

Impact: an enquiry into how think tanks create change

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January 2017

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Introduction

In the seven years leading up to the end of 2016, I worked for one of the UK's biggest think tanks, the [New Economics Foundation \(NEF\)](#). During my time there, discussions about how we had an impact were common, and we were increasingly asked to better demonstrate our impact by those who funded us. This is not an easy task for any organisation, and for think tanks it is no different. Their currency is ideas, and their focus tends to be on influencing the political elite.

As a Fellow on the [Clore Social Leadership Programme](#), I had the opportunity to do a piece of independent research. At the time when I began thinking about which topic to explore, new ideas were beginning to shape NEF's work. There were people advocating for stronger partnerships with campaigners and activists; for more research work to be informed by communications and social psychology thinking; and for greater use of community organising methods. Simultaneously, I was moving out of the think tank world and wondering what my legacy would be: where had my own and my team's work made the greatest impact?

This piece of research is a critical enquiry into what it means for think tanks to have impact: how they (and others) understand impact, and what kind of change they seek to create in the world. In part, this research was inspired by the Centre for Evaluation Innovation's thinking in [Pathways for Change: 10 Theories to Inform Advocacy and Policy Change Efforts](#)¹. This paper sets out a matrix of ten theories of how change happens, and outlines the pre-conditions for policy change set out by each theory.

Methodology

The question guiding this enquiry was: what impact do think tanks have? I collected data through:

- a rapid literature review of the existing work on think tanks' influence and impact;
- 15 semi-structured interviews with people working for think tanks, charitable foundations, media organisations, the civil service, charities and academic institutions in the UK and U.S.; and
- one half-day theory of change workshop with a think tank based outside the UK.

There is not much information readily available on the impact think tanks have had, and very few think tanks collect data about their impact in any systematic way. Time limitations meant I could not follow particular examples as they emerged. I would suggest further research might include:

- an in-depth case study of how one think tank's programme of work has led to change in policy and practice; and
- a self-evaluation framework for think tanks to use when developing and running programmes of work.

¹ Stachowiak, S. (2013) *Pathways for change: 10 theories to inform advocacy and policy change efforts*, [online]. Available: <http://www.evaluationinnovation.org/publications/pathways-change-10-theories-inform-advocacy-and-policy-change-efforts>

Thanks

Many thanks to all those who participated in the research for this work: David Boyle, Annabel Brown, Eli Fenghali, Iason Gabriel, Mubin Haq, Owain Johnstone, Neal Lawson, Sara Llewelin, Deborah Mattinson, Travers McLeod, Roope Mokka, Aleksi Neuvonen, Jonathan Rosenthal, Sonia Sodha, Patrick South, Julia Unwin and Danielle Walker-Palmour. Your insights, challenges and critical reflection have all been essential.

Thanks to the team at Clore Social Leadership, who have supported me throughout the Fellowship and in producing this work. Thanks to the Friends Provident Foundation for supporting the fellowship and particularly to Danielle Walker-Palmour who has been an invaluable source of guidance for the past two years. And lastly, thanks to Anna Emerson who has provided an eagle eye, copy editing this work. Any errors are, of course, my own.

1. What is a think tank?

Definitions matter. They help us understand the parameters of an idea or debate, and pinpoint areas of difference. One of the first questions that came up in this research was: how do you define a think tank? The answer, it transpires, is not always clear. Think tanks do many activities that cross over with other institutions, such as large charitable foundations, the policy and research departments of charities and businesses, and party political research departments.

The insights from this research showed that people most commonly see think tanks as organisations that:

- carry out a combination of research, policy analysis and policy development;²
- seek to influence government policy and political parties;
- are forward-looking and develop new ideas about social, economic, environmental or foreign policy; and
- are usually, though not always, not for profit.

