



COVID-19 INITIATIVE

SURVEY RESULTS

JUNE 2020

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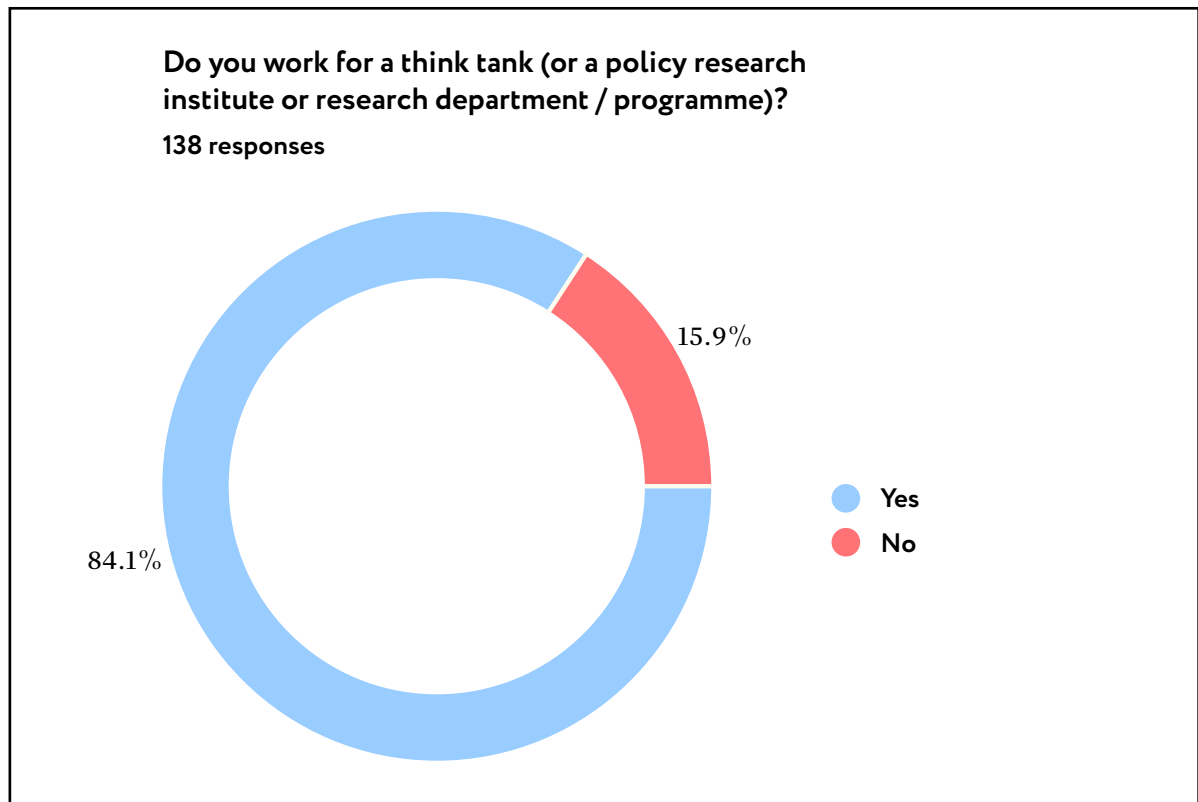
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ABOUT THE SURVEY

The first On Think Tanks (OTT) survey on the impact of COVID-19 on think tanks was carried out between 7 April and 25 May 2020. It was a short pilot survey intended to provide us with a rapid assessment of how think tanks have been affected by the pandemic, and how they have responded in the early months of the crisis. Further surveys will be carried out to track the crisis development and its effects on think tanks across the world.

In total, 138 individuals responded. Most respondents work for a think tank or a policy research body. Other respondents included independent researchers, funders and service providers.

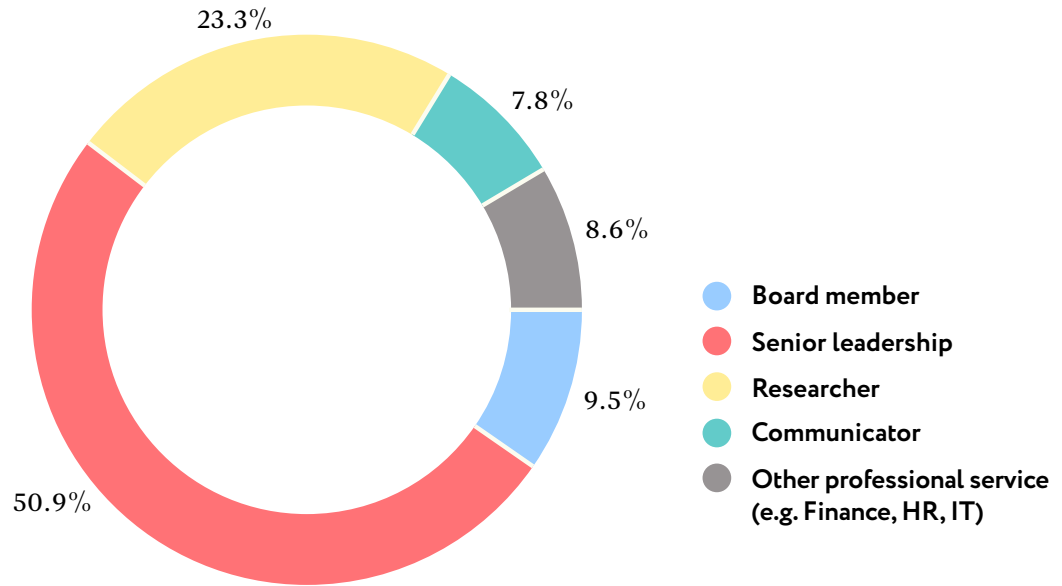


Among those working for a think tank or policy research organisation, most of the respondents were members of senior leadership, including the board.



What is your role in the organisation?

