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What is a successful think tank?

Best practice on quantifying results

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elf FORES

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About

The European Liberal Forum

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the foundation of the European Liberal Democrats, the ALDE Party. A core aspect of our work consists in issuing publications on Liberalism and European public policy issues. We also provide a space for the discussion of European politics, and offer training for liberalminded citizens. Our aim is to promote active citizenship in all of this. Our foundation is made up of a number of European think tanks, political foundations and institutes. We work throughout Europe as well as in the EU Neighborhood countries. The youthful and dynamic nature of ELF allows us to be at the forefront in promoting active citizenship, getting the citizen involved with European issues and building an open, Liberal Europe.

About
Fores

Fores – Forum for reforms, entrepreneurship and sustainability – is a green and liberal think tank. We are a non-profit foundation that wants to renew the debate in Sweden with a belief in entrepreneurship and creating opportunities for people to shape their own lives. Market-based solutions to climate change and other environmental challenges, the long-term benefits of migration and a welcoming society, the gains of increased levels of entrepreneurship, the need for a modernization of the welfare sector and the challenges of the rapidly changing digital society – these are some of the issues we focus on. We act as a link between curious citizens, opinion makers, entrepreneurs, policymakers and researchers.

About Republikon

Republikon Institute was founded in 2007 and became fully operational in 2008. Independent from any political party but committed to democratic values, tolerance, and the construction of a more open society, Republikon has been endeavouring to shape policy thinking and public debate with its innovative approach to politics and policy. It is the mission of Republikon to articulate new ideas, to find ways of making the values of liberal democracy, human rights and tolerance more popular and to contribute to any future coalition between parties, civil organisations and NGOs critical of the authoritarian tendencies visible in Hungary. Our experts are professionals in political science, economy, sociology, international relations, education and communication and are dedicated to work for the aims of the Institute - some of them doing it also as active members of youth and civil organisations.

About
NEOS Lab

NEOS Lab is the political academy of the liberal grassroots movement NEOS, and an open laboratory for new politics. The main objective of NEOS Lab is to contribute to enhancing political education in Austria by providing a platform for knowledge exchange and liberal political thinking on the key challenges and pathways of democracies and welfare states in the 21st century. Particular emphasis is placed on the core topics of education, a more entrepreneurial Austria, sustainable welfare systems and democratic innovation. NEOS Lab conceives itself as a participatory interface between politics and society insofar as it mediates between experts with scientific and practical knowledge on diverse policy issues and interested citizens. A network of experts accompanies and supports the knowledge work of the diverse thematic groups and takes part in the think tank work of NEOS Lab. Additionally, NEOS Lab provides several services, such as political education and training, workshops and conferences and a rich portfolio of inter- and transdisciplinary research at the interface between science, politics, economy and society.

Content

Introduction:

What is a good think tank?

As most ELF members will doubtlessly concur, explaining just what a think tank does - and does not - do, is not an easy task. Quantifying the results of the think tank's work, on request from board members, financial supporters or policy makers, is a daunting task, which is often solved by rather reporting activities such as conferences held, politicians met or publications launched. When pressed to deliver "real" short term results, the think tank risks falling into the trap of being too close to policy or to mimic the work of consultants or lobbyists. On the other hand, *not* focusing on results may result in inefficiency and complacency, and may lead to funders withdrawing their support.

At Fores, encouraged by our board, we have felt the need to clarify and quantify our results, striving to answer "How efficient are we?", "How do we become more relevant?" and "Can we be more cost-effective?", while at the same time jealously safeguarding the uniqueness of being a think tank. We have developed a performance sheet, that met with approval from the board, but limited enthusiasm from our workforce, meaning that it is not currently a useful tool for improvement.

When asking fellow think tanks, both within our Nordic network and within ELF, we didn't find anyone performing much better in terms of measuring think tank success. Instead, we found many others who are, similar to ourselves, discussing this and trying to come up with answers - as well as others who have largely stuck their head in the sand but agree that a better answer should be developed.

That led to this ELF project, seminars, roundtable discussions, interviews, meetings, consultancy reports and benchmark practices, all in order to try and establish a best practice on quantifying reports for think tanks. While this report contains the most tangible results, much of what we and the other think tanks have achieved in this project has been thanks to the process in itself; the very discussion on how to evaluate think tanks has gotten the ball rolling.

Even though this is the final report of the project, this is very much a work in progress. Ensuring better quantification of results and better answers to "how successful are we as a think tank?" requires changes in how projects are designed, how the year ahead is planned, how the past year is reported, how staff members are incentivized, and many other things that cannot be changed overnight. In addition to that, many of the insights from the process are still at a trial and error-level, with final answers yet to be developed. We thus hope and expect the discussion on how to evaluate think tanks to continue, and look forward to the increased awareness and efficiency this will lead to.

Why think tanks matter

A key reason for this project is our firm belief that think tanks matter, now more than ever. In many countries around the world, we see how traditional political parties and democratic values are being challenged by populists or extremist organizations, increasing the need for other platforms for policy discussions.

Furthermore, as the common and shared spaces shrink, we see an increased need for different types of organizations and different parts of society to meet and interact - think tanks can provide this and build bridges between policy makers, academia, civil society organizations and the business community.

In addition, we see how traditional ways of organizing oneself are losing ground; non-government organizations including political parties have shrinking memberships and as a result lose in credibility and relevance. Think tanks can and should provide a new way of canalizing ideas and propositions.

Finally, we also see that policy makers struggle to take in all new developments, and find it hard to have a long-term, strategic vision, beyond the next opinion poll, budget process or election. This longer perspective can and should be provided by, among others, think tanks.

How to use these guidelines

In this report, you will find tips and thoughts to be inspired by, as well as checklists to use for evaluating a think-tank, a project or an event. Use what you think is beneficial for you, and make evaluating a routine in a way that suits your work. As an appendix, you will find a number of interviews with think tanks on these issues, to be read by those interested in a deeper insight into how other think tanks reason on efficiency and measuring their work.

Baseline:

What is a think tank?

Judging from the discussions that this project has led to, an important starting point for the discussion is what a think tank is. We believe that part of the difficulties in answering what a successful think tank is stem from the limited understanding and clarification on the role of think tanks as such.