“There are two kinds of think tanks: ones which commit themselves to a political party – they have small impacts around the edges, and their impact depends on whether or not the party is in power. The other type of think tank gathers around a set of ideas, and it’s the individuals within these that go out into the world and spread them.” (David Boyle, policy expert)

“The main way that [think tanks] operate is to provide a forum for debate and ideas, to think things through and then to influence who they want to influence. Their scope is quite narrow. Most people on the street wouldn’t have heard of them. They are not public facing, but they do influence politicians, policy makers, and in some instances businesses.” (Deborah Mattinson, Britain Thinks)

“Think tanks operate in a variety of ways. While some aim to capture a political party or movement and use it to implement their manifesto, others rely on impartiality and expertise to achieve political influence.” (Dr Iason Gabriel, St John’s College, Oxford)

In general, think tanks are perceived as being government-focused. This is starting to change slightly, with a number of interviewees describing think tanks that take a slightly different approach. Some of these organisations are moving towards a combination of policy, practice and campaigning or activism. They are undertaking activities that a more traditional think tank might do, but combining them with campaigning techniques, or political organising, to mobilise the public behind their work.

² In this research, ‘policy’ is used in reference to ‘government policy’ and refers to the action the government has decided to take on a particular topic. It also describes policy proposals, which might be ideas generated by different organisations but not yet put into place by a standing government.

“Platform London: think tank stroke do tank and campaigning. An interesting model. They’ve got elements of what a think tank does: researching, thinking through an idea, but also creating a coalition of support to get something done about it.” (Mubin Haq, Trust for London)

“They [think tanks] can think that putting out research, or a paper, [means] change will happen. If think tanks understand themselves as a tool that can support organisations that are working directly in community with real people then they would approach their work and priorities in a different way.” (Eli Fenghali, the New Economy Coalition)

This shift in focus implies a different analysis of change. It suggests some think tanks are beginning to look beyond government as the source of change and towards other organisations and activists that can build grassroots support among the public, campaigners and organisational partnerships.

In the next section, we’ll explore all the different ways – intended and unintended – in which think tanks can create change.

2. How do think tanks have an impact?

“There are three or four ways that think tanks have impact:

- 1. Changing the terms of the debate about a subject and influencing the way we talk [about] an issue, or whether we talk about an issue at all. Eg, Resolution Foundation on [the] impact of recession;*
- 2. Bringing new statistics and analysis to light;*
- 3. More traditional recommendations for government, eg Policy Exchange’s education work.”*

(Sonia Sodha, The Observer)

“The Barrow Cadbury Trust funded Winnie Mandela’s trips from the Eastern Cape to Robben Island all the years that Mandela was in jail there – that was what the Soweto ANC activists said was needed to keep morale up. You try and write me an impact framework for that.”

(Sara Llewellyn, Barrow Cadbury Trust)

“Can you call policy reform impact? You need to implement that policy, and it then needs to have an impact on people’s lives.” (Annabel Brown, Centre for Policy Development)

This research explores what kind of impact think tanks have. Asking this question opens up a number of themes that shape how we might think about impact. These include big questions about how strategic think tanks are able to be, whether the change they create is direct or indirect, and how possible it is to attribute their impact to specific activities and outputs.

This section sets out each of the routes to impact most commonly identified through the research in more detail, sharing quotes and examples that show how think tanks use these strategies to achieve change. Data was collected from people working in think tanks, those who have commissioned or funded think tanks, academics, campaigners and policy officials. This range of perspectives show what people inside think tanks believe their impact is, as well as what some of their key stakeholders think. It also sets out a critical view of impact, shared by many in the research, and sets out some of the complexities that think tanks are managing in their work which make impact a difficult question to answer.

Fresh thinking and new ideas

“I think one of the ways think tanks have impact is that they bring new, politically relevant ideas to the public policy arena.” (Danielle Walker Palmour, Friends Provident Foundation)

Think tanks are in the business of generating new, politically relevant ideas, and of repackaging existing ones. This is one of the main ways they create change in the world. Once formed, these ideas often lead to a programme of recommendations about how they might be implemented – for example, through central or local government policy, tax incentives or new investment. Policy Exchange’s work on [education](#) would be an example of this. Typically, a think tank will conduct a programme of research and publish recommendations for government that will then be the focus of influencing and lobbying work.

