The number of think tanks around the world continues to increase. More often than not, studies on think tanks have addressed their role in society and politics at the nation-state level. But that focus neglects an increasingly important component of think tank activity: Many think tanks are building regional and international networks. Think tank networks are not new, but over the past two decades the scale and density of exchange within these networks have mounted significantly and now extend from North American and European institutes to include a more globally diverse range of organizations.

When addressing these developments, it is necessary to distinguish among think tank networks, the activity of networking, and policy networks. Think tank networks are composed of research institutes and policy centers that are organizationally similar in structure and general objectives. These networks exclude other nonstate actors such as NGOs, private firms, and professional associations. The activity of networking, by contrast, is a mode of interaction and can take many forms: interpersonal interaction, organizational contacts, and internetworking. Finally, “policy network” is a conceptual category to describe coordinated patterns of interaction to influence policy.

Think Tank Networks

International networks of think tanks have coalesced around common areas of interest and policy themes as well as around ideology. An early example of an international network was the institutes of international affairs in Europe and the United States that formed after the Versailles settlement. They maintained lines of communication until such efforts tapered off toward World War II (Wallace, 1994). Nevertheless, in the 1930s and 1940s, sister institutes of Chatham House were
founded in the Commonwealth countries of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and at later dates in India, Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, although the relationship between these "sister" institutes of international affairs now exists in name only.

Today, numerous networks are apparent. A few examples will suffice. The Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP) is a network of five sister institutes in London, Bonn, Paris, Arnhem, and Brussels, dedicated to the advancement of European environmental policies. In contrast, the Atlas Foundation is an umbrella organization for free market institutes worldwide that provides start-up funds and technical assistance for new institutes. Whereas IEEP is bound together by its regional and sectoral policy focus, the Atlas network is connected by a shared ideological framework. FLACSO—which has autonomous branches in a number of Latin American countries such as Chile, Argentina and Costa Rica—is a more institutionalized network of research institutes with a greater emphasis on graduate education and multi-disciplinary research.

Since 1997 the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) has convened its “Global ThinkNet” meetings. This initiative had its origin in earlier bilateral and multilateral activities to promote policy-oriented dialogues through think tanks between Japan and other countries or regions. Global ThinkNet represents a means for JCIE specifically and Japanese policy intellectuals more generally to participate in international collaborative networks for independent policy research. JCIE is not the only Japanese institute facilitating networks of think tanks. In different ways, both NIRA (as a sponsor of GDN—see below) and the Nomura Research Institute have helped develop regional and international research networks.

The Global Development Network (GDN) convened by the World Bank and a number of other international organizations has sought to act as global forum for think tanks concerned with economic reform and development issues. A new and consciously "global" network, the GDN seeks to facilitate interactions between think tanks, research institutes, and development researchers by assisting in access to research funds and training schemes, helping to coordinate research efforts, and building capacity for institutes and individuals in developing countries (see www.worldbank.org/devforum/gdnall). Another important role of the GDN is the multi-disciplinary concern to forge political, sociological, economic, and other research to inform policy-making at a national level and in international organizations. Think tank networks are especially noticeable at the regional level. In many cases, such networks are a reflection of shared historical conditions, ties of language and ethnicity, and of encountering similar or transborder policy problems. For example, think tanks in the transition countries of Eastern and Central Europe have shared interests in privatization and political reform and can learn from policy innovations in neighboring countries. The enormous growth in the number of think tanks in this part of the world (see Struyck, 1999) has propelled think tank networking. One of these is the 3ENet (Network of Emerging European Economies), which operates with the support of the US-based Freedom House. The Secretariat for Institutional Support for Economic Research in Africa (SISERA) was created in 1997 by USAID, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to provide technical support and financial assistance for policy institutes. SISERA is a multidonor initiative to promote economic research in Africa to enable organizations such as the World Bank to find partner institutions in training events conducted for government officials, parliamentarians, academics, private-sector operators, and others. Regional networks are usually composed of a smaller number of think tanks, with individual directors and scholars familiar with each other.
Operating at the regional level is efficient; as a consequence, regional networks tend to be stronger than international networks. International networks tend to be more diffuse, with a greater number of actors. Common identity, consensus, and collective action are more difficult to engineer.