Wikipedia defines a think tank as “a research institute/centre and organization that performs research and advocacy concerning topics such as social policy, political strategy, economics, military, technology, and culture.”[1] UNDP defines think tanks as “organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy. They are the bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies”[2]

Several authors have indicated a number of different kinds of think tanks:

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Think_tank
2. Organization/Structure of Think Tanks, Heidelberg University, www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_14157-544-1-30.pdf

- Policy research institutes affiliated with a university;
- Governmentally created or state sponsored think tanks;
- Corporate created or business affiliated think tanks
- Political party think tanks and legacy or personal think tanks; [3]

Think tanks can also be categorized according to

- Size and focus: e.g., large and diversified, large and specialized, small and specialized
- Evolution of stage of development: e.g., first (small), second (small to large but more complex projects), and third (larger and policy influence) stages
- Strategy, including: Funding sources (individuals, corporations, foundations, donors/governments, endowments, sales/events) and business model (independent research, contract work, advocacy)
- The balance between research, consultancy, and advocacy

3. Think tanks: definitions, development and diversification https://web.archive.org/web/20070206171015/http://www.adbi.org/discussion-paper/2005/09/09/1356.think.tanks/think.tanks.definitions.development.and.diversification/

- The source of their arguments: Ideology, values or interests; applied, empirical or synthesis research; or theoretical or academic research
- The manner in which the research agenda is developed—by senior members of the think tank or by individual researchers, or by the think tank of their funders
- Influencing approaches and tactics and the time horizon for the strategies
- Audience or target group[4]

There are many other ways of defining and categorizing think tanks, but the important part for the evaluation purposes is how the individual think tank choses to define and categorize itself; without a clear answer here, a profound and relevant evaluation will not be possible.

4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Think_tank

Current practices:

What, how and when do think tanks evaluate?

In order for think tanks to improve their self-evaluations, it is important to gain a better understanding on current practises; what, how and when do think tanks evaluate?

While there is abundant material on how to better evaluate organizations, there is limited information on how think tanks work. In our belief, this is partially due to the secretive nature of some think tanks, notably in the US where a lot of the organization evaluation literature comes from, but also that think tanks are a relatively marginal phenomena compared to companies and other kinds of organizations.

With this in mind, Fores with the support from ELF organized a fact finding on how think tanks evaluate their work, with

- a questionnaire sent to all ELF member organisations
- interviews with representatives of ELF member organisations (Appendix I-IV)
- interviews with selected think tanks outside ELF (Appendix V)
- a workshop with Swedish think tanks and a working session with the Fores board
- the ELF workshop “Best practices on quantifying results” in Stockholm

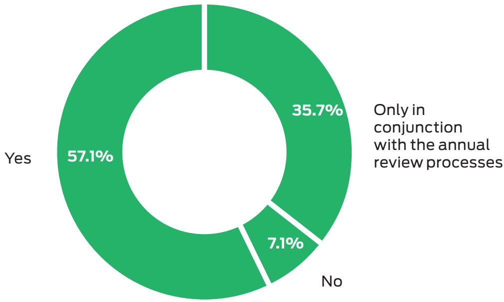
ELF is a family of quite various members, and far from all organizations define themselves as think tanks. Most of those that do not have refrained from answering the questionnaire, but in some cases their answers are included.

Evaluations: Regularity

A clear majority of the think tanks that answered the questionnaire - almost 60% - regularly evaluate their work. An additional 35% evaluate their work, but only in conjunction with the annual review, while only one claims to not regularly evaluate its work at all.

When it comes to the evaluation, the interviewed organisations have a very wide span of ambitions,

Figure 1. Do you evaluate your work on a regular basis?



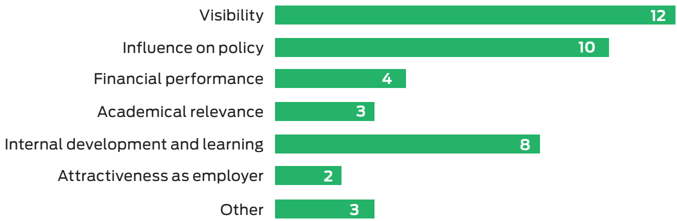
from weekly evaluations according to predetermined indicators to occasional, informal evaluation meetings after larger projects.

Evaluations: What is covered?

In terms of what is evaluated, there is a clear bias towards the quantitative and readily measurable, with visibility being the most commonly evaluated theme of the ones asked about in the questionnaire. This is in line with Fores initial, scouting workshop on this theme, where the number of people attending events and the number of reports published were commonly used measurements.

The second most common factor to evaluate, influence on policy, may be the one most closely associated

Figure 2. When you evaluate your work, what factors do you include?



with think tanks, but 30% of the respondents to the questionnaire do not evaluate that - partially because some of the ELF-members that have answered the questionnaire don't consider themselves as think tanks. Our interpretation, supported by the interviews, is that even if policy influence is probably important to all think tanks, it is hard to evaluate. An indirect factor to measure is contacts with politicians or people who can be expected to influence politicians, such as journalists and other opinion-makers. This can be done by measuring attendance at events, smaller meetings etc. It seems many if not all think tanks count the number of events per year and sometimes also the number of participants.

But it is possible to be more detailed. KEFiM breaks down the number of participants in each event in categories such as politicians and journalists, and thereby gets a clearer picture of if the right people are coming. Another possibility is to identify certain individuals that should be reached and measure to what extent it succeeded.

As seen in the comments, some think tanks - including Fores - focus on *changing public opinions* rather than influencing policy.

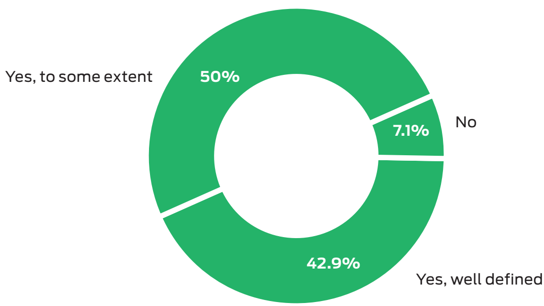
Most of our respondents, but not all, evaluate visibility. Some think tanks are close to a party and can reach their target groups - the party's politicians and staff - without going through the media. For those that try to reach visibility, counting media hits is perhaps the easiest, but not the best measure. Some have more detailed quantitative measures to separate media that are of different importance, others do more of a case-by-case evaluation, e.g. Republikon saying that it could be possible to evaluate appearances on the discussion TV shows, but "one appearance two days before the election makes more difference than if it is long time before".