Think tanks also have a role in creating a space for new ideas that might, at the moment, be almost completely off the political agenda. Examples of this include universal basic income, which has recently been covered by a range of think tanks including the [RSA](#), and NEF’s provocations on a [shorter working week](#). They can play an important role in starting to make the unthinkable possible, and convening a space where politicians and opinion formers can safely engage with ideas that might be considered politically risky.

“A think tank creates the conditions for a new discussion.” (Julia Unwin)

“Your job is putting thoughts in government’s head – and if you can do that then you’re definitely playing the part.” (Anonymous former think tank director)

Think tanks can also be powerful advocates for new methodologies, such as the application of [design thinking](#) to public services pioneered by The Innovation Unit, or the promotion of co-production in healthcare by NEF, [Nesta](#) and others. In recent years, think tanks have worked more frequently with local government, the NHS and the voluntary sector to test new approaches and spread their findings across a sector.

Re-framing existing ideas

The extent to which think tanks actually generate new ideas is contested, though. Much of their work involves re-packaging existing ideas or problems. Some argue that they take ideas from other places, such as campaigners and or international examples, and then explore how to reframe them so they are more policy-focused and relevant for a political audience and context.

“Most other big ideas come more from movements: eg those campaigning for a living wage; freedom of information. Think tanks tend to be quite policy focused.” (Neal Lawson, Compass)

Sometimes reframing an existing problem can be a useful tactic to shine a spotlight on something, and make it seem like an original idea. Coining a new term, such as [‘modern slavery’](#) or [‘people powered health’](#), can raise the profile of an emerging issue and make it worthy of further research,

policy or campaigning work. It can be a useful tactic to make an existing problem more politically appealing, as in the case below of the Modern Slavery Act.

“The key argument the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) put forward in the report was that we shouldn’t think about human trafficking as an immigration issue, but as a criminal issue, suggesting that we should refer to it not as ‘human trafficking’ but as ‘modern slavery’. They weren’t the first people to frame it in this way, but arguably they were the most prominent voice doing so. It may have helped the CSJ obtain influence since it seems that this framing of the issue was in line with what the government wanted.” (Owain Johnstone, PhD candidate, Oxford University)

Another frequently cited example of coining a new term is the ‘squeezed middle’, which is one of the central topics covered by the Resolution Foundation.

“The Resolution Foundation created the idea of ‘the squeezed middle’... they created this niche.” (Danielle Walker-Palmour, the Friends Provident Foundation)

Though a useful tactic, coining a new idea or phrase isn’t in and of itself an example of impact. It can shine a light on a topic and raise its profile, but may not lead to policy change or other initiatives that directly tackle the issue.

Impact as a change in government policy

“When I think about think tanks their responses are much more to do with policy implementation and recommendations.” (Julia Unwin)

In this report I have distinguished between creating new ideas and specific policy change because think tanks can have some impact in one area, such as a new idea, but not follow it through as far as specific policy proposals. In practice, these two areas of impact can be very closely tied if a think tank has a strong relationship with the political party in government.

Policy is a broad term, and can describe:

- Influencing the basic principles by which a government is guided; or
- Specific commitments or plans for action the government might make, for example in a manifesto.

Policy can be shaped by a range of organisations and individuals. Big picture policy visions might be set out by a minister, their special advisers, think tanks and other. Detailed policy options might be worked up by the civil service to achieve the government’s vision, and charities or delivery bodies with specialist knowledge of a subject area might input into more detailed policy recommendations.

