



**Center for Global & Strategic Studies  
Islamabad**

## **Role of Think Tanks in Nation Building**

*Published on 30<sup>th</sup> July, 2019*



The nature of the developing states' policy in the past was very different than in contemporary times. There was minimal intervention of input from external sources in policymaking. Societies, in general, were reluctant towards welcoming new ideas and changes in the pattern of thinking. However, with the passage of time, states started opening the doors to input from socio-political players in the realm of policymaking. The world today is a global village. The evolving inter-states, as well as the intra-state interactions, have greatly influenced the policies and attitude of nations in the international arena, and the perception of people regarding domestic state policies.

Political awareness and public participation, which the developing nations traditionally lacked, is now being promoted through institutions.

Societies today are subjected to rapid change in the nature of the environment where they operate. People face insurmountable societal problems and challenges on a daily basis. Within this context, various institutions are established that are committed to bring social change and respond to such social concerns. The same is true for think tanks, which are not often considered as public welfare institutions but have the potential to play a dynamic role in the development of a nation's future.

### **Think Tank:**

"A think tank is an institute, organization, corporation, that conducts research and engages in advocacy in areas such as social policy, political strategy, science or technology, industrial or business policies, as well as military advice.<sup>1</sup> A think tank, being a socio-political player, is comparatively a recent phenomenon in the policy landscape. Think tanks, also known as policy institutes, are a prodigiously diverse group of organizations that work to execute research, as well as assist and evaluate policymaking related to social issues, political strategies, international relations, economy, military, energy, technology, law, and culture, to name a few. They enable intellectuals to research, investigate and study policy-related subjects. They provide alternative policy options and are a supplementary resource for the political management of the states. Moreover, they contribute significantly to disciplinary

---

<sup>1</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary, "Think Tank", and Merriam Webster's Dictionary, "Think Tank".

developments in academia by producing journals and policy papers of high academic repute. History has proven that the states having intellectuals and academicians, taking part in the policy-making have been far more successful and prosperous than those who have not.

### **Think Tanks Role in U.S. – Brief Historical Analysis:**

Looking back at the history of research institutes in the United States, in the early 1900s when the first such wave of think tanks emerged in the country, these research institutions made their presence felt on the global level. These think tanks applied scientific inquiry to various policy-related issues. Their primary objective was to educate and guide the general public and policy-makers about the probable consequences of directing a certain course of action in foreign policy. After World War II, when America became a dominant power, the need for a rational and prudent policy-relevant advice became evident. The major impacts of these policy research institutions in the U.S was generating fresh ideas that would direct the approach of U.S. decision-makers perception of international politics, influencing priorities and making political alliances. In order to mainstream their researched conclusions into the contemporary society and on an international level, the method used by these institutes was that of conduction of open seminars, conferences with relevant participants and invoking a sense of inquisitiveness into students by delivering lectures on important topics. They had a great impact on the decision making an approach at domestic, national and international levels.

The concept of nation-building became popular among American political scientists after World War II, to advance the greater integration of state and society, as well as the right to political participation. In this context, think tanks primarily drive for change through innovative ideas and evidence-based arguments in order to create consciousness in the general public. Historically the impact of such institutions has been so prominent as they were one of the key determining features of U.S. policy decisions regarding participation into world politics, in contrast to choosing isolationism as they had for the better part of the previous century. The main reasons for think tanks to thrive in the 20th century were; firstly the governments were escalating thus policy expertise was needed; secondly, the sense of consciousness was developing and people started questioning the government policies and evaluating probable consciousness.

### **Nation Building:**

The prosperity of a nation depends mainly on political awareness and public contribution in the decision-making process. The strongest and the most powerful nations in the world have intellectual and seasoned experts in their institutions and their government. Think tanks are one of the vital players in the process of nation-building, through national policy formulation that aims at facilitating and generating consciousness among the minds of people towards the state of affairs of their country, and by presenting optimal alternate policy options. Nation Building is a multi-

dimensional concept. It involves the active participation of its citizens in various walks of life.

To ensure the success and prosperity of a nation, think tanks participate in promoting better ideas and helpful suggestions. Experienced and professional people from all sections of the society become part of such think tanks for a better output. Think tanks serve as ideal foundations to enhance nation building as they outreach to multi-disciplinary audiences including governments, policy experts and the broader society.

