

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

Francis Johnson<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stockholm Environment Institute

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This paper provides an interesting tour of Think Tanks associated with the analysis of Megatrends and Futures Research and builds on the book by the authors. The role of Think Tanks has indeed evolved considerably during the past two decades during which major work tracking, analysing and ranking Think Tanks has been carried out, the most prominent among these being the TTCSP at the University of Pennsylvania, as noted by the authors. The unfortunate and sudden demise of the TTCSP with the passing of its founder and leader has left some gap in our ability to follow and understand the work of Think Tanks. As noted by the authors in their introduction, there is a tendency in the Think Tank profession as a whole (and perhaps especially with regard to Megatrends analysis) not to conduct historical reflections or analysis since the focus is on the future – whereas history is always important for understanding the future. Therefore, researchers who are carrying on with analysis of Think Tanks can play a useful role in understanding how and why they influence policy and practice, and perhaps offer recommendations for how Think Tanks might sharpen and focus their work, with special reference to the topic of Megatrends Analysis and Futures Studies.

The paper, however, is largely descriptive, and is lacking in analysis. In order for the analysis to improve, the first step is to enhance the Methodology by having clear steps along the way of answering their main question about the role of Think Tanks in Megatrends and Futures Studies. This methodology would likely include screening the list of Think Tanks, perhaps using the most recent list from TTCSP, in order to choose the most representative sample for interviews. We are told that diversity in size and geography and thematic area was considered, but without a screening method, there is no obvious way to see that that is in fact the case. Also, by referring to the TTCSP list, it might be possible to choose from across different categories or to emphasise highly ranked Think Tanks, or some other criteria that are more concrete than just diversity per se.

We would also need some statistics for what the identified Think Tanks do. The interview in and of themselves provide background. But the specific performance of the Think Tanks, perhaps including publications statistics, social media scanning, and other indicators that differentiate what they do, how they do it, and what the impacts is.

Another step to make it more analytical would be to develop further the interrogation of the characteristics and approach of the Think Tanks by developing sub questions of issues for the role that can be played. They have noted their five criteria but there is no obvious and consistent application of the criteria. We would like to see a detailed table comparing the Think Tanks analysed, perhaps using the 5 criteria or some similar set that offers a comparative lens.

Another point that is glossed over somewhat is the independence of Think Tanks and here it would have been useful with a proper classification (also part of the Table) showing which ones are independent and how this has been determined. Nationally-funded Think Tanks or those that receive most of their funding from their national government cannot really be independent, so one might assess this based on the share of funding each gets from their host government. Also, in authoritarian governments, even those that are somehow “privately” funded or project-based might also not be very independent since their governments would not really allow it. Private sector funding also can make Think Tanks less independent and more like consultants, so share of private sector funding also has to be considered. A related point mentioned only briefly in the article which deserves more consideration is the issue of “advocacy” and “lobbying” which also take away from independence, since lobbying for a position may be done with the express purpose of getting more projects and not only for making policy recommendations. In such case they may be more like an NGO or a lobbyist and not a Think Tank at all.

All of these issues could get at the point as to whether the Megatrends Analysis and Future Studies that a given Think Tank is doing can be regarded as independent work, as opposed to being biased in favour of the funders or some particular constituencies. This in turn raises a further methodological question, since transdisciplinary research is supposed to allow stakeholders to define the research questions and direction of research, i.e. the MegaTrends and Futures would be co-produced and therefore to some extent they explicitly do represent the views of those stakeholders and are NOT independent. This is different from the traditional style of futures work, especially in the early days of Think Tanks, such as the Rand Corporation's pioneering work on scenarios and decision-making, which elicited information but would not involve stakeholders in the analysis itself. So all of these issues need to be considered in order for the paper to include critical analysis and assessment and not only describing the status based on this particular sample.