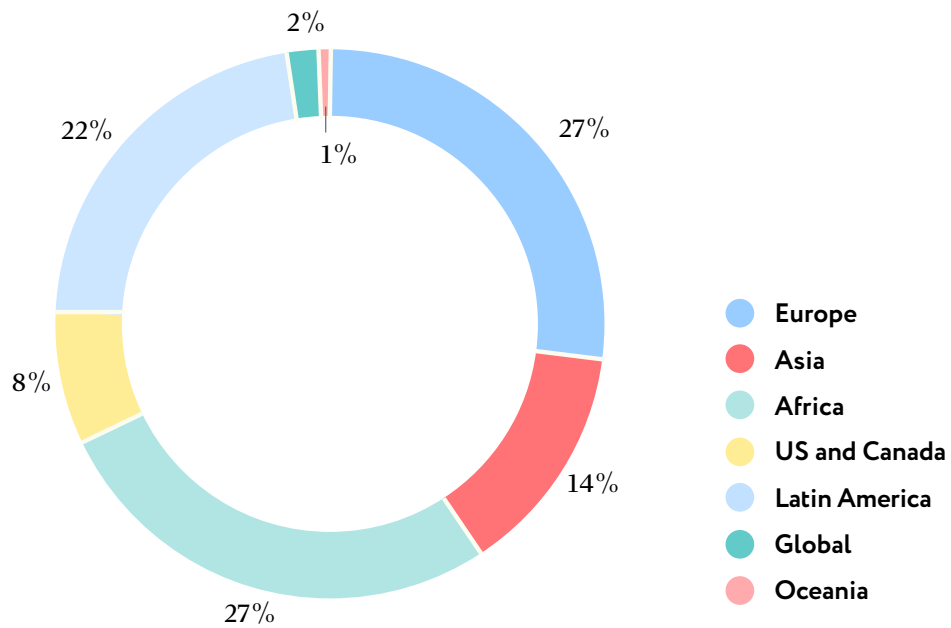
116 responses



Respondents cover all continents. We do not expect this sample to be representative of all think tanks in each region, but the survey responses do coincide with what we are hearing from the think tank communities we engage with regularly through other channels.

Regional coverage of the survey

116 responses





ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL

COVID-19'S EFFECT ON THINK TANKS IN 10 HEADLINES

1 THE SECTOR WILL SUFFER SETBACKS

Most respondents predicted that there will definitely be setbacks. A little over 30% of respondents expected that only a handful will do well from the crisis. In fact, 9.5% said that this could involve some having to close down or significantly downsize their operations.

On the other hand, a little over 10% of the sample considered that this was either not a crisis for think tanks (4.3%) or that they would benefit as a consequence of the crisis (6.9%).

But how will this opinion evolve in the coming months? Especially when many experts have reported that funding cuts will only be felt in the second half of 2020 and early 2021 – and respondents agreed:

'Funding has been cut until next year'

'We expect to see the negative effects in 2021 when the donors completely shift their funds to COVID-19'

'Our funding is largely based on donations from foundations which receive income from the stock market. If this income will be reduced, we might suffer from reduced funding next year.'

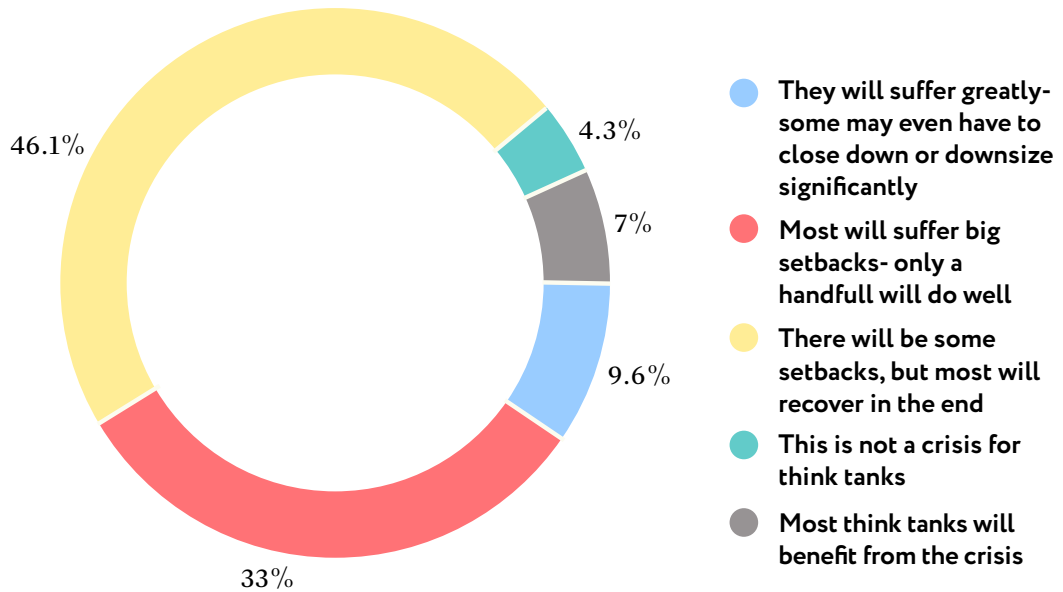
'As a funder, we see pressure from our funders (governments and philanthropies), to redirect attention to COVID-19 related research immediately.'

'There are likely to be fewer think tanks in the long run. I expect funding will fall sharply during the second half of the year.'



What do you think will be the overall effect of the COVID-19 crisis on think tanks and policy research centres in your country over the next year or so?

115 responses

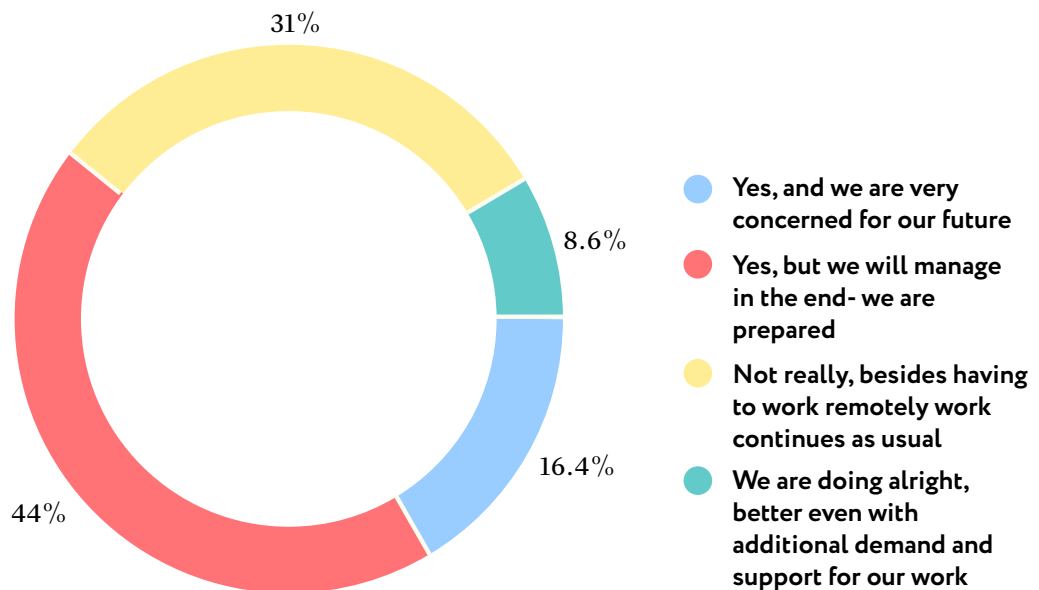


2 THINKTANKERS BELIEVE THEIR THINK TANKS ARE STRONGER THAN OTHERS

When asked about the effect on their own organisations, thinktankers have been more positive. Only 16.4% consider that they will be seriously affected by the crisis!