The third most common factor to evaluate is internal development and learning, where some think tanks that we interviewed include this in the regular staff self-evaluations.

Less than half of the think tanks measure financial performance, in some instances because as not-for-profit organizations it is not seen as relevant, though those that do evaluate it often see it as a relevant "bang for the buck" factor. Almost no think tank evaluates its attractiveness as employer; this may serve as food for thought since in many other sectors this is seen as an efficient - if hard-defined - way to measure the overall attractiveness of the organization.

Target groups: Who are they?

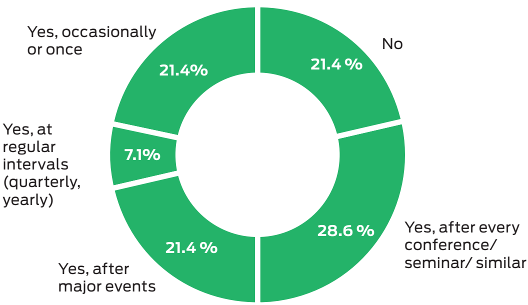
Figure 3. Do you have defined target groups?



Almost all respondents have target groups, though according to themselves, less than half of them have well defined groups. In our interviews, some of them reason that the target groups are less clearly defined than it may appear; with "decision makers" as an example. Some seem to have had the same target group over time, while others have changed this over time, for instance by widening it to "future decision makers".

As seen in the follow-up question (below), in most cases, the target groups are not systematically used as part of the evaluation; only a small minority use them for this at regular intervals and a larger share don't use them at all as part of their evaluation efforts.

Figure 4. Do you ask your target group or audience to evaluate your work?

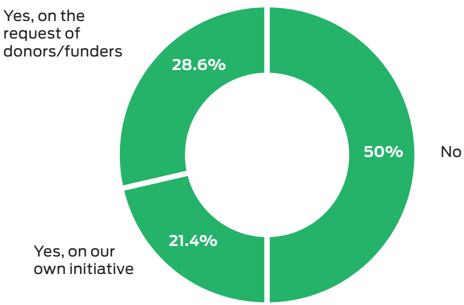


Who evaluates?

Half of the think tanks that answered our survey have never commissioned an external evaluation of their organization, while most of those that have done so, have done it at the request of donors or funders. In the comments, it is stated that some EU funding typically request this kind of external evaluation, but that it is often very focused on quantitative, easy-to-measure factors and may thus be of limited relevance for think tanks that want to improve their performance.

Even with other external evaluation, there is a risk that the measurements are removed from the reality in which the think tank works. A meaningful evaluation probably needs a quite detailed knowledge of the political and media landscape to establish realistic and relevant goals, e.g. whom to meet, what media outlets to be seen in.

Figure 5. Have you commissioned an external evaluation of your organisation?



Evaluating a think tank

General advice

Start by defining who you are and what you want to achieve. The concept of a think tank is not very well defined, with very large differences on whether they want to merely inspire or directly influence. Individual projects can also differ in what they want to achieve; a general discussion or specific decisions? Where your think tank and your projects are placed along this line is important to define in order to be able to evaluate the work done.

Aim high, and don't make excuses. You can only evaluate your projects and your think-tank if you know what you're aiming for. Use the nine questions (below) as a starting point, and make sure that you in the end evaluate what you said you would do to begin with. A good rule-of-thumb is that you should have clear conclusions of the project and make sure that they have reached your target group. E.g., if you're targeting politicians and journalists, name them or their positions and evaluate if your main conclusions have reached them, not just if you sent them a book and a press release.

Prioritize what to evaluate. Serious evaluating is time-consuming, meaning that a decision to profoundly evaluate everything will simply mean that nothing gets profoundly evaluated.

Prioritize the cases where you might learn the most; perhaps the projects that are the most central to your organization or - to the contrary - projects that are so new to your organization that they will tell the most about how you manage to deal with new situations. Combine this with very light evaluations of more routine events; seminars, conferences, op-ed articles - even a brief round-the-table will give valuable input.

Evaluating is a serious job. For the evaluation to be a useful tool, it should be done following standardized guidelines that are known to all relevant staff members, an employee should be given the direct responsibility for evaluation and follow-up, and at key moments in the development of the organization, a professional, external evaluation should be performed

- both for the results it will give, and as a learning process in how to improve our evaluation skills.

Share lessons learnt. Make sure that lessons learned are shared with relevant persons in your organization, and passed on to other projects - but often not to others. By keeping parts of the evaluation strictly internal, you can also do more honest evaluations.

Set yearly targets for your work. Many think tanks have an overarching vision and/or mission, as well as concrete projects, but not much in between when it comes to qualitative aspects of the work that is not covered in the budget. By setting this kind of target, your work becomes easier to evaluate.

Realize limited usefulness of compulsory project evaluations. Many evaluations are done to satisfy the demands from external funders. These evaluations are of limited help when it comes to defining how successful the think tank is since - let's be honest - the purpose is to show that individual projects have been successful and to keep the funding partners happy. Furthermore, they are often done under severe time constraint, when the next project is already waiting to get started.

Evaluations are needed both for projects and for the think tank as a whole. A think tank is more than the sum of its projects, it is important to measure if you are well-known and how you are perceived.

Complement formal evaluations with informal input. Use questionnaires after events to get feedback. Team up with other think tanks and evaluate each other. Ask someone else to perform an external evaluation, e.g. by interviewing stakeholders who get to be anonymous.

Indicators for the evaluation of a think tank

In a more overarching and general evaluation of the organization, it is recommended to use external, professional actors to ensure a neutral evaluation. Furthermore, if this is - as is recommended - done periodically with two to four years between major evaluations, the basic questions are recommended to be the same so that a comparison over time is facilitated, though this can be complemented with a special focus that may be different for each time.