Think tanks often aspire to a new programme of policy as an example of their impact. The line between fresh ideas and policy change is not always clear, but as a brief example we can explore one of the headline ideas under the 2010-15 coalition government: the Big Society. It was reported that this concept was influenced by the think tank Respublica. The idea caught on, and was used by the government to frame its thinking on social policy. It then had to be translated into a set of more

specific policy proposals that would bring it to life and transform the Big Society from a catchphrase into something concrete. Some of the specific policy proposals that resulted from it included the national Community Organisers Programme, the Social Action Innovation Fund and the National Citizen Service for young people. It's likely these proposals came out of an interplay between civil servants, politicians, think tanks and others.

Policy comes in many forms. It can entail new initiatives, such as free schools or personalised health and social care budgets, that require specific legislation. It can mean financial incentives or greater investment in programmes, such as social investment or tax breaks. It can also involve informal influencing with specific sectors, such as the recent government encouragement to employers to promote three days' volunteering leave.

One policy lead in the civil service described waiting for a policy 'window' by having a list of ideas that were ready to be presented at the right time. Think tanks need to be able to react when opportunities arise to set out their policy proposals; for example, when a minister wants some detailed options to implement an idea. Often, civil servants and political advisers hold relationships with think tanks and try to elicit proposals that will be politically acceptable.

Think tanks can work on big headline pieces of policy, such as the Big Society, or education reform, or they can work on micro policy changes that sit within the existing policy framework a government has introduced.

"Quite rightly [think tanks] are concerned about impact and getting political parties to take up their ideas. But increasingly this means they've narrowed quite a lot of what they're proposing so it becomes in many ways less ambitious. There are many tweaks in terms of the changes they're looking for, and what I'd like to see is the big radical ambition as well as the tweaks." (Mubin Haq, Trust for London)

One interviewee who worked for a think tank on the [life chances](#) agenda that David Cameron introduced in 2016 described his conversations with leading civil servants:

"[A Department for Work and Pensions official said]: 'Don't waste your time on the plumbing. We have a department that can work out the wiring – what we often struggle with is the vision and the principles.' Once Number 10 had decided it was going to take on life chances it was possible to hang our policies onto this narrative. Then we would have long conversations with groups of civil servants about whether this idea was practical and could be developed further." (Anonymous former think tank director)

Another described how micro policy can be affected, so that smaller changes are made within existing government policy:

"The minimum income standard which we've [The Joseph Rowntree Foundation] published for ten years... has affected micro policy; for example, sentencing guidelines for how people are fined." (Julia Unwin)

Although there are some examples of think tanks doing work that led directly to changes in government policy, much of the research painted a more complicated picture.

“You sometimes get a direct policy from a direct piece of work, but by and large that’s not how it happens.” (Sara Llewellyn, Barrow Cadbury Trust)

“The Modern Slavery Act is a good example. [It was a] combination of practice, policy and an evidence base. Too often we have one of those three rather than all of them. If the policy analysis is only analysis not prescription you’re only taking [the government] a problem.” (Julia Unwin)

Think tanks can often work for years on a particular topic and not gain any traction with politicians or policy makers because some of the other critical conditions are not in place. Much of this report will describe this mix of conditions, including the strength of the relationships between key individuals and political parties, the sense of crisis and opportunity for particular ideas, the level of public support, and how many organisations are pushing for the same vision at the same time.

Impact through access to political power

“For us think tanks are an integral part of the work – we get access and routes to power and privilege and it’s a shortcut to doing it ourselves.” (Sara Llewellyn, Barrow Cadbury Trust)

For external stakeholders, one thing that makes think tanks appealing is their proximity to political power, and the credibility they can have with politicians. Many think tanks have a close link to a particular political party, and have strong relationships they can use to influence, whether the party is in power, or in opposition. Sometimes these links are formed because think tanks have been set up by politicians who remain on their board, or staff in the think tanks have been seconded in and out of political parties, or moved jobs from a party into a think tank. Working with, or funding, a think tank is seen as a route to political influence. It can mean getting policy proposals into a manifesto, having a minister speak at a launch event, or having your work quoted in a speech. It takes a lot of time and resource to cultivate these relationships, and think tanks can be a proxy for access in a way that few other organisations can be.