Has the COVID-19 crisis negatively affected your organisation?

116 responses





survey results

3 NON-RESEARCH STAFF ARE THE MOST OPTIMISTIC

While most respondents considered that the crisis will have negative effects on think tanks, 22% of communicators and 20% of other professionals saw it as either an opportunity, or a crisis that will not affect think tanks at all.

In fact, some communicators responded with a positive angle:

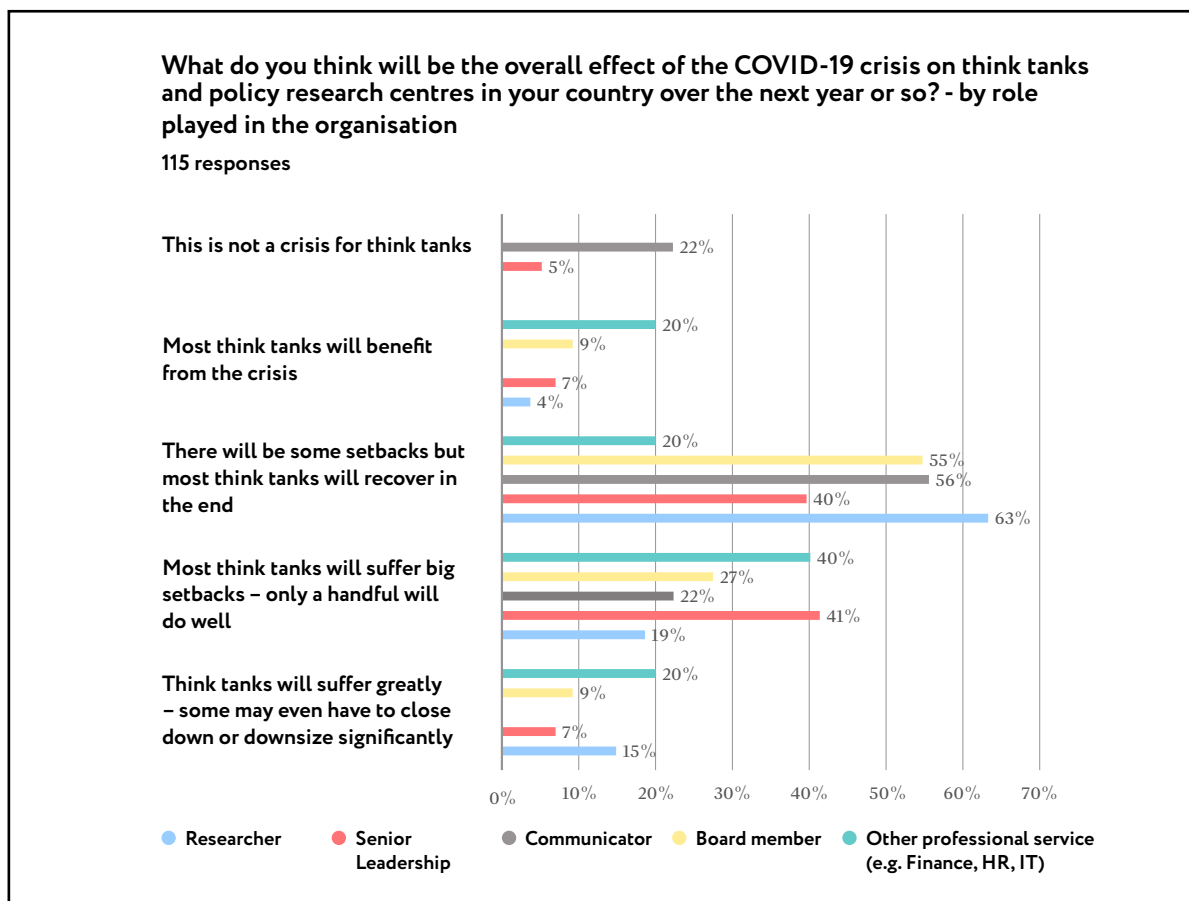
'[The] positive: a modernisation push toward digitalisation, an enhanced understanding of more modern ways to do our advocacy and think tank work.'

'Our webinars have been very successful and reaching new audiences so this has been a positive out of a very difficult situation.'

'In rethinking in-person meetings, conferences etc. we've actually leaned into this and have reconceptualised how we are doing convenings and sharing information in ways that are positive and useful, instead of just rote moving in-person events to online platforms.'

'Our vision of virtual workspace has been materialised.'

'I think the pandemic creates more opportunities for a young think tank to learn and grow.'



We wonder if the opportunities presented will materialise and if these positive experiences will find a way to change think tanks’ modus operandi in the medium to long term.

In future surveys we hope to find out more about how the views and advice of communicators and other professional services within think tanks shaped their organisations’ futures.