The Danish Damvad Analytics group are experts in evaluating not for profit-organizations and have performed in-depth evaluations of think tanks. The Damvad Analytics partner Torben Bundgaard Vad participated in the ELF evaluating think tanks workshop and presented an evaluation sheet for think tanks wishing to improve their self-evaluation skills.

Damvad Analytics has gathered nine analytical questions that are relevant to ask in any think tank evaluation, inspired by their insights and expertise.

1. What difference does the think tank want to make?

The first question is about the strategy of the think tank. What impact does it want to have and how does it want to get there? How deep and how broad is the think tank's strategy vis-à-vis the target groups it wants to impact. Only by asking this question one can analyse if the think tank is achieving its aims, but also identify which impact it misses and which additional impact in can achieve.

2. How does the think tank make it happen?

A modern financier and think tank should not only be looking retrospectively at results but integrate the impact measurement into administration and communication with projects and participants to empower everybody to maximize the intended results.

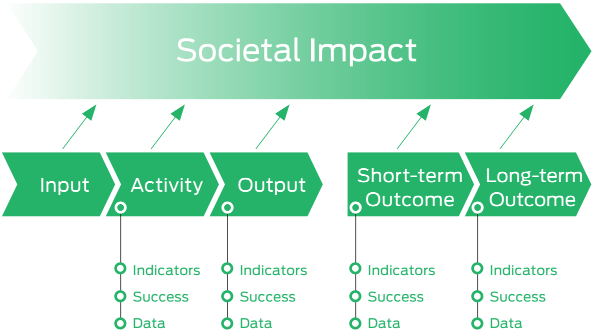
3. Where does the think tank expect to see impact?

Several factors are important when assessing think tank impacts. First, indicators should be selected depending on the areas it wants to impact. Individual level impacts can be assessed based on microdata approaches. Structural impact can be assessed with macro models and systems approaches. If impact is expected in the long term, one could still look for early indicators and impact paths. If impact is expected to show on the short term, measure the outcome indicators.

4. Is there a solid theory of change or do we need to establish one?

To understand how impact happens the think tank must have a theory of change. In this regard we ask questions such as; how do you expect to achieve your goals? Can we identify indicators in all phases of the theory of change? If you expect to have an impact on a more structural level, identify the relevant indicators. Indicators should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. A theory of change is not least about the financial, human and leadership resources available to achieve impact. It is also about the efficiency of the organisation. How are resources and personnel used?

Figure 5. Have you commissioned an external evaluation of your organisation?



Source: Theory of change for think tanks, Damvad Analytics 2018.

The purpose of the theory of change is to show how the formulated aspirations and goals of the think tank actors can be expected to be realised over a longer period of time (5-10 years) as a result of specific investments and actions by the think tank. The development of the theory of change should use backwards mapping starting with the long-term goals and aspirations and then think back on the changes that are required to cause the desired change. The Theory of change for the think tank should be seen as credible, achievable and supported by the think tanks stakeholders and employees. The development can be a great way to involve employees and stakeholders and thereby facilitate engagement, enthusiasm and common values around the think tank. The process of developing the theory of change is hence seen as useful as the end result.

5. How is the think tank's impact defined by its position?

It is important to understand that impact does not happen in a vacuum. The environment or sector has to be ready for impact efforts. The think tank's capacity combined with other agents in the sector is another key variable to consider. It is crucial for every think tank and for their financiers to map the think tank's position.

6. How much impact can be expected?

Different parameters can be used to assess the level of impact that a think tank can expect to achieve. By assessing the politics, the people, the market and the knowledge that define the current sector, it is possible to identify where the potential for impact is biggest and where the think tank can expect to meet barriers. In any case, it could be expected from any think tank that it is good at spreading their argument and dissem-inate knowledge through the media. This can easily be assessed through a media analysis. But we also want to know about the content. Is it produced by the Think Tank itself or by others?

7. Which impact tools are used?

A think tank should know the other players in the field. This should also be known when conducting an evaluation. Hence, an impact assessment should also take note of the think tank's ability to manoeuvre and create impact in a field – sometimes by itself, but most often in cooperation with other key players. We want to know about the relevance, the intensity, the synergies and the results of cooperation. We also want to know if it has the right partners and if it can create collective impact?

8. How should impact then be measured?

The appropriate measures of impact depend on how the think tank places in all the previous parameters: The instrument of impact, how they choose to impact and their role in the surrounding environment. One wants to know if the impact is the aggregation of all the think tank's efforts, or if it is part of a wider impact, of which the think tank can "only" claim some?

9. Which data should we apply?

Finally, as part of the evaluation process, think tanks and their financiers should of course consider the data sources that they have available. The choice of data sources should rely on two basic parameters: 1)

How crucial is the data source for the intended impact measurement and 2) How complex is the data source to work with? In many cases we will use personal interviews, questionnaire surveys or self-evaluation schemes. A lot of data is also available through social media or databases. Scientific expert reviews is also a way to learn about the quality of the think tank's work. Many types of data sources are available and can be used. Data that can be collected automatically with a minimum of resources are preferred.

To summarise, an external evaluation should hence include the view of key stakeholders, e.g. think tanks, authorities, policymakers, media representatives, scientists in the areas that the think tank deals with, as well as former staff and board members. Questions may include:

- Do you know the organization?
- How would you describe it?
- In which areas/fields is the organization relevant? (open or with choices)
- How has the organization's relevance developed over time?
- Is the work credible?
- In what areas do you see the most room for improvement?

In addition, relevant tasks for the external evaluator include

- Perform a benchmark comparison with similar actors; other think tanks, etc
- Evaluate progress over time
- Compare how the organization is seen (by key persons, in media etc) with the stated objectives of the organization
- Evaluate staff members understanding of the organization's vision, mission and purpose; is there a common understanding?
- Study relevant project documents; is it possible to discern a common thread?
- Evaluate visibility over time; how has it developed in general, and in what areas is the organization particularly visible? Is the visibility balanced or biased?

In an internal evaluation of your organization, much of the same questions can be asked, though it must be realized that the results will be influenced by who asks them; both because the answers may be less sincere and because the results may be seen in a subjective way. However, internal evaluations also have several advantages over external; since the cost is often lower, they can be performed more often; indeed, internal evaluations can become part of the routines for projects. Also, some of the questions that can be part of a think tank evaluation are easier to answer internally than with an external expert. Potential questions for internal evaluations include the following, to be seen as starting points for a qualitative discussion rather than something to just answer in writing:

General

- How successful are we?
- How well do we perform compared to a year ago?
- Compared to an ideal, theoretical think tank, how well are we doing and in what areas do we need to improve?

