3	5	3.77	.983
Greater awareness of the services	3	4	3.60	.495

(Source: Survey monkey, 2014)

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The rise of think tanks in the developed countries can be attributed to the important role they play in the dissemination of ideas and their influence in the policymaking process in general. The study concludes that the excellent features of the world's top successful think-tanks can be considered as lessons and benchmarks for the think-tanks in SSA. Besides, it highlights think tanks require favorable political environment and local private philanthropic traditions so that they can significantly contribute for the transformation of societies politically and culturally.

The study also finds that think tanks' capacity to influence polices in SSA depends on their institutional factors (resource mobilization, research capacity, leadership and effective communication of research findings) and the political environment. Based on the findings of this study, the researcher has proposed the following recommendations that can be insights to draw lessons for sub-Saharan African think tanks:

**Increasing responsiveness:** think tanks are accountable to the funders or clients, and to the government in a broader sense. However, think tanks can potentially focus attention on other stakeholders by increasing responsiveness to the wider stakeholder and policy community. The stakeholders may include 'end users' of their research and analysis who are in need of improvements in livelihoods and reduced poverty etc. End user is a term used to describe the final beneficiary of a technical innovation or policy. Think tanks often claim that their policy proposals will benefit certain group (e.g. farmers, exporters, small enterprises). This incurs a duty to be accountable to the claimed beneficiary. Links to claimed beneficiaries provide a source of legitimacy and credibility, particularly if the relationship is an ongoing one. Therefore, it is important to engage with the end-users in the course of the research itself. Engagement with end-users of an innovation or the policymakers to discover the type of information and innovations they require, and their participation in the research process itself, will therefore be important to its ultimate adoption.

**Capacity development:** capacity development of think tanks and research institutes for bringing evidence into policy needs to go beyond technical research to include participative methods of creating evidence, facilitating participatory methods and building alliances for better influence on policy.

**Autonomy / independence of think-tanks:** there is a need to create conducive political environment that highlights the important role of think tanks. They have to be financially and politically independent. Some think tanks need to explore the possibility of endowments for think tanks as a guarantee for autonomy.

**Alignment to policy:** think tanks have to link their programs and research agendas to the MDGs and to specific pro poor policy options, especially as the aid community moves towards direct budget support. Think tanks are most likely to play key roles in achieving the welfare of the society; whereby they influence the decision - making process positively through producing an informed research, building a minimal level of trust and confidence between the government and the public, developing a local agenda that matches with the global one and designing a forward - looking vision reflecting emerging issues (urbanization, climate change,

migration, security, etc).

**Securing financial sustainability:** think tanks in SSA rely, to a large extent, on foreign governmental and government funding. Think tanks must look for other sources and diversification of funding. One way is to learn the techniques of fund raising and resource mobilization. An area of potential resource mobilization is the philanthropic sector. Philanthropy is mostly based on personal charity. There are few coordinated ways in which ordinary people are encouraged and enabled to donate to civil society organizations. Think tanks can explore and promote new forms of fund raising from common but interested people. Legislative reforms for income tax benefits for charitable donations can be advocated to encourage individuals to donate funds to such organizations and gain some tax benefits. In SSA, there is very little corporate funding to civil society organizations. Funding to think tanks can be promoted as a form of corporate social responsibility.

**Engagement with a wider set of actors:** research is more likely to be effective when policy networks and advocacy coalitions are forged. Networks allow smoother communication and transfer and visibility of information. This helps facilitate policy changes. It is important that the SSA research organizations engage with a wider set of actors in the system- at domestic, regional and international levels, instead of focusing simply on policymakers. Networks are increasingly being harnessed as ‘platforms for action’ to generate wider support, to empower their members and to provide a space for discussion. Knowledge and innovation generated through research can be exchanged across borders. Use of research information and findings from outside the country result in exchange and transfers of ideas (McGann & Johnson, 2005; Missiroli & Ioannides, 2012).

**Partnerships with think-tanks and using external expertise:** the leading think tanks of the world establish horizontal and vertical linkages with other regional and international think tanks. Particularly, networks among these think tanks have been highlighted by academics. Further partnerships and exchanges, import of more external expertise benefit research through cross fertilization of ideas and capacity development. Partnerships with other policy actors provide additional knowledge or expertise which does not often exist in-house. Thus, for SSA think tanks, partnerships with other think tanks create opportunities for adopting new and innovative approaches and initiatives. This would in turn result in more benefits of networks that entail enhancing influence, creating common grounds, bolstering legitimacy. Regional networking can also facilitate quality control and training.

**Capacity of policymakers and the media:** a study by McGann (2012) indicates that several donors working in developing and transitional countries, points out the importance of working on the demand side of the policy advice equation as well as the supply side. Many of the donors felt they had been successful at establishing and building capacity of think tanks and even in sustaining them. Yet, that capacity must be improved with involvement of policymakers in the legislative and executive branches of government as well as with the media. Hence, adopting a more holistic approach and working with both sides of the spectrum can be useful. Specifically, steps must be taken to help governments, policymakers and the media understand the value and utility of independent policy advice in SSA.

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