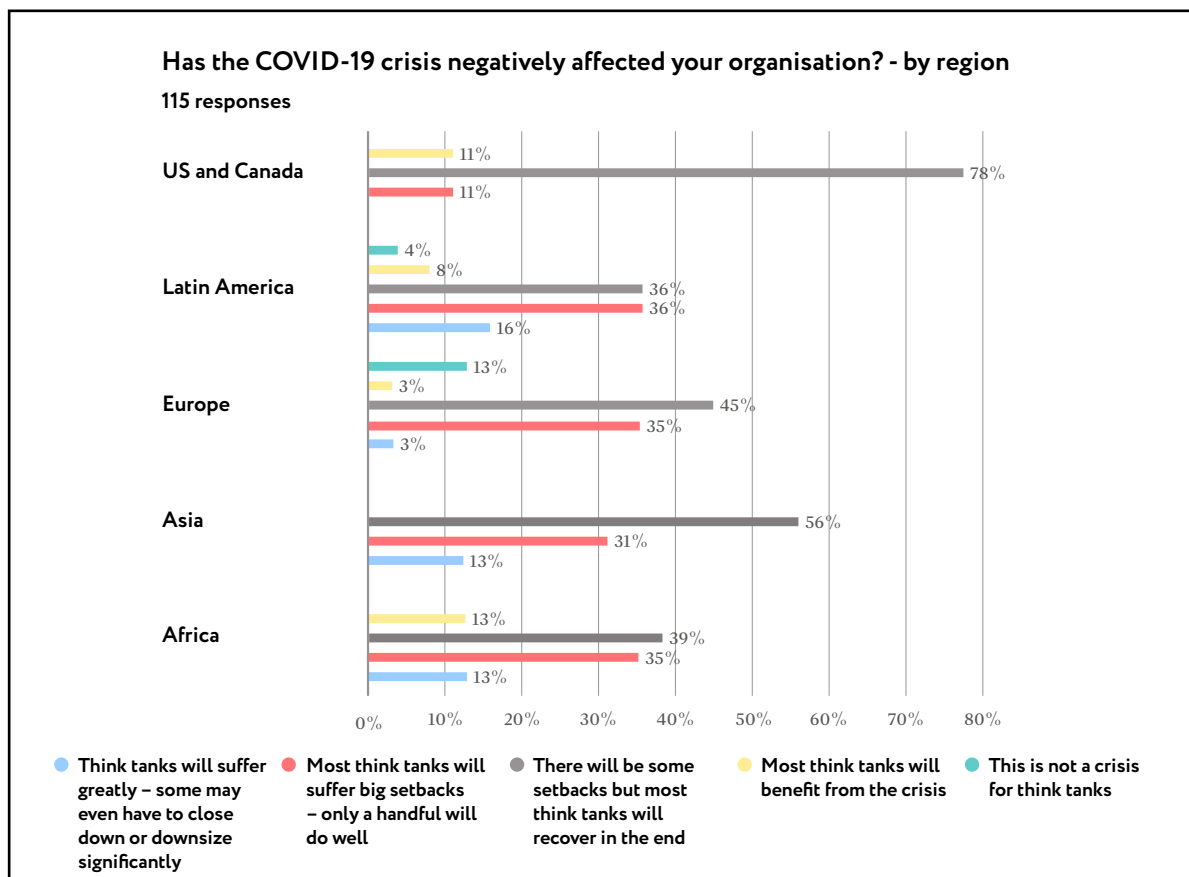
4 THINK TANKS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES HOLD A GLOOMIER OUTLOOK

The picture seems gloomier in the global South: 52% of Latin American thinktankers consider that the crisis will have a significant effect on think tanks in their country; 48% from Africa, 44% from Asia, 38% from Europe, and only 11% from the US and Canada thought the same.

This is possibly related to both availability of funding for think tanks and demand for their services in these regions. While the US, Canada and Europe enjoy a strong think tank funding sector (with both public and private funding available), most Asian, African and Latin American think tanks rely on either foreign or public funding.

In Latin America, foreign funding for think tanks has been in rapid decrease for at least the last decade and the crisis is surely reducing the availability of public funding. As a result, 13% of respondents from Africa and Asia and 16% from Latin America expect the crisis to lead to the closure or significant downsizing of think tanks.

In follow-up surveys, we expect to find European think tanks recovering from a crisis that will still be raging in the global South. How will this affect think tanks’ outlook?





5 PEOPLE, AND THEN MONEY, ARE THINKTANKERS' BIGGEST FUTURE CONCERNS

While 30% of those who are very worried about the future of their organisation have seen a decrease in funding, 49% have observed a negative impact on staff, including:

- staff being overwhelmed and stressed,
- a loss of productivity,
- difficulties implementing remote working and staff and family members becoming infected with COVID-19.

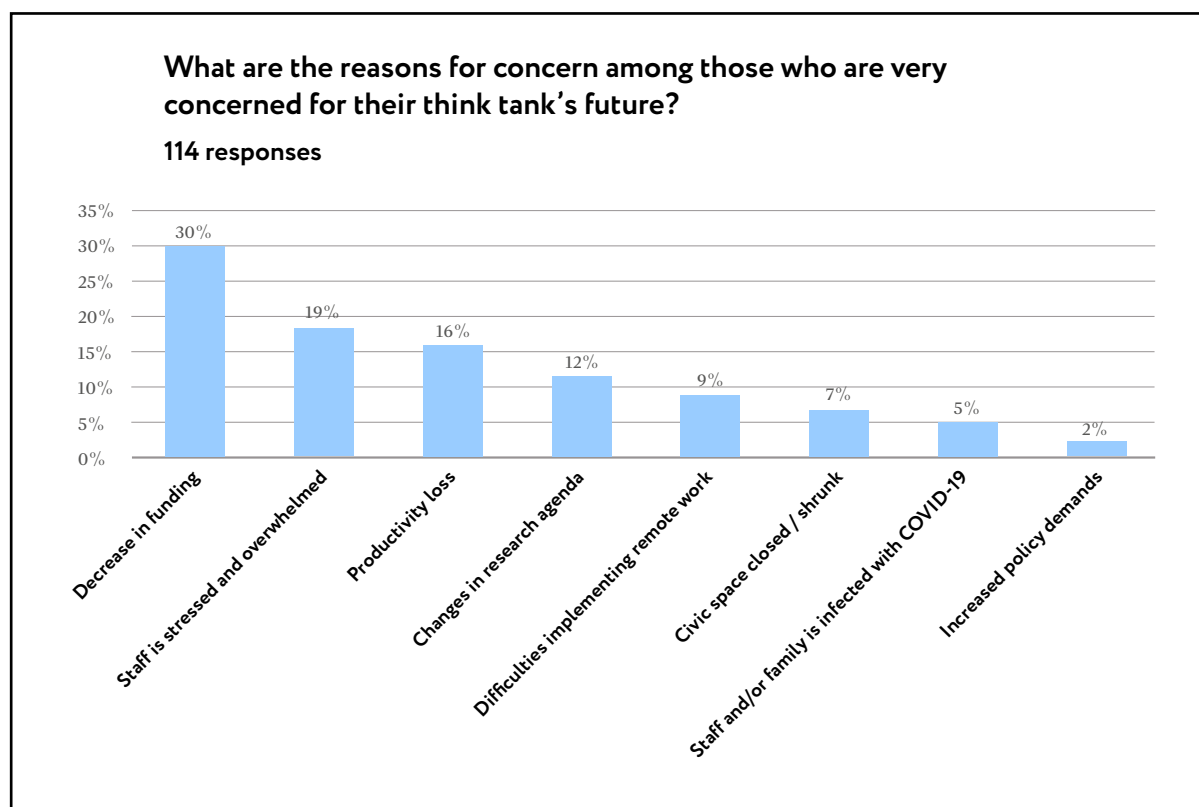
These are all connected. Stress and loss of productivity are certainly aided by the challenges involved in working remotely and health concerns.