Organization

- Does the organization have a clear place and role in the landscape of think tanks and other similar organizations?
- Is there a clear vision, mission and strategy for the organization?
- Does the organization have the needed competences?

- Are key competences developed over time?
- Is the organization good at cooperating with other?
- How much have we interacted with our target groups over the last period of time?

Economy

- Is the current economic situation satisfactory?
- How has the economy developed over time?
- For how long is the organization's economy secured?
- How large part of the total funding comes from one main donor?

Staff

- Has the organization attracted/lost key staff in the last period of time?
- How attractive are we as employer?
- How many spontaneous applications do we get and how senior are they?
- How high is our staff turnaround compared to competitors, and to a year ago?

Activities and products

- Are the activities successful (according to your set criteria)?
- Are the activities relevant?
- Are the activities well-known by our target groups and key audiences?
- Is the visibility of the activities and products good?
- Is the quality of the products high?

Remember to bear in mind and factor in that we live in a changing world; for instance, there will be more spontaneous applications in a recession with high unemployment than in times with high employment.

Evaluation of projects

In addition to evaluating the whole organizations, individual projects can and should be evaluated. The following is from Fores' project evaluation map.

What is considered a project?

What is considered a project or not is not always obvious. For example, at Fores a policy paper is considered a project, but an op-ed is not. Similarly, a full day conference is seen as a project, but a smaller seminar is not.

Strategy meetings

The project process begins as the project is initiated, either internally or with external players. During its life cycle, the project should undergo two strategic meetings and also be evaluated twice:

1. During this meeting, the first guidelines are drawn. What form should the project have and what objectives do we have with the project?
2. There is by now an outline for the project, and the synopsis is reviewed together with an internal or external researcher linked to the project.

Setting goals/targets

- There should be targets both at the organizational level and for the individual project. Goals should be concrete and limited in number. Include:
- Who do we target? Politicians / Scientist / Public / Other?

- What media coverage / other impact do we strive for?
- How do we measure the result?
- How do we follow-up and build on the project results?

SWOT

In the early planning stage of the project, a SWOT analysis should be performed (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). This analysis can be a good way of assuring the relevance of the project and early on addressing the potential problems that the project might face.

Synopsis

The responsible author must provide a synopsis. Appropriate headings are background, purpose, content and literature. Point out that what we do should be relevant to policy (preferably through clear policy recommendations in the publication). The synopsis is to be terminated by a Fores researcher.

Scheduling

When you draw up a schedule for the study, be sure to include all the elements of the process, with plenty of time for external review and revision. Start thinking about who (two people) will be responsible for peer review.

Budget

Set a budget before work begins (costs including peer review, possible external funding, revenue). Remember to set aside money to share the results of the project.

Goals

Set clear and measurable goals for the project, and ensure that they are relevant and in line with the organization's overall goals. Goals may include target audience, impact on the political debate and academic impact. If relevant, have mid-term goals.

Peer review

Studies and books are to be reviewed by two third parties, ideally an academic and a practitioner. The review should be based on the questions to be answered in the document on scientific quality work. The reviewers should be anonymous to the author. If the reviewer has submitted comments in a word document, it must be anonymized.

Evaluation questions

After the project has finished, it will be evaluated. The purpose of this is to document our working methods to learn for future projects. Based on the project documents from the strategy meetings, answer the following questions:

- How did it go?
- Was it as we thought?
- What was good and what could have been done differently?
- What did we learn?
- What can Fores learn - and how is it conveyed to colleagues?

Appendixes:
Interviews with think tanks

As part of the work leading up to the workshop and to this report, a number of interviews with relevant think tanks were performed. They include both ELF members and think tanks outside of the ELF realm, with the intention to also cover different parts of Europe, as well as think tanks of different sizes and characteristics - some could be characterised as more hands-on, while others are closer to research.

Please bear in mind that these interviews were performed without extensive preparations from the think tanks involved, for any details on how the individual think tank operates, please do not hesitate to contact them!

Appendix 1:

Interview with Csaba Toth, Republikon

Republikon Institute describes itself as a "liberal think tank organisation based in Budapest, focusing on analysing Hungarian and international politics, formulating policy recommendations and initiating projects that contribute to a more open, democratic and free society. The goal of the Institute is to promote discussion and implementation of liberal ideas, approaches and policies." Republikon exists both as private entity and as a foundation, and does research and publications, policy analysis, conferences and workshops. It has existed since 2010 and has approximately 8 employees (see http://en.republikon.hu/about.aspx). We talked to Csaba Thot, the CEO of Republikon who is also a member of the ELF board.

Overall view

For Republikon, the local context of Hungary is very important to understand how they evaluate their work, according to Csaba. It is a small country, where most politicians, policy advisors and think tank employees know each other, which means that evaluation often happens informally. Secondly, the political context where politics is dominated by the Fidesz party means that evaluation will be different compared to a situation with a more even distribution of power.

Evaluation criteria

Republikon's evaluation is based on two main components: a weekly media evaluation and an on-going evaluation on political interaction.

The *media component* is largely qualitative, since the number of media hits matters less than when and where the appearance was; "We have two major daily political discussion shows on tv, we could evaluate quantitatively how often we are on them, but I wouldn't want to work like that since one appearance two days before the election makes more difference than if it is long time before."

The evaluation is done on a weekly basis, from the insight that in the local context, media visibility, issue salience and agenda setting is a target in itself while policy impact is less so; "This is Hungary, we can influence the agenda and the discussion, but not so much the decisions themselves; Fidesz rarely takes independent opinion into account"

In addition, a social media evaluation is done on an ongoing basis, using the matrix that Facebook and others offer, where not only reach but also interactions and follow-up can be evaluated.

