Review of: "The Role of Think Tanks in Megatrends Analysis and Future Research"

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This paper addresses the important topic of interconnections between megatrends analysis, future research and the role of think tanks. Important because it must be expected that with globally growing complexities and uncertainties demand for this kind of work and institutions will grow. We are facing a period of rapid technological development and convergence, diverging societies and political systems, increasingly chaotic government and fading boundaries between academic research, private sector research and NGOs. In theory think tanks can provide guidance in societies facing these complexities.

Important also because there is only a limited research base on the topic, at least if I accept the choice of the authors to limit their approach to connections with megatrends and future research. And if we accept the boundaries set by the authors by their definitions of megatrends, future research and strategic foresight. Throughout the paper the authors make a series of relevant observations and raise implicit questions.

Having said this, the paper reads as descriptive and explorative. The limited number of case studies, their diversity and "shallowness" confirms this. The aim of the paper, or the question the authors want to answer is not stated clearly enough. On page 3 it reads 'This paper seeks to fill a gap in the academic literature by analysing the evolution of megatrends and future research ...'. I understand this to be something else and much more ambitious than what is stated in the first sentence of the abstract. The evolution of megatrends (over the past 4 decades?) is hardly addressed and the development of future studies (to be seen as methodological according to the authors) is not there. Paragraph 3 is mainly about political-organisational issues.

Taking the first sentence of the abstract as a starting point I suggest developing a simple analytical framework (taxonomy) for describing the targeted interconnections. Partly this can already be derived from the way the cases are introduced: focus, organisation (networked - centralised), dissemination approaches, methodologies (future research) etc. Other descriptors can be independence of the research and policy agenda (government, NGO, private sector) and mission and goals of the think-tank (advocacy, short-term/long term, scope, etc.). Such a descriptive framework can easily be derived of the vast body of literature on the linkages between policy research, policy making and politics. These publicatyions are highly relevant for this paper. The Pentagram might also serve as a starting point here, but then should be used consistently.

The conclusions of the paper can hardly be called conclusions in the present form. For example, what is the basis for stating that 'The majority of think tanks .. are not deeply affected by the burgeoning megatrends discourse ..'? Applying a

relatively simple analytical framework or taxonomy would allow the authors to develop the conclusions into a series of questions which could take the shape of a simple research agenda about think tanks. This would do justice to the limited number of widely diverse cases. Most of the concluding remarks will then come back as questions. For example, the first sentence: what is the impact of better global access to data, etc. on the the ways in which think-tanks address megatrends? Does it have an impact on the number of think tanks? And more general: how is demand for the work of think tanks developing? Such questions relate back to things which have been said in the paper, but for which the evidence is too thin to draw strong conclusions, but good enough to raise the question. That the evidence cannot be found in the existing scientific literature makes the questions highly relevant as the start of building a research agenda.

To summarize: 1) develop a relatively simple taxonomy and use this as framework for the analysis; 2) try to make implicit questions explicit; and 3) write the conclusions as a research agenda. This may turn the paper into a valuable contribution to the debate on the role of think tanks in view of their contribution to megatrends identification and analysis.