Funding worries surely contribute to this level of stress. But so do changes in the political environment that have seen the civic space close in many contexts, policy agendas becoming monolithic, and research agendas that have taken years to develop losing all sense of purpose.

'We were not ready for remote working since not all the staff has access to the Internet or to ITCs. It is very important to expand these services in this kind of crisis.'

'Working remotely with our target beneficiaries has become a huge challenge. We work with rural populations where communication technologies either don't exist or are a serious challenge. And because of total lockdown in the work areas, it becomes very difficult to reach our networks in these communities.'

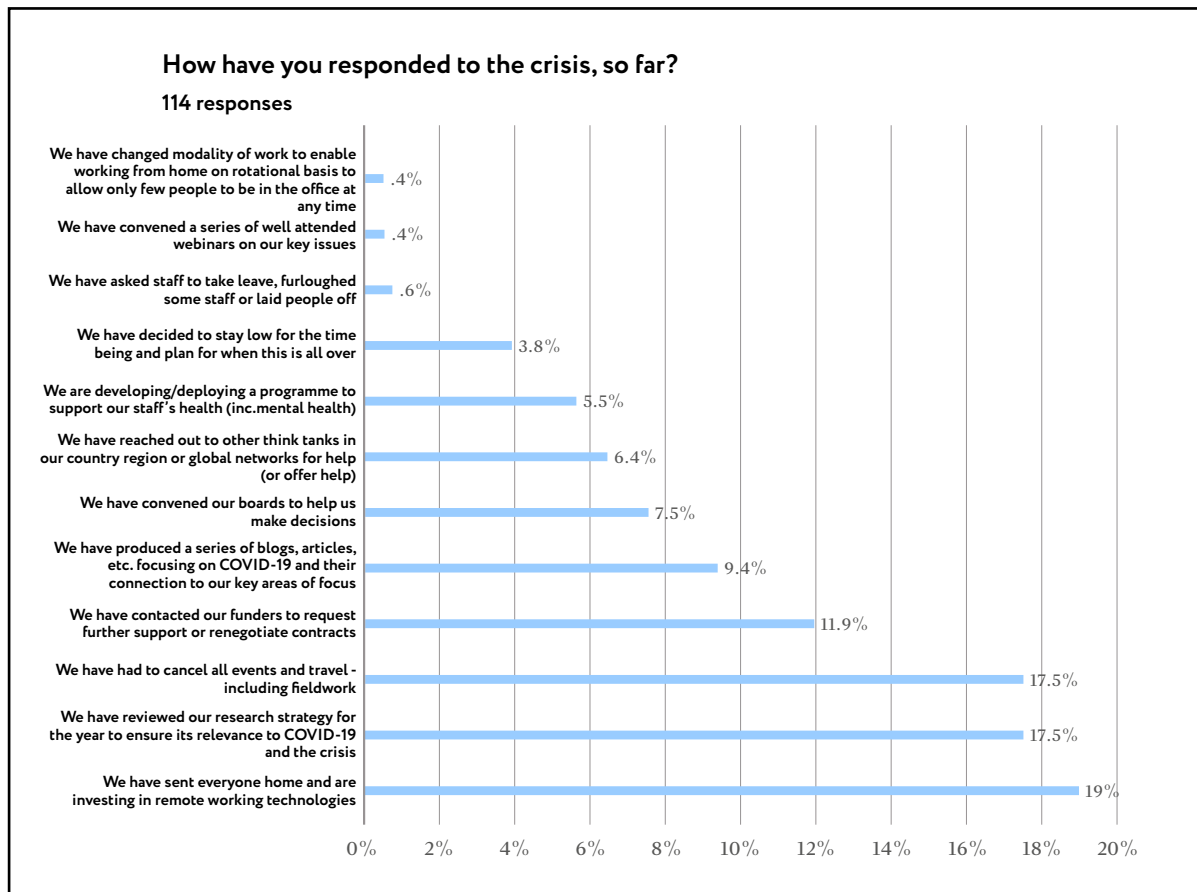
How will this pan out as the crisis unfolds? Will a return to normal activities in Europe and North America help address staff welfare concerns? Will Latin America, the next pandemic epicentre, experience a worsening of conditions for think tank staff?



6 THINK TANKS HAVE RESPONDED WITH A RANGE OF STRATEGIES

From sending staff home to re-assessing their research and communications plans, to contacting their funders and reaching out to their boards, think tanks are trying a range of strategies to deal with the crisis.

Only a few have taken the decision to lay-off staff. Many are expecting additional support from their usual funders or government stimulus packages to help them weather the storm in the coming months.



It will be interesting to explore the different effects that these strategies have on think tanks' resilience.

7 GOVERNMENTS HAVE FORGOTTEN ABOUT THINK TANKS

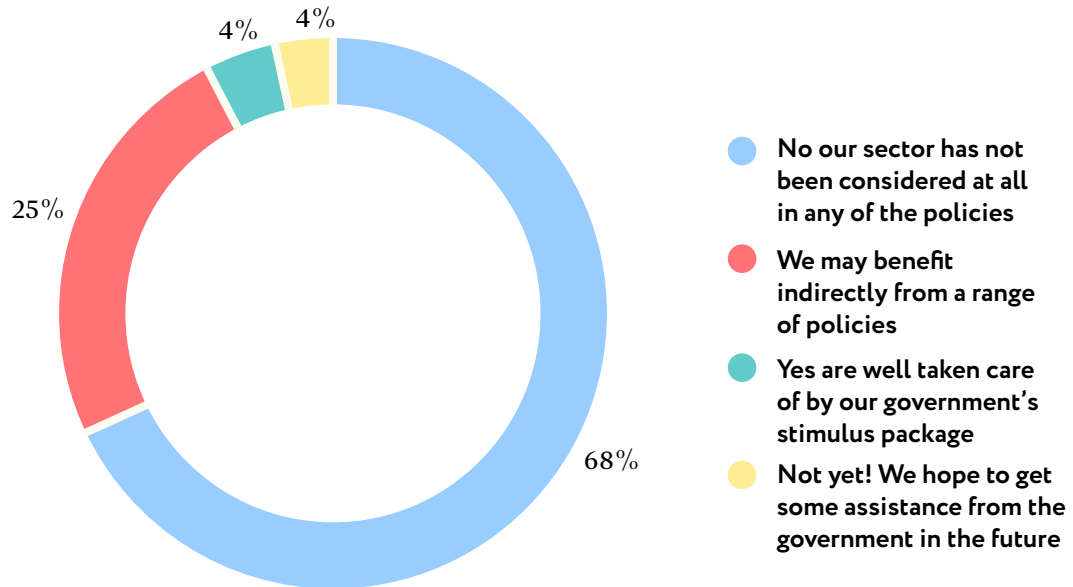
Only a small proportion of respondents, 4%, reported being included in their governments' stimulus packages and policies – although this may have improved since the survey closed. Still, think tanks who expressed the most concern about their future were those who were not included in any direct or indirect support package.