The *political component* is based on a "want to interact"-component; if relevant politicians want to interact with the think tank it is considered a success. For Republikon, this includes all non-Fidesz parties: Republikon wishes to make sure opposition parties formulate their agendas in a more liberal fashion. The Fidesz dominance means that success cannot be based on political outcome, but rather on how the discussion itself has evolved. As an example, Csaba mentions Republikon's proposal to introduce the primary system for elections, where they consider it a success if parties engage in the issues. "The bar is very low", as Csaba puts it.

A more formalized evaluation is difficult, since the political context necessitates a large degree of improvisation. Thus, Republikon does not have specific yearly plans, instead working with project plans and event plans as well as a day-to-day work that means that there is not much to relate to when evaluating. This is also a consequence of Republikon being involved in day to day political issues which are difficult to plan.

Who evaluates?

Republikon does its own evaluations. It could be done by professionally, but Republikon is reluctant to spend money on this since other issues are seen as more pressing. This question of prioritization also applies for how often or systematically the internal evaluations are done; "With limited resources, the question is whether to spend working hours evaluating what we have already done or writing a new proposal, the choice is easy for us". Csaba also emphasizes that "Overformalizing doesn't add value."

The self-evaluation is not done in a vacuum, however; Republikon listens a lot to informal feedback, from policy makers and journalists. This is often more efficient and captures the reality better than Google-forms or other formalized evaluations where often only the most opinionated (positive or negative) answer – you don't necessarily know what the majority thinks. For this reason, Republikon doesn't use formal evaluations.

Republikon receives on a long-term average about one third of its funding from the European Union (institutional and for projects). This means that a fairly large part of the think tank's activities needs to be formally evaluated according to the EU criteria. But this is project-based and, as Csaba puts it, "They are often for the books, and mainly quantitative, focusing on the number of people that attended more than the results. Twenty seconds on the main commercial tv channel is more useful and relevant than thousands of leaflets, but the EU and other financial backers don't always see it like that."

Benchmarks and evaluation criteria

Republikon doesn't formally benchmark against any other organization, but informally the comparison is done with other think tanks in Hungary; "we watch each other". There is no other independent entity that evaluate think tanks in Hungary.

In terms of criteria, Republikon sees trustworthiness and credibility as the two key factors to evaluate, even though it may be difficult to translate into clear evaluation indicators.

With more resources?

At Republikon, they have a fairly clear view on how evaluation of their work should be done more professionally but don't have the resources to do it. As a next step with increased ambition, a social media evaluation could be professionalized. This could include an external social media expert who would spend around a month using a formalized matrix models to evaluate the organization's social media work qualitatively. But again, Csaba estimates that "it would be insightful, but probably not the best we can do with the resources."

Republikon would also be very interested in assessing its brand value, which has never been done. In this, the most important thing to know would be how decision makers evaluate the think tank. There would be trust issues involved in how to do this best, with a potential way to get around those being to collaborate with other think tanks whom would then also be part of the evaluation.

While there have been attempts, mostly by the German foundations, to establish some sort of regular think tank meetings for opposition think tanks in Hungary – last time facilitated by the Ebert Foundation – Csaba struggles to see the value in this from an evaluation point of view; reasonably like-minded think tanks meet informally anyway and a deeper understanding and discussion on successful think tank work would be hindered since many of the think tanks are competitors for funding, and certainly for attention. Regional meetings of ideologically closer think tanks are a better idea.

Appendix II

Interview with Nicos Rompapas, KEFiM

KEFiM works with a broad agenda, on all aspects on liberalism. We spoke to Nicos Rompapas, Executive Director, who has a great interest in evaluations. For a general picture of Greek politics, Nicos tells us that people are liberal only in economic issues, if any. Those who are economically liberals are conservatives otherwise. KEFiM, however, are classical liberals, which is a position that has to be explained in the Greek environment.

Lately, work at KEFiM has focussed more on economy, which is the biggest issue in Greece right now. Since there is no other liberal think tank in Greece, KEFiM tries to cover both reaching politicians and reaching the public. Much of the work is policy oriented, but KEFiM are planning to do ideological training for candidates in upcoming elections. KEFiM has six full-time employees and research is mostly carried out by outside personnel.

Objectivity and independence are very important for KEFiM. Nicos' view is that NGOs don't have a good reputation in Greece, so it is important to build trust. KEFiM is non-partisan and has a rule in its statutes that if a member of the board or one of the trustees is involved in an election, they have to leave their position. KEFiM tries to influence all the pro-European parties, not the populists.

KEFiM does not accept any funding from the government or public sector. Instead, they try to have many fundraising sources. This is important to avoid being dependent on one specific entity or business.

Overall view

KEFiM has, for the last 2 ½ years, made detailed measurements of its projects. They make business plans, with specific, quantifiable goals. A monthly report is sent to the board and to key stakeholders, where the projects are tracked according to those goals. Each monthly report includes the data from earlier months during the year, meaning that the December report also is a yearly report, with data both for specific projects and for KEFiM as a whole.

Evaluation criteria

One example is a goal for audiences at events. KEFiM divides the audience numbers into categories for politicians, journalists, and academics, which are included in the monthly report. Fundraising is also measured month by month. Media mentions are counted and divided into major media, minor media, websites etc. It is also included in the monthly reports if things KEFiM have done are mentioned by politicians or mentioned in parliament.

Every month, they also check if the projects are on schedule and if they are keeping within their budgets.

Right now, KEFiM is working on *Greece 2021*, which is an agenda for liberty and development. For this, they have set a goal that they want 20% of the agenda to be adopted by the next government. This affects the creation of the agenda, as KEFiM invites politicians, academics and business people to co-create the agenda, to make it possible for adaptation.

KEFiM has grown for the last years, and has a hiring goal.

Who evaluates?

KEFiM has not commissioned any external evaluations of the projects or the think tank as a whole. The evaluations are done in-house. They also send out electronic questionnaires to the audience after some events, but haven't examined what other stakeholders think of them and their activities.

Appendix III

Interview with Coen Brummer, Mr. Hans van Mierlo Stichting

Mr. Hans van Mierlo Stichting in the Netherlands is close to its mother party, D66. The think tank is mostly government funded, based on the number of MPs for D66, and funded to a smaller part by private donors and party funding. The think tank works on a broad variety of themes, and see them from the perspective of progressive liberalism. We talked to Coen Brummer, Director at the foundation.