In sum, the interaction between various institutes at domestic and international levels helps create alliances where information is transmitted and where a conduit for funding is established. Skills and expertise are shared. Think tanks keep in touch with counterparts in other nations or states that exhibit shared sets of values, educational objectives, and/or policy interests. Such contacts allow think tanks to become aware of innovative policies adopted elsewhere and give them the opportunity to provide analysis and commentary on the relevance of such policies to their own context. These networks present many advantages. They create the overlapping personal and communications infrastructure for fast and effective transfer of new ideas and policy approaches between global and local networks. Potentially, networks help increase the effectiveness and efficiency of implemented projects by incorporating a wider range of knowledge and expertise.

**OPERATING AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL IS EFFICIENT; AS A CONSEQUENCE, REGIONAL NETWORKS TEND TO BE STRONGER THAN INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS.**

**NETWORKING STYLES**

There are various styles of networking, but here I refer to the modes and techniques through which these policy research institutes engage with one another and with policymakers, business, and civil society.

Person-to-person networking should not be underestimated. It is an important foundation upon which more substantial interactions are often built. Individual exchanges via email as well meetings and “after-hours” discussions at think tank and other conferences help to build personal relationships. These relationships are essential to effective communication and fruitful research collaboration. Similarly, gradually building personal connections with journalists, international civil servants, foundations, bureaucrats, and politicians is often a means to draw attention to an institute, to garner financial and other resources, and to develop channels of informal influence. These personal networks differ from individual to individual and defy generalization. They cross-cut policy domains, academic disciplines, institutions, and national borders. This kind of networking could be said to create “invisible colleges” of policy researchers.

“Organizational networking” is the public face of many think tanks. For example, the network style of the International Center for Economic Growth (ICEG)—which has offices in San Francisco, Nairobi, Quezon City, Budapest, and Cairo—is to act as a “clearing house” for the work produced by hundreds of think tanks it counts as its “member institutes” in 117 countries. It claims that its website is “the place to go to find out what is being researched and written around the world by leading policy research institutes,” especially those with an interest in the market economy (www.iceg.org). Its electronic newsletter provides a medium through which institutes are kept abreast of policy research of other institutes.

Another network style is what might be called the “research network think tank.” Instead of operating with a full-time, salaried, in-house research staff, some successful think tanks are small organizations that operate through a dispersed network of researchers. For example, the Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), based in London, operates through a network of economists throughout Europe and North America with whom it contracts to produce policy studies. This has the advantage of drawing in a wider range of expertise to an organization and of reducing...
the salary and overhead costs of maintaining an in-house research capacity. A further feature is the transnationalization of think tanks. Think tanks have moved offshore and established branch offices. For example, a few American institutes—such as the Heritage Foundation, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Urban Institute—opened offices in Moscow after the collapse of the Soviet Union to “export” democracy and market reforms.

An additional and more contemporary networking style is that of “virtual networks.” Developments in information technology have meant that virtual networks of think tanks can be sustained. OneWorld. (www.oneworld.org) provides easy access to numerous think tanks on the Web. Similarly, the four-week email discussion group convened by the GDN (www.gdnet.org/bonn/) facilitated considerable exchange between research institutes and the wider community of development researchers and practitioners in 37 countries.

The question that arises is: To what does all this networking between think tanks on research production amount? At one level, such interactions are symptomatic of globalization, and the manner that advances in communications and lower costs of travel have enabled actors with common research interests to engage transnationally on a regular basis. Yet these networks are also symptomatic of the role of knowledge and expertise in global governance and evidence of strong sources of demand for think tank research. In other words, think tanks are beginning to exert some influence through their involvement in “global public policy networks” (Reinicke, 1999/2000).