In future surveys we hope to find out how many countries provided support to think tanks and policy research centres, and what kind of stimulus packages or policies worked best.



Has your government announced or offered any support or stimulus package for universities or civil society organisations like think tanks?

114 responses



8 THINK TANKS NEED MONEY BUT IN A MORE NUANCED WAY THAN WE MAY THINK

Respondents made a strong plea for smarter funding for policy research. This includes funding practices that:

- are transparent and predictable,
- allow for flexibility,
- balance short- and long-term needs and possibilities,
- are conscious of the fact that think tanks are part of a wider policy research community, and
- includes 'beyond the dollar' support.

This is what they said:

'[We need] clear regulations on how to handle surplus budgets in 2020 or even 2021.'

'This is the period when flexible funding is needed as most project-based funding will require us to deliver on the planned activities as a condition for providing funding. Flexible funding that can be re-aligned to meet up with curtailing such distortions will be useful in this period.'



‘Financial support in the short term. Most donors have been thrown off their schedules for implementing, giving programmes and to some degree adjusting their targets, in light of COVID-19. Staff similarly need time to understand the implications of this episode [and adjust].’

‘We need long term support beyond the crisis. Even basic support so that we know that we can continue operating beyond the crisis.’

‘We have expenses and money saved to cover [salaries], but it’s going to be hard if this continues for six months. In terms of laying people off, we haven’t, but our contractors who usually work full time are working part time or not at all, which is 200 or so people.’

‘Institutional development support to strengthen virtual operations, virtual reach and engage experts in areas that have apparently become critical in this changed environment.’

‘A little more support for becoming more technologically equipped for working from home.’

‘More enhanced partnerships amongst think tanks and donors to facilitate continued engagement and shared knowledge, expertise and support.’

9 THERE ARE UPSIDES!

Not all is doom and gloom. The crisis has offered thinktankers the opportunity to reflect on their business models, their strategies and the approaches they have followed in the past.

In some cases, they have been forced to try ways of working that had been rejected not so long ago; and many have been surprisingly pleased by the results.

‘We’ll probably innovate in some practices as a result of this.’

Others have used this crisis to usher in more substantial institutional reforms. The crisis has empowered their leaders or, often, the new generation of thinktankers, to bring about those changes. These include:

- restructuring the organisation,
- a realignment of research agendas,
- striking new partnerships with policy actors.

‘Upsides: Quick response, transfer to digital worked well, used our own resources more and managed to come up with new formats and even more publications. This has even brought bigger audiences. It’s also been easier to get ‘big names’ as they also work from home.’



‘The pandemic has resulted in positive restructuring of the organisation to be leaner and more effective.’

‘We are planning to transform ourselves into a virtual think tank.’

‘We have reviewed our annual work plan and realigned it with the current situation, in full concertation with our funders. We have developed a COVID-19 response programme focused on our strategic thematic areas, considering the short- and long-run impact of the pandemic. We have also developed a strategic partnership with key grassroots organisations, linked to our thematic focus areas.’

‘I believe that this will give our organisation better focus, aligning the things we do with the outcomes we want. We will have to do more with less – not only less overall productivity but less funding. But we also have a vast amount of flexibility now that our donors have unrestricted a large portion of our project-based grants. So, we have an opportunity to truly focus on quality and alignment of our work. We hope this will continue into 2021, if we can secure commitments from our donors to give with the notion of shared outcomes rather than an over-focus on line items and underfunding overhead.’

An unexpected upside of this is that for some organisations, these innovations and perceived improvements are having a positive effect on staff wellbeing – which has been so hard hit by the crisis.

‘We are getting heard, contributing in key public policies. This is boosting the team’s morale and zeal to work hard.’

There are upsides to the policy research contexts in which think tanks operate as well. The crisis has created opportunities for think tanks to win battles over the problems that their societies face. For once, policymakers and the general public are open to their analysis. Everyone can see that there are complex underlying problems and think tanks have the capacity to explain them and layout a path forward.

In fact, in Africa, Latin America and the US and Canada, there are thinktankers who consider that the crisis will not have a negative effect on think tanks, at all. On the contrary: the crisis will constitute an opportunity!

‘The crisis has revealed, in stark terms, some of the fractures and fragilities within various policy areas – especially health, education, economics – and some of the resiliency that emerges out of certain types of communities, especially religious communities. These are key areas of work for our think tank, and it’s provided opportunities for our message to be heard in new ways.’

‘It somehow makes our work more relevant, more pressing, more urgent.’



‘The opportunity to rethink our role and future radically. The solutions and policies we promote (including universal basic income) are receiving focus and support as never before.’

This is further supported by a revaluation of the role of experts in many countries. Overnight, they have overcome, even if temporarily, years of blows to their legitimacy.

‘The role of experts will be revalued.’

‘I see a silver-lining in this period as [our think tank] will likely become more relevant in the knowledge debate on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak.’

‘Knowledge and research now will be more demanded than before. This opens doors and possibilities for research institutions.’

‘COVID-19 will further emphasise the critical issue of investing in science, technology and innovation capabilities of nations – to our advantage.’

This is having a positive impact on the think tank community, too. It is bringing teams together and fosters collaboration between organisations like never before.

‘It has brought our community closer together and made me proud to work for [my organisation].’

In future surveys it will be important to determine how many think tanks have been able to take advantage of the opportunities presented and why. We will also want to learn more about how national think tank communities have changed as a consequence – are they more or less equitable?

10 IT'S NOT OVER YET

The crisis is a test of fire for many organisations. Their entire business models will be stretched to the limit.

‘The crisis showed which think tanks are capable to quickly react to an unforeseen development by producing high quality analyses and convening high quality meetings, and which have opted for quantity over quality. I think that this may lead some think tanks to lose their public due to low quality outputs and others gaining it.’

There are significant challenges ahead. Funding may still drop dramatically in the second half of the year and in 2021.



‘Loss in funding likely for 2021.’

‘A massive recession will tighten funding considerably in the medium term.’

