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***Think Tank and Political Foundation
as ‘policy entrepreneurs’***

**“EIN: Achievements and its role to play in the future”
The contribution of Think Tanks & Foundation to Political Making Process
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Think Tank and Political Foundation as ‘policy entrepreneurs’

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The role of TT and political foundation in shaping European integration process

A political making process does not necessarily require governmental involvement but can occur between corporations, international organizations and NGO's. The history of European integration is one of the best case study to show, because it is above all a history of ideas. The process of integration has always been driven forward by ideas. Such ideas have been important because often they introduce unique experiments, untested elsewhere in the world¹.

As promoter of new policy ideas, the Think Tank [TT] and political foundation have the potential to stimulate debate amongst European leaders and publics about the future shape which European Union could take in **promoting new issues** onto the agenda and in **offering a range of alternatives to decision-makers**.

TT, which contribute to democratization, have certainly had an impact on EU policy-making in the past, alongside other groups of policy experts who have lobbied for change, although the extent of this impact is difficult to measure.

Nowadays, TT have a potentially important role to play in helping the formulation of public policies, in promoting healthy political and democratic practices within Europe and in contributing to Europe's intellectual and cultural diplomatic efforts.

In general, the contribution of a TT and Political foundation to political making process is influenced by the political environment and it can be defined as a “**nongovernmental policy transfer**” although is not automatically evident².

TT interact with actors in government, the business world, the media or other nongovernmental associations. The transfer of ideas can occur at many organizational levels.

- 1) There are interactions between TT and government (national and sub-national);
- 2) TT interact with international organizations and regional associations, for example, the European Union;
- 3) There is exchange from TT to TT and from TT to other civil society organizations.

¹ Diane Stone, *Non-Governmental Policy Transfer: The Strategies of Independent Policy Institutes*, in *An international Journal of Policy and Administration*, Vol.13, No 1, January 2000, pp. 45-62.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 47

The difficulty to measure the impact of TT in decision making process

Investigating the policies and practices of other countries or regions is part of TT and political foundation's task. From one side, they can provide the rhetoric, the language and scholarly discourse to give substance and legitimacy to certain preferred position, to the other side, as non-state actors, they have no formal decision-making role, nor are necessarily involved in the administration of government policies and they cannot impose policies on a political system. They can merely exhort and be engaged in lesson-drawing rather than the coercive aspects of transfer.

If governmental actors are not receptive to, or aware of, TT recommendations in a policy area, there is little hope that they will be a participant in policy transfer. Similarly, the ideological disposition of ministers or the party in office will occlude certain policy perspectives, hence certain ideologically identifiable or partisan TT.

Moreover, it is important to stress that it is not possible to determine with any degree of certainty what impact TT have on decision-making processes. This is the conclusion which several authors have reached, in contradiction with TT which often include particular cases of supposed influence on the political agenda and policy alternatives in their annual reports.

In fact, Abelson [2002] argues in “*Do Think Tanks matters? Assessing the impact of Public Policy Institutes*”, that it is “notoriously difficult” to determine: “the extent to which TT have influenced public opinion and public policy”. Furthermore, answering the question “*Do Think Tanks matter?*” is even more difficult because of the institutional differences from one country to another and the diversity of TT and strategies used³.

He concludes: “It may be more appropriate to discuss the relevance of TT in the policy making process than to speculate about how much policy influence they wield”.

However, the difficulty to measure their impact does not contradict the importance of their potential contribution to the formulation of public policies.

“TT deal in *soft power*, in shaping policy agendas, in challenging the language and terminology of public debate, in redefining the mental maps of policy makers”⁴ and to use a common expression: they contribute to the “marketplace for ideas”. In this respect, the greater the number of TT, the greater competition between them and with other institutions responsible for formulating plans and political strategies.

³ Donald Abelson, *Do Think Tank matters?*, McGinn Quinn University Press, 2004 (II edition), pp 49-57

⁴ William Wallace, *Think Tank Tradition, Policy analysis across nation*, Manchester University Press, 2004 (III edition), pp.2-10

McGann and Weaver [2000] in fact list six important roles which TT usually play in relation to policy formulation⁵:

- 1) They carry out “basic research on policy problems and policy solutions”;
- 2) They provide advice on immediate policy concerns that are being considered by government officials;
- 3) They evaluate government programs;
- 4) They serve as facilitators of issue networks and the exchange of ideas;
- 5) They serve as suppliers of personnel to government and as a place for politicians and policy makers who are out of power to recharge their batteries;
- 6) They help interpret policies and current events for the media

TT as policy entrepreneurs

TT and political foundation play a role as:

“Policy entrepreneurs in that they generally exhibit a concern with a special subject that leads them to build up a nations-wide or international networks of contacts that are a source of ideas for new programs” [Dolowitz and Marsh 1996:345].

Drawing upon the categories outlined by Dolowitz and Marsh, the following paper depicts the character of one-nongovernmental mode of policy transfer⁶.

The policy transfer is linked with:

- 1) concepts of *policy learning*,
- 2) to ideas about *knowledge utilization* which draws attention to the role of knowledge actors (experts, academics, intellectuals)
- 3) and finally, with *network models* which are useful for incorporating nonstate actors into the analysis of policy transfer

⁵ James Mc Gann, Kent Waver, *Think Tank and Civil societies, catalyst for ideas and action*, Transaction Publisher, London & New York, 2000, pp.70-85

⁶ Daniel Dolowitz, Daniel Marsh, *Learning from Abroad, the role of policy transfer in contemporary Policy making in An international Journal of Policy and Administration*, Vol.13, No 1, January 2000, pp. 345

Accordingly to the main political science literature, TT are outside the public sector and have a significant degree of autonomy from corporate and other interests.

Second, TT tend to be intellectual independent. Most TT strive for a diversity of funding sources to help preserve their intellectual integrity.

Third, these are research organizations with a scholarly or analytic orientation. Staff are usually trained in the policy and social sciences or have considerable firsthand experience from careers in government service.

Fourth, independent policy institutes are typified by a desire to inform the policy process. Their research is not disinterested but directed at government, business, industry leaders and media. Their policy focus and interaction in the political and bureaucratic spheres differentiate them from university research which is usually more academic and theoretical.

Accordingly, TT can be regarded as “potential agents of policy transfer among the general body of policy entrepreneurs or experts of nations”. Their potential importance to the process is their concentrated ability to diffuse ideas by:

- 1) Acting as a clearing-house for information
- 2) Their involvement in the advocacy of ideas
- 3) Their well-developed networks:
 - **domestically** into the political party, bureaucracy, media and networks;
 - **internationally** with other TT, NGOs and international organizations
- 4) Their intellectual and scholarly base providing expertise on specialized policy issues.

Conclusion: the value of an European network

Advocacy is considerably enhanced by networking. First, the interaction between various institutes at both a domestic and an international level helps create alliances where information is transmitted, a conduit for funding is established and skills and expertise are shared. TT keep in touch with counterparts in other nations or states that exhibit a shared set of values and/or policy interests. Such contacts allow TT to become aware of innovative policies adopted elsewhere and the opportunity to provide analysis of and commentary on the relevance of such policies to their own context.

Second, TT facilitate the process of transfer by acting as a for a for interchange among decision-makers and others.

One of the most important outcome of transnational intellectual networks in operation is cross-fertilization of ideas between TT through collaborative work.

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