Overall view

Coen Brummer says that you can often define a few factors to measure results, such as visibility and impact both in and outside your party. But they might be at the cost of each other. With a background in history studies, he views success as often being an odd combination of timing, luck etc. Coen says we should not be naive about finding the factors behind success or failure. In the end, he sees work as more an art than a science. Nonetheless, it is essential in his view to prepare publications thoroughly: make sure what your key message is, invest in communicating that message and make sure you follow up by talking to party members and politicians about the ideas that have been developed at the foundation.

Keeping in line with this overall view, the van Mierlo Stichting does not have systematic evaluations with quantifiable goals. However, after an event or when a book is finished, they find it important to take some time for an evaluation session. He does not see that it would be reasonable for a small think tank - the van Mierlo Stichting has seven employees - to invest in large evaluations. If there are good ways to do it in a systematic way, he is interested, but right now he does not think it's worth it.

Evaluation criteria

The van Mierlo Stichting does not specify goals for the projects or the organization. In the evaluation sessions, they look at things such as visibility and impact in the D66. They also think about how to get more outcome from a book than just the attention around the book release, for example by following up with op-eds, symposia and social media. Another factor is that they want to see that those who work with a project are happy with it afterwards. Coen also stresses that it is important to remember to evaluate things that did not happen in the project, not just what happened. The foundation's board is mostly concerned with the quality of the VMS' products, their relevance in terms of policy development and the visibility of the foundation.

Who evaluates?

When the foundation arranges events on D66 party conferences, they ask for feedback via email afterwards. Apart from that, the evaluations are done at the internal evaluation sessions. The foundation has never commissioned an external evaluation.

Appendix IV

Mattias Goldmann & Andreas Bergström

interview themselves, Fores

Fores – Forum for Reforms, Entrepreneurship and Sustainability – describes itself as "the green and liberal think tank." It is a foundation and non-profit NGO which "wants to renew the debate in Sweden with a belief in entrepreneurship and creating opportunities for people to shape their own lives." Since Fores organizes the workshop and ELF study on how to evaluate think tanks, we let the CEO and vice-CEO interview themselves.

Do you evaluate your work on a regular basis? If so, how?

We do; every Friday we go through and evaluate what we have been doing, and prior to most board meetings - held four times a year - an evaluation is done by the CEO after consultations with the colleagues on how Fores is doing on key areas. In addition, larger conferences are evaluated by the participants, and of course we measure things like media coverage, etc.

But honestly, none of this is done very systematically or with a clear view on how the learnings are best integrated into the development of the organization - hence the interest for this project!

Do you evaluate the result of each project?

Major projects are evaluated, but mostly immediately after the launch of the report, the hosting of the conference, the approval of the final report, etc. This means that we are often so relieved by the fact that we have managed to pull it off, that we are not very self-critical, but more importantly, we fail to consider the long-term effects of what we have done, and too quickly move on to the next project. We also do not listen nearly enough to external voices - almost all evaluations are done either in-house or by those who were at the conference - those within our target groups that opted not to participate would be at least as interesting to hear.

Do you evaluate the total output of the organisation?

We tried this with a scoreboard with a number of performance indicators, but it was met with limited enthusiasm both from the board and from the colleagues, and was only done once. Specialized media annually do reports on think tanks, and we are proud that other think tanks have in recent years mentioned Fores as one of the most interesting think tanks. For much the same reason, we find it relevant when we figure on lists of “most important” and receive awards for what we do.

Do you evaluate your outcomes against certain predetermined goals?

We do, including our 20-20-20 target which says that by 2020 we are to be 20 employees with a turnover of 20 million SEK [≈ € 2 million]; it is easy to evaluate how we are doing compared to this target. But we need to be careful not to overemphasize criteria that are easy to measure; we have for instance stopped counting press clippings.

What factors do you evaluate (e.g. visibility, influence, financials, academically, internal development and learning, attractivity as employer)?

The “CEO-letter” to the board, the staff and the founders has a periodical evaluation of Fores work on the five pillars of Finance, Organization, Relevance, Engagement and Visibility (“Synlighet”, so F-O-R-

E-S). This has been done using red, yellow and green traffic lights to indicate the CEO's personal views on the development, with little in terms of a systematic approach and more of a qualitative than a quantitative approach. The feedback from the board has been limited, so these letters have become less frequent.

We strive to move to more qualitative factors rather than the quantitative that we have been using partially because they can be done by any staff member using google and an Excel sheet - and since they have been pointing upwards, it has given us some satisfaction too!

Informally, we more and more often refer to what kind of people apply for work at Fores, not least the spontaneous applications - when they are at a senior level, we know that we have done something good.

Have you asked your audience or target group for feedback?

I would say that one target group for us is our own employees; they know us best and are our most vital resource. Twice yearly our head of human resources have two-hour meetings with every staff member, mainly for personal development but questions also include Fores as a workplace and how we can become more successful - this part could certainly be developed! Audiences are asked to evaluate everything we do that is at least half a day long, but the answers help us improve on individual conferences rather than develop ourselves as a think tank.

Have you commissioned an external evaluation of your organisation?

Yes, about five years ago. It was relevant, but we did not use it in a systematic way and should perhaps redo it every two or three years to get more usability.

Should think-tanks measure influence, and if so, how?

Within Fores, we have a different take on what success looks like for different parts of our work. For instance, with Uppdrag: Integration, there is a clear mission to help improve the integration of migrants into the society, and the 2030-secretariat has parts that are approaching lobbying, which makes evaluating that work easier; its measurements include how much it is mentioned in the yearly government budget proposal, benchmarked against environmental and motor organizations.

What role do topics such as objectivity, credibility, independence and transparency play in the planning of projects in your organisation and is that something you are evaluating?

Since we have one political party as our main financial backer, accounting for around two thirds of our budget, credibility and independence are key factors for us, and one way to measure that is to what extent researchers are interested in working with us and whether or not government and institutional funds accept our applications. For the same reason, we strive to increase our transparency as well as that of think tanks in general.

Appendix V

Green think tanks compared: Similar goals, different evaluations

The Norwegian organization ZERO describes itself as a "not for profit, independent foundation working for a modern society where human activities don't hurt the climate". Concito describes itself as "Denmark's green thinktank, working to reduce climate related emissions and limiting the damages of global warming." We spoke to Henrik Gudmundsson and Jenny Skagestad, senior staff members at Concito and Zero, on how they evaluate their work.