For many, a prolonged period of uncertainty may lead to a loss of staff – the most vulnerable to income shocks, women, young people and thinktankers from lower socio-economic backgrounds may have to leave the industry altogether – thus making think tanks less diverse and inclusive organisations.

In a few countries the civic space has closed even further. With few independent funding sources available, think tanks are dependent on government funding and are feeling the pressure from the government to help legitimise their policies. This could erode think tanks credibility in the long term – even if they survive.

‘There is much less space for disagreement with government policies, especially regarding some aspects of the lockdown.’

In the long run, they may be alone in a world with fewer democratic institutions, a larger and opaquer state and a less open social contract.

‘The important challenge will be significant reduction in funding for democracy and accountability projects. Our current donors are already redesigning their programmes and focus. And depending on how long the pandemic lasts, there will be breakdown in work infrastructure. This will surely have an impact on our work.’

HOW CAN OTT HELP THEM?

We asked how OTT could be of assistance during this crisis and in the future. The responses varied but more or less aligned with our areas of work.

Think tanks want help amplifying their voices. They have been working hard, from the early days of the pandemic, to study and find solutions to the highly complex problems affecting their societies. But not all their voices are being heard – and this is certainly the case among think tanks in the global South, and for the smaller and less well-connected think tanks.

Visibility will help think tanks to contribute to national, regional and global debates and to raise necessary funding.

‘By linking us to potential researcher funders who are willing to invest in strengthening research ecosystems in the region amidst this crisis.’

Greater visibility of the challenges they face is also important. Think tanks want help communicating to funders the kind of support that they need and the importance of supporting think tanks’ long-term strategies. We may be able to do this ourselves or create spaces for think tanks to work together on their common agendas.



'To highlight the fact that think tanks are vulnerable especially because of the dearth of core funding that provides flexibility.'

'Advocate for flexibility and flexible funding modalities from funders; advocate against "Covidisation" of everything. There are still important issues in the world to deal with now and in the post-COVID-19 world.'

'Giving spaces to talk about what we are doing or have been doing in relevant topics such as social protection.'

They also want us to help convene spaces for, and to facilitate, learning – from the OTT team, global experts, and each other.

'Necesitamos aprender de la experiencia de otros think tanks (we need to learn from the experience of other think tanks)'

'Create virtual communication spaces with other think tanks, where we can share and listen to experiences.'

'OTT's sharing of best practices has always been welcome.'

The issues that think tanks want to learn about are diverse:

'Hearing from, and learning from think tanks around the world about how they are coping with the financial challenges, as well as hearing about innovative ways think tanks are deepening relationships in the midst of physical distancing would be even more welcome now.'

'Webinar training on communications and outreach skills in this new context would be very helpful.'

'Guiding us on how to use technology to innovate in raising funds based on our knowledge and research findings and to identify the right tools.'

'Help to develop a programme to prepare staff to [respond to] this crisis (how to manage work combined with other concerns).'

'It would be great if we could learn from the experience and mitigation measures of similar think tanks and advocacy groups.'

'By sharing information on what coping mechanisms think tanks are implementing to deal with this crisis globally.'



Fundraising capacity also features among the requests for support:

'It would be so useful to crowdsource knowledge on how others are rethinking their operations and fundraising models.'

Finally, there is a clear demand for help in nurturing a global community of think tanks and their supporters. This is one of the most consistent messages since the crisis started in early 2020. Think tanks want and are willing to reach out to each other for help and with support.

OTT has tried, and will continue, to work hard to strengthen local, regional and global communities. We do this by inviting contributors to our blog, convening online and face to face networking events, actively making connections between think tanks and carefully generating data, evidence and insights about think tanks across the world.

'Acting as a convenor and providing space for discussions on common problems and facilitating exchange, building the sense of community for think tanks'

'Maybe OTT can help in finding new partnerships all over the world.'

'Continue to connect think tanks globally and regionally to promote a sense of community in face of this struggle. And so, well done!'

But there is also a reminder to all of us. We must also:

'Bring new ideas for the future.'



COVID-19 RESPONSE

SURVEY RESULTS

THINK PIECES



HANS GUTBROD

HOW THE PANDEMIC IS IMPACTING THINK TANKS: OVERVIEW OF OTT SURVEY RESULTS

How has the pandemic affected think tanks? This is one of the questions that the On Think Tanks (OTT) survey has looked at. More than 100 people working at think tanks around the world responded, giving a good overview on their outlook.

SPLIT VIEWS ON THE FUTURE FOR THINK TANKS

Respondents had split views about the future for think tanks in their respective countries in the next year – mostly pessimistic, or cautiously optimistic, with some downright optimism mixed in.

A bit less than one third of the respondents thought that most think tanks will suffer big setbacks and only a handful will do well. About 10% thought that most think tanks will ‘suffer greatly’ and that some may have to close or downsize significantly.

This pessimistic view, from a total of about 41% of the respondents, was countered by about 58% that had a broadly optimistic outlook. The plurality, 47%, said that ‘there will be some setbacks but most centers will recover in the end’.

There was downright optimism too: 7% thought that ‘most think tanks will benefit from this crisis’, and a handful of respondents reported that in their view ‘this is not a crisis for think tanks’.

OVER HALF REPORT NEGATIVE IMPACTS NOW

On their current situation, a total of just above 60% reported a negative impact, of varying degrees of intensity. For now, 45% thought that ‘we will manage in the end’. Some 16% were ‘very concerned’ about their future. These concerns seem to be particularly concentrated in West Africa, though a few respondents from the UK and Southeast Asia and one from Central America also reported strong worries.

31% said that the crisis had not negatively affected their organisation, besides having to work remotely. Another 9% said that they were even ‘doing all right’, with ‘additional demand and support for our work’. The upbeat responses came primarily – but not exclusively – from Western Europe.



Think tanks reported significant practical impact: more than 40% said that there were issues with funding, it either not materialising or that funds were under strain. More than 30% said that the staff was ‘stressed, overwhelmed, feeling isolated or confused’, and nearly 20% described a ‘productivity loss’.

As has been reported [elsewhere](#), more than 20% said that ‘the civic space has suddenly closed due to the policies pursued by our government’. The pandemic has taken a toll on the research agenda: about 20% said that the research agenda now had ‘lost its track’.

Some respondents outlined current challenges in their written survey comments: ‘our current financial position is solid but we are seeing our pipeline of donor commitments diminish or delay.’

Next to these funding concerns, several respondents also mentioned the challenges of working while homeschooling children. Other respondents highlighted that working from home cannot be taken for granted: from Nigeria, one respondent reported challenges with the electricity supply, and several said that their slow Internet made working remotely difficult.