“Tory leaning think tanks like Bright Blue and Centre for Social Justice are the ones people are most interested in talking to – because of their proximity to power.” (Deborah Mattinson, Britain Thinks)

But along with the benefits of being close to a political party comes the danger of being out of power, when the party a think tank is aligned with is in opposition for an extended period of time.

“It’s hard for a politically aligned think tank to have consistent impact. It’s not right or wrong, but it’s quite interesting.” (Julia Unwin, former Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation)

“Policy Exchange were very impactful on the Conservative government when it came in: free schools, sanctions – a number of policies you can point to came straight out of there. IPPR [the

Institute for Public Policy Research] *has more difficulty because Labour is not in government. Clearly they had an impact on Miliband. More recently on air quality we've seen an immediate impact in government and on the Mayor of London with think tanks such as Policy Exchange and IPPR playing a valuable role. They are contributing to what some other key organisations have already been doing in that field.*" (Mubin Haq, Trust for London)

Even when a think tank has political winds blowing in its favour, having an impact demands more than just central government support. Devolution and the election of local mayors in some of England's major cities mean some think tanks are placing more emphasis on working with local authorities, local mayors and the UK's devolved administrations. Some of the biggest themes of the current government's public services agenda, such as health and social care integration, for example, are being led at a local level.

"Think tanks focused just on the centre will have a limited impact, but at the same time the central framework is really important in shaping what schools can do... central government is less important than it was ten or 15 years ago, but it's not unimportant." (Sonia Sodha, The Observer)

As the locus of decision making changes across European, national, devolved and local boundaries, so will the focus of think tanks. The shifting boundaries of control and decision making created by Devolution, and latterly Brexit, will bring new opportunities for think tanks. Some think tanks who have expertise in trade negotiations and EU/British relations might suddenly find their influence increases.

"In three months' time there will be a new Prime Minister who will want some fresh thinking and they will want think tanks who understand international trade negotiations, and Europe and international trade. Government will have new priorities that the civil service won't have all the answers to". [Anonymous former think tank director]

These sometimes unexpected events can create unforeseen windows of opportunity that mean a think tank has a moment of unparalleled influence.

Impact through people

The ability of think tanks to have an impact is enhanced through the movement of staff between their organisations and political parties, the civil service, and other statutory or private sector organisations. This is often through secondments, and a revolving door of recruitment from senior political aides into, and then out of, think tanks. Through this continuous accumulation of relationships and links, think tanks can spread their ideas into other organisations, strengthen relationships with people in positions of power, and bring key contacts back into the think tank.

"[Some think tanks] talk to cabinet, senior civil servants, and their reach into those institutions is much deeper and greater. Often because CEOs and senior staff have worked in those institutions and cultivate those former relationships." (Mubin Haq, Trust for London)

“People are really important. CEOs are really important: Geoff Mulgan, Matthew Taylor, Ed Mayo, Michael Jacobs at the Fabians... went in and out of Number 10.” (Neal Lawson, Compass)

These relationships can enable think tanks to get greater traction within government, and give them a strong influencing position when the government is looking for ideas. The contacts and networks that think tanks have are also perceived by other stakeholders as valuable reasons to engage with them, work with them, or commission them to do particular pieces of work.

“Key people, key networks – this is really important to us.” (Danielle Walker-Palmour, Friends Provident Foundation)

Senior people in think tanks are valued by external stakeholders, especially for the networks they bring, and the credibility of these staff enables them to get greater access to decision makers within the government. Having these relationships is often a pre-condition of think tanks being able to have an impact with their work over a longer period of time.