Target groups

Zero's target groups are "Decision makers in business and policy making", which according to Jenny is less concrete than it seems at first; for instance, staff members may be more important than elected politicians.

Zero also has “decision makers of the future” as a target group, linked to the Zero academy for youth politicians under 35 years of age with four meetings per year. This has been linked to several large businesses approaching Zero saying “we need to work with you since we do not manage to reach the youth”.

Concito’s target group is “Decision makers” which has until now been mainly at the national level, but municipalities will now be added. “Youth” is a second target group, within the work of “climate ambassadors for the future”, with more quantitative and measurable targets - clicks on the website, etc.

What to evaluate?

Concito says that the evaluations are “quite flexible” and mainly done by the board meetings twice a year. “Since we are a think tank, we are not very oriented towards products and formal results, and with our main financial supporter, it is more of a negotiation than an actual evaluation - did we deliver what they expected? We have a five-year funding, with a larger evaluation after two and a half years. How this evaluation is to be done is not very defined.” “We only accepted this large sponsor since it has given us a very large degree of freedom, and that is why the evaluation is so open - we need to be free from project deliveries, so that we can deliver freely and act on the occasions that arise. This means that documenting what has been delivered can be challenging."

> *"In our strategy, we focus on areas where we want to be leading and set the tone for the discussion in Denmark [food and the future of cities]. We define ourselves which products to deliver within these themes, with the external evaluation with our main financier being to what extent we have managed to be a thought leader in these areas and had a positive influence on the debate."*

Zero has just approved a new five-year strategy, decided by the board. It focuses on three strategic areas where Zero can make a difference [Norway as a zero-emission country; emission-free industry; green financing]. This focus is new, and is complemented with yearly projects. All these projects have a score card, with concrete political targets and a plan on how to reach them. They can be as concrete as "Did the parliament discuss the issue?".

Every four months, the responsible for each project reports to the board on how they are doing compared to the criteria - there are four board meetings per year, and three of them are part of the evaluation process. “I hardly have any direct contact with the board, and they never interfere in the targets that we set, but they want to see how we are doing in relation to the target.” By contrast, the yearly report seems to of limited importance; “We write a yearly report but I haven’t seen it for a long time, so I guess it is mainly a formality.”

> *“Every year we evaluate which victories we have had, and we evaluate our media visibility but have moved from counting the number of clippings to see how relevant they are for the targets that we have set. “, says Jenny and continues “In many media issues, we comment what others already debate - it is important for us to be part of the large discussions that are taking place.” With this, Henrik totally agrees; “we often don’t get to decide what is discussed, but often it can be predicted, and we then need to be in the discussion.”*

Benchmarking

Both Zero and Concito mention Fores when asked what they compare themselves with, and Henrik says that he is “inspired by the way you [Zero] set concrete targets including on what the parliament should discuss, and to what extent the discussion has changed - we would want to do more of that, because it gives adrenaline to the work. Our work is to ensure that the debate is better, not necessarily that specific targets are reached."

Zero mainly compares itself to environmental organizations, Concito doesn't as much since it doesn't see itself as being in the same sector, but they do look at how environmental organizations manage to get funding. Concito also has a "main enemy", which they benchmark against.

Media benchmarks or evaluations are read "but they are often very quantitative and focus on visibility, which is not so relevant for us, says Henrik.

When it comes to benchmarking itself as a workplace, Zero is part of the "Great Place to Work" network and was named best place to work in the not-for-profit-sector.

Who evaluates?

Zero has "so many supporting partners that any one partner cannot get to decide what we are to do, but we have a cooperation agreement with each of them which are quite detailed and may include how many seminars to arrange together. Sometimes we work very long and very hard for some issues without getting anywhere, in other areas we have rapid success, and it is very tempting to choose these quick gains".

Zero "wants to be better at systematic evaluation. For a while we evaluated every meeting that we had, two minutes at the end, which forced us to ask ourselves to what extent it helped us reach our targets." In Zero's employee satisfaction evaluation, a few questions relate to how the employees evaluate the success of the organizations.

Neither Zero nor Concito work with focus groups, though Zero sees their conference participants as approaching something similar; "We evaluate the Zero conference in detail, since it is so important for us, with an evaluation sent out to the participants. This could be seen as our main focus group."

Zero has a process leader "who very much focuses on feedback within the organization, where we all start out by giving input on what's been good doing the year. After a few hours, we have a fairly complete picture of what we have achieved, which gives a good feeling for the organization."

Appendix VI
Sources

- Interviews with ELF member organisations:
- Republikon - Csaba Toth
- KEFiM - Nicos Rompapas
- van Mierlo Stichting - Coen Brummer
- Fores - Andreas Bergström and Mattias Goldmann (self-performed)

Interviews with other think tanks:
- Zero - Jenny Skagestad
- Concito - Henrik Gudmundsson

Discussions with Swedish think tanks and with the Fores board

ELF organisations answering the questionnaire:

- The Academy of Liberalism
- Boris Divkovic Foundation
- D66 / Stichting IDI
- Fondazione Critica liberale
- Freedom Research Association
- International Educational Center
- Liberal Integration Foundation
- Movimento Liberal Social - Portugal
- NEOS Lab
- Projekt: Polska
- Svenska Bildningsförbundet
- Zavod 14

Andreas Bergström
Mattias Goldmann

What is a successful think tank?

Best practice on quantifying results

Explaining just what a think tank does is not an easy task. Quantifying the results of the think tank's work is often solved by reporting activities such as conferences held, politicians met or publications launched. When pressed to deliver "real" short term results, the think tank risks falling into the trap of being too close to policy or to mimic the work of consultants or lobbyists. On the other hand, not focusing on results may result in inefficiency and complacency, and may lead to funders withdrawing their support.

This report is written by Mattias Goldmann and Andreas Bergström, Director and Deputy Director at the think tank Fores. It builds on experiences from several ELF members and from evaluations of think tanks outside the liberal sphere. Although there is no evaluation model that fits every organisation, the examples, general advice and questionnaires in this report should provide useful inspiration.

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