### **Think Tanks in Pakistan:**

Pakistan being a developing state is facing a number of problems such as international terrorism, economic crisis, institutional weaknesses, political unawareness, low literacy rate, lack of public participation and psychological warfare against state and its institutions among the citizens. Thus, instilling consciousness and positive ideas that can be acted upon are the need of the hour. Think tanks in Pakistan, have been working to encourage public participation in analyzing the current issues, offering practical solutions and promoting a wave of positivity among the public to thwart off negative image being spread to malign the image of Pakistan.

In the last couple of years, numbers of think tanks have emerged in Pakistan. Evaluating the contribution and research output of the majority of these organizations, it can be clearly seen the genuine work they are producing and the efficient research they are performing on various important issues of the country. This output, if used in the

appropriate area, can be valuable for the effective policy. But unfortunately, in Pakistan, there is a disconnection between think tanks and the decision-makers.

### **Think Tanks Role in Social Awareness:**

The growing importance of think tanks and research organizations in Pakistan has become very relevant in current public policy scenario. They bring a variety of experts on one platform so as to assist the government functionaries. Thus think tanks are offering platforms for important discussions that educate the citizens about the issues and affairs going on in the world. Most importantly, the identification of new and critical issues and bringing these issues into the knowledge of policy-makers as well as the public is one of the great contributions of the policy research institutions. Seminars, conferences, and round table sessions are an important source of knowledge, especially for the students as well as the other sections of society.

### **Think Tanks Role in creating Political Awareness:**

Nation-building is very closely linked to political awareness among the mass public. People's engagement with politics determines public participation and active citizenship as well as the selection of fact-based information and right orientation towards civil issues. The correct understanding of the internal and external events is very essential for the public to grasp in order to choose between right and wrong. In Pakistan, political instability due to numerous factors, including constitutional frailties, financial crisis, lack of social growth, etc. has resulted in civil unrest among the population. The people of Pakistan have been least perturbed to participate in the

decision making or political affairs of the country and have been concentrating solely on struggling for their basic human needs. Thus, Pakistan has not been able to achieve a consolidated intellectual base for its citizens and due to this negligence and lack of awareness, the public is left untutored to the basic elements that are needed for a nation's progress. So the congregation of people's political orientation and the political environment of the country, and convergence of both in an institutional framework is essentially required.

### **Think Tanks Role in Policy Recommendation and Analysis:**

In order to obtain evidence-based knowledge and information regarding different facets of governance and social aspects, think tanks serve as a foundation. One of the major contributions of think tanks, for the development of a nation, is to assist setting the policy agendas. The formulation of an effective policy is essential in advancing the interests of a state. Think tanks play a key role in this regard. They provide the right expertise and relevant evidence-based data to formulate a policy in compliance with the requirements of the government in order to bring about policy impact by informing policy discourses with relevant, quality data and evidence.

### **Think Tanks Role in Academia:**

The policy research organizations started off as study groups which brought together researchers, scholars, specialists, and government representatives to discuss policy issues. Furthermore, they held lectures, studied research reports and kept extensive libraries. Their work concentrated on influencing the wider public. Think tanks today

serve as a bridge between academia and policymaking by conducting extensive academic research on various crucial subjects. Think tanks serve as a link between different sectors, mainly the academic institutions to achieve sustainable development goals. Moreover, the creation of policy-relevant knowledge enables public dialogue and makes contributions towards transparency of the policy process. In this way, both students and scholars get a platform to participate and contribute to statecraft.

### **Conclusion:**

Think tanks are the linkage between specialized knowledge and the policy-making sphere. They also construct broader political contexts and ideas about how to organize society and interaction with citizens to incorporate them into the system. Involving students, scholars, experts, NGO representatives, local activists, the private sector and other interest groups isn't just about transferring policy knowledge to a wider network of stakeholders but also act as a window into the society. The establishment of true democracy, as is the case with most developed welfare states, finds its roots in public participation. While other institutes work towards economic emancipation of the poverty-stricken peoples of Pakistan, think tanks are working to bridge the gap in intellectual thinking. Think tanks operate hand in hand with various institutions to produce a multi-faceted strategy towards achieving the national interest both domestically and internationally. In short, they produce the intellectual and philosophical framework for government and other institutes to direct them for their role in nation-building.