Holding government to account

Some think tanks have an impact by using data and analysis to hold the government to account. Most frequently, this is done by gathering annual data on a topic (for example poverty, or financial exclusion) and publishing this data as a benchmark of government performance over time. These activities can influence the government’s own priorities, attention or actions.

“Regular information provision is useful, and it holds government to account. About 15 years ago New Policy Institute used to publish its monitoring poverty and social exclusion indicators through JRF [the Joseph Rowntree Foundation], and government used to issue its own [data] in advance in order to spoil it. They looked at the same data set again and again. I think government pushed their own data out first (under John Prescott) because the government had an agenda about that issue and so having a dataset which commented on that agenda which they didn’t control was incredibly powerful.” (Danielle Walker Palmour, Friends Provident Foundation)

Many think tanks also analyse and publish commentary on government policy, and some have become well known for providing analysis that is then used to shape the way that policy is reported in the press. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) is an example of an organisation that provides analysis and comment on the government budget, which influences the media coverage the budget gets.

“IFS have come from being not that influential to being really the main organisation who does the budget commentary. They’re completely a centrepiece of the budget, and their analysis is almost as important as what the chancellor says.” (Danielle Walker Palmour, Friends Provident Foundation)

Although some think tanks are very well known for their public commentary and data analysis, the right conditions also need to be in place for this work to have an influence. The government usually needs to have made a public commitment through its manifesto or in policy in order for it to be held

to account effectively. This means the government is more likely to care about its track record on the issue, so an external organisation publishing data on its performance can push more action from government.

Increasing impact: communications and partnerships

“Common Weal was born out of the moment of the [Scottish] referendum and have a nice grassroots feel and a good populist way. You have to write in a way which is intelligible to your average school leaver.” (Neal Lawson, Compass)

“Think tanks, and the rest of us, need to understand how to sell our ideas to the public.” (Mubin Haq, Trust for London)

Communications and partnerships were two main areas that were consistently highlighted in this research as ways in which think tanks could increase their impact. A very small number of think tanks were held up as examples of good practice, but generally there was a strong critique of the ability of think tanks to speak to, and mobilise, the public.

There are a number of possible reasons for this. Think tanks tend not to be public-facing and often produce quite technical recommendations which don't have much popular appeal. With a few exceptions, they don't mobilise large numbers of people through campaigns, though they may work with or influence organisations that do run campaigns.

Some think tanks undertake participatory research with civil society groups, but many still focus on desk research and engagement with elite opinion formers. Though many think tanks do see public engagement via the media as an important activity, this is done less with the aim of influencing the public, and more to maintain their profile as an important organisation in the minds of politicians and opinion formers.

There were many references to think tanks developing ideas with little connection to the everyday realities of people's lives. Two or three think tanks were held up as having particularly strong networks among civil society groups, which ground their work in the granular detail of people's experiences.

“The sweet spot is bringing the concerns of civil society together with the knowledge of think tanks and the support of foundations. It's problematic if think tanks are far removed from the reality of day-to-day civil society.” (Julia Unwin, former Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation)

“I see a really critical role that think tanks are playing – change needs to come out of an interplay between activists and think tanks. Activists are more caught up in local issues, but think tank folk can struggle to be grounded in this reality.” (Jonathan Rosenthal, New Economy Coalition)

“CSJ has a very good machinery sitting under and informing their work and that is very impressive. They have about 300 informant organisations so they do take soundings from civil society to feed into their work. That is really healthy.” (Sara Llewellyn, Barrow Cadbury Trust)

“Think tanks should be working closely with those organisations that are on the ground and trying to make change happen and should be asking what they need, what the data they need is, and then they leverage the equity and resources they have to work through what the end result and dissemination strategy needs to be.” (Eli Fenghali, New Economy Coalition)

The issue of engagement goes to the heart of how think tanks develop ideas and try to get them taken up more widely by the government. Some argue that think tanks would have a greater impact if they worked in partnership to build a broad coalition of organisations advocating for change. Think tanks often advocate for large-scale social, economic or environmental change. This type of change is complex and it is rare that one single organisation can lead it unilaterally (though there are exceptions). This makes partnerships, coalitions and movements for change essential.