**Policy Networks**

The use and meaning of “policy network” concepts vary considerably. However, the point here is that policy networks assist in the achievement of collective aims. A policy network is “a set of relatively stable relationships which are of nonhierarchical and interdependent nature, linking a variety of actors who share common interests with regard to a policy and who exchange resources to pursue these shared interests acknowledging that cooperation is the best way to achieve common goals” (Börzel, 1998).

Policy networks also differ in composition, tactics, and style. “Policy communities” are stable networks of policy actors from inside and outside government that are highly integrated with the policy-making process. These communities are said to emerge and consolidate around specific policy fields or subsystems such as education policy, tax policy, or security policy and to revolve around relevant institutions such as specific ministries or government agencies. Think tanks are likely to be accorded “insider” status if they share the central values and attitudes of the policy community. Alternatively, think tanks are sometimes identified as participating in broad “transnational advocacy coalitions” (Keck & Sikkink, 1997) that accommodate a range of NGOs and activists. These coalitions seek to shape the climate of public debate and to influence global policy agendas and are often less integrated into policy-making than policy community actors. Yet again, some analyses have identified think tanks participating in more elite “epistemic communities” (Stone, 1999), which are primarily composed of knowledge actors—professionals, researchers, scientists—who have privileged access to decision-making fora on the basis of their expertise and scholarly credentials. These latter two concepts are more able to address the global and regional interactions of think tanks and their relations with international organizations. These two concepts also recognize that many policy problems are no longer restricted to the realm of the nation-state.

Because think tanks are usually private organizations, lack formal decision-making authority, and function outside the formal political arenas of assemblies and executives,
their governance roles can be only partially understood by observing them as independent organizations. Observing their policy network interactions provides insight into the manner think tanks penetrate informal political circles and acquire entree and access to decision-makers. Within networks, think tanks often act as “policy entrepreneurs” and contribute policy-aware advocates, researchers, and other specialists who analyze problems and propose solutions. For example, in May 1999 the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, convened a closed meeting to ask the assistance of think tanks in providing analyses to help guide UN policy-making (ODC, 1999). In short, think tanks provide intellectual resources. These institutes also draw together people from diverse backgrounds in government, law, academia, the military, international agencies, and elsewhere, with the purpose of establishing lines of communication among disparate actors with common objectives or interests. Networking helps promote solidarity, loyalty, trust, and reciprocity—all important factors leading to joint policymaking between private and public actors. ASEAN-ISIS (institutes of strategic and international affairs) represents a good example of an influential regional policy network where think tanks took a leading role in establishing political support for new ideas about security in the region, and central in the initiation of a new multilateral forum, the ASEAN Regional Forum (Stone, 1999).

The transnational character of many policy problems establishes a dynamic for research collaboration, sharing of information, and cooperation on other activities that pull think tanks into the global domain to meet the demands of governments and international organizations for information, analysis, and other knowledge services. Although the global expansion and networking of think tanks has contributed to an increasingly diverse and plural community, it has also created new hierarchies. The internationally prominent insti-
Institutes tend to be Western organizations, or at least those institutes based in OECD countries. Asian, Latin American, and African institutes may acquire regional stature but few gain the global reputation of the Brookings Institution or the Trilateral Commission. This is partly due to the longer history of the think tank in Western political systems as well as to their superior resources, whether it be funding, professional personnel, or entrée to transnational policy networks. Yet these Western think tanks are often regarded by think tanks in the “South” as disseminating ideas or norms that bolster the prevailing liberal hegemonic order of free market economies and liberal democratic polities. Alternative or “southern” networks do not yet equal the dominance of more established ones. Nevertheless, the network arrangements and strategic alliances that link think tanks to other global actors are key components in their power to influence policy agendas. Networks enable think tanks to operate beyond their domestic context and networks are the means by which think tanks individually and in coalition can project their ideas into policy thinking across states and within global or regional fora.

Diane Stone is a lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick. She is the author of Capturing Political Immigration: Think Tanks and the Policy Process (1996) and co-editor of Think Tanks Across Nations: A Comparative Approach (1998).

References