Yet even large institutions, who said that they could support their team, mentioned that they ‘still experience some staff, particularly the mid-level and junior staff not coping with working remotely. We have noticed some inactivity among some staff.’ Another shift seems to be that the pandemic ‘has massively increased the load on communications staff’.

COMMON THINK TANK RESPONSES

As for the ongoing response, more than 70% say that they sent their team to work from home and that they are investing in remote working technologies.

More than 60% reported having to cancel all events and all travel.

More than 60% also said they had ‘reviewed their research strategy for the year to ensure its relevance to COVID-19 and the crisis’.

More than 40% said that they had talked to their funders to request further support or to renegotiate contracts.

Nearly 30% said that they had ‘convened our boards to help us make decisions’. It’s worth noting that the majority of respondents were senior leadership (52%) or board members (10%), and roughly one quarter were researchers (23%), thus there may have been differing levels of awareness of the management response.

OTT’S ROLE

Several respondents saw a role for OTT. One suggested: ‘With its international network, OTT can monitor the situation and create an early warning system which shows where think tanks are under threat. Similar mechanisms exist for civil society organisations, so it might be a good idea to set up something similar for think tanks.’



ABOUT THE SURVEY

This, in a nutshell, are the main results from a survey that OTT conducted from 7 April to 25 May, with the bulk of the answers coming in mid-April.

At the time of writing, the survey had 114 respondents and likely is representative of thinktankers that are interested in engaging with international practice. Respondents were recruited through OTT's networks. To preserve anonymity, OTT withheld the respondents and their institutions' identity. It is possible that particular institutions are represented several times.

The survey was truly global: it had participants from more than 50 countries. The UK had most respondents (9), followed by India and the US (7 each), Nigeria (6), Kenya (5), Peru (5), Pakistan (4), Tanzania (4), Armenia, Bolivia, El Salvador, Germany, Senegal and South Africa (3 each) and many more countries, ranging from Algeria via Iran and Myanmar to Zimbabwe.

The survey also collected extensive written input, which – like all the data – is available for analysis on request.

LOOKING BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

One respondent provided this comment, which may be a fitting way of looking beyond the current pandemic:

'This is not all negative. Policymakers are stressed and confused, and that makes them ready to listen. You just need to maintain access to them (in their home isolation). Some aspects of the pandemic are strong reminders, revelations you might say, of general failures of good policymaking, such as paying heed to expert advice, not looking at the long term and understanding second and third order consequences, lack of contestation in the public space, and more. These revelations will provide for more openness to address other [critical] issues, including global overheating [among others, more].'

Hopefully OTT's work can help to, indeed, increase the impact of think tanks in the future.



ED BIGGINS

HIGH SPIRITS AND LOW FUNDING: HOW THINK TANKS VIEW THE CURRENT CRISIS

The impact of COVID-19 on think tanks and research institutes will vary across the globe, from country to country, and from sector to sector. National governments have offered wildly different policies with regards to funding certain areas of their economies, and international funding has reduced dramatically as resources are concentrated on the home fronts.

This is especially problematic for think tanks and other educational non-profit organisations, as funding and donations represent a large portion of their income. Therefore, it is vital to conduct research into the experiences of think tanks around the world, in order to understand the issues that different institutions face and to be able to provide solutions, so that collectively we can maintain a healthy and varied assemblage of research organisations.

The On Think Tanks (OTT) survey has made an excellent start to the process of diagnosing the issues that think tanks face, and are likely to face, in the events and aftermath of COVID-19.

The survey data at the time of writing this, includes feedback from representatives of 113 think tanks from around the world on how they have been affected by COVID-19, and how they and their governments have been responding to the crisis.

Given the historic importance of the social sciences in combatting global pandemics, it is disappointing that **67% of the think tanks stated that their governments had not, at the time of answering, announced or provided any form of financial assistance to the sector** (which encompasses think tanks, universities and non-governmental organisations).

Indeed, **only 4% of the respondents were in think tanks that had received direct, governmental, non-conditional, financial support.**

A further **21% stated that they had received some form of financial assistance, albeit indirectly or conditional.** Indirect benefits include governmental coverage of a portion of income to help all organisations cover the salaries of low-income employees. The conditions of financial support likely compel think tanks to conduct research concerning COVID-19. However, the financial benefits of complying with such conditions could be offset by the costs of redirecting research efforts, or in the lost



income from cancelling existing non-coronavirus related research projects, especially those involving international fieldwork.

Despite this oversight by national governments around the world to fund the research sector, it is encouraging to see that spirits remain high within the social science community. Over half, **57%**, **of the 113 think tank survey respondents believe either that the majority of think tanks will eventually recover despite some short-term setbacks; that most think tanks will benefit from the current situation; or that COVID-19 does not represent a crisis for the industry.**

Incredibly, **61% of these think tanks with broadly positive outlooks for the future of the research sector are in countries in which the governments have not announced or provided financial assistance.** This suggests that their attitudes remain positive despite financial difficulties and not because of the support they have, or have not, received. **Only 10% believe that think tanks and other research bodies will suffer significantly, potentially even resulting in closures.**

However, whilst a positive attitude is important and, thankfully, currently present among the majority of think tanks, nothing will help these bastions of learning and research like full financial assistance.

In the immediate term, think tanks will need to do their best to refocus their efforts on providing research on the coronavirus in order to be as eligible as possible for the available funding.

For think tanks in developing countries, the future remains unclear due to the high reliance on state and international funding, both of which are currently under immense stress.

It is also important that all research bodies in the social sciences acknowledge their own vital role in the continuing global struggle, whilst also maintaining an awareness of the overall health of the social science community.

If different think tanks do not support others, or if research bodies do not uplift other institutions that are struggling, we may see a shrinking of the research community as a whole. It is imperative that this does not happen, because a weak social science community can only sustain weak research institutions and think tanks, and currently the world needs the insights, stimulation and escapism so often provided by the humanities and social sciences.



BARASSOU DIAWARA

COVID-19 AND AFRICAN THINK TANKS: CHALLENGES, NEEDS AND SOLUTIONS

This year's Africa Day, celebrated on 25 May 2020, was marked by 100 days since the first coronavirus case was reported on the continent.

Africa's first COVID-19 case was recorded in Egypt on 14 February 2020. Since then, 54 countries have been affected, with Lesotho being the last country to report its first case on 13 May. Today, Africa has the lowest number of COVID-19 cases compared to other regions of the world. As of 25 May, Africa has reported 115,616 cases, with 3,479 deaths and 46,630 recoveries. At 100 days since the beginning of the pandemic