“A new piece of research is not always necessary to have impact: invest in your spokespeople and get new coalitions on board to get the idea out there... it’s very rare that you can point to one organisation making a single change happen.” (Mubin Haq, Trust for London)

In recent years, many policy changes have often been made through coalitions coming together and using their collective voice to wield influence, such as the work towards the Modern Slavery Act (2015) and the Freedom of Information Act (2000).

A contrasting focus: Demos Helsinki

Demos Helsinki is a think tank based in Finland that was established in 2005. Its work involves development work (strategy, new services, processes, products or design), research and consultancy (service design, stakeholder development and community building). The majority of their work has been with the private sector.

Demos Helsinki hasn’t historically focused its efforts on changing policy or legislation. It doesn’t see the change it wants to create as coming primarily from policy. Instead, the private sector is a much greater focus for Demos Helsinki than for many British think tanks. Its founders, Aleksi Neuvonen and Roope Mokka, had worked with the environmental movement so their approach to impact is shaped by their understanding of the need for the private sector to shift its behaviour, processes and products if the environmental challenge is going to be successfully tackled. They are also interested in the reach the private sector has since ‘power has shifted from the state to the private sector’, and its role in driving major social and technological change over the past decade.

One of Demos Helsinki’s biggest areas of impact over the last decade has been in changing people’s behaviour so they have a lower carbon footprint. So, for example, it has worked on consumer clean tech, sharing services, smarter homes and food transportation. Its work on this topic has ranged

from policy reports, to workshops with corporations on consumer clean tech, and working with cities and regional structures to develop local strategies.

In terms of impact, Roppe says: “we are just getting started,” but they have already seen some of the changes they want, including new ‘clean tech’ products, new policies at a national and local level, and EU and Finnish funders putting substantial resources and funding into this area.

The complexities of impact

“We fund a lot of think tanks and campaigning and advocacy organisations to achieve structural change. For that kind of work impact is collective, cumulative, long-term and viral... very often the way they create intellectual value [is] that their ideas very quickly spread and are often non-attributed... by viral, I mean ideas get floated and tussled with, but very quickly they become part of what is in our lexicon and we get acclimatised to these ideas. That’s one way they get short changed on their value, because it’s not directly attributed.” (Sara Llewellyn, Barrow Cadbury Trust)

Describing and defining impact is an imperfect science. Like many other organisations, think tanks work within a fast-changing environment, and their impact is affected by external factors beyond their influence.

One theme in this research was a critical view of how to define and describe impact. There were only a handful of direct examples of impact that could show how a think tank’s programme of work had led to a specific change in policy or practice. Those cited included Respublica’s influence on the Big Society agenda, Policy Exchange’s work on education policy, the Centre for Social Justice’s role in the Modern Slavery Act, work by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) on the Commission for Social Justice and the Resolution Foundation’s work on the squeezed middle.

More common than specific examples of impact were moments in time when a particular think tank was influential. Policy Exchange was highlighted as having a big influence on the Conservatives between 2010 and 2015, and IPPR was often described as the thinking arm of Labour in the mid to late 1990s. These examples show that think tanks have an impact when they have significant political influence, and this is when their work can lead to a big shift in thinking, vision and ideas.

Of course, though, there are think tanks that are not clearly aligned to one particular party or another, and they still manage to have an impact. Think tanks such as Chatham House have a strong reputation on foreign policy regardless of which government is in power. Likewise, health think tanks such as The Kings Fund and The Health Foundation maintain an influential presence in the health sector.

Changes in the regulations around how politically active charities can be are changing how desirable it is for think tanks to pledge allegiance to one party, and many are trying to do more cross-party work.

“All of them [think tanks] try to go across the board to avoid charity regulations. We’ve had some interesting conversations with think tanks who try to avoid being seen as too close to one party. They are cautious about being affiliated to political parties.” (Mubin Haq, Trust for London)

One additional complexity of impact is the timescale that think tanks work to. Much of the change they aspire to create is complex and takes time: it involves many different organisations chipping away at different parts of government, civil society and business, finding windows for change and sticking with an issue for a long time. The nature of most think tanks’ funding arrangements means that funding comes attached to short- to medium-term projects.

“[Think tank work] tends to be more about the technical/policy side rather than the big vision: this tends to be most fundable. You do the work, you deliver it and then you move on to do something else.” (Neal Lawson, Compass)

“Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust funded the Freedom of Information campaign. That was [a] single issue, and they funded it for 25 years and in the 26th year it became law. Was it a waste of money for 25 years or not?” (Sara Llewellyn, Barrow Cadbury Trust)

One of the questions this leaves us with is: how far can think tanks influence the political environment, or are they often forced to respond to it? Some of the think tanks cited as being most impactful in recent years have their own endowments or other forms of secure funding, which enable them to be strategic and run longer-term programmes of work. For those who have less secure funding, an important consideration is how to sustain the impact of short term pieces of work.

Conclusion

“At their best think tanks are addressing issues which are really difficult and really challenging and looking to the horizon to see what’s coming up next and coming up with really practicable solutions.” (Julia Unwin)

“At their worst they talk to themselves about whatever slings a few quid at them.” (Deborah Mattinson, Britain Thinks)

It’s clear from the research that many working in, and with, think tanks see their primary impact as influencing policy and politics by bringing in new ideas to solve complex problems. To do this effectively, certain conditions need to be in place. Firstly, they need a unique, and politically appealing, proposal. To have the greatest traction with the widest number of people, this should be based in evidence, and reinforced by a coalition of partners all asking for the same thing. Strong relationships with politicians, their special advisers and civil servants will all help new policy ideas to get taken up when windows of opportunity present themselves.

But what happens when the political climate isn’t ripe for a particular idea? Then, think tanks have an important role in making the unlikely possible, and lending their own credibility to ideas that politicians might not feel able to support. They also provide a safe space for politicians and policy makers to debate ideas, and test the feasibility of ideas before going public with them.

A smaller group of think tanks have an impact through holding the government to account, and putting a spotlight on topics through doing consistent research, analysis and advocacy that enabled that topic to gain a profile. Some think tanks focus more on local or regional policy, but their attention is still on political elites and leaders, though it might be in local government or the NHS rather than central government.

Two big challenges came out of this research. These are issues think tanks need to address if they are serious about their work having the biggest possible impact.

The first is for think tanks to develop stronger relationships with civil society, activists and campaigners, so that policy work can better reflect the everyday experiences and challenges of citizens. This might mean more participatory research, engaging the groups that many describe as ‘hard to reach’ in policy research; it might involve civil society having a stronger voice in shaping the work that think tanks pick up and promote to government; and it could enable think tanks to complement their policy work with campaigns that speak to the public and engage them in the big issues of the day.

The second challenge is that think tanks should consider partnerships and coalitions as a central part of their strategy for change. Time, funding streams and short term projects often act against collaboration, but most of the examples of impact in this research came from long term, strategic

work that engaged a range of organisations, from policy, academia, and front line practice. For think tanks that do want to have a sustained impact, this is one successful, but underutilised tactic.

At their best, think tanks can analyse complex problems, looking outside the country or sector for evidence and ideas, and producing possible policy solutions. They can talk about big ideas which many would consider politically unfeasible, and they can influence the political system in a unique way to make them possible.

At their worst, think tanks can be reactive, repetitive and internally focused. They can fail to connect with people's every day experiences, speak only to a narrow group of political elites, and repeat work which has been done before. They need to be innovative and look for new ideas to address problems which haven't yet been solved - focused on the future and not the past - to do the job others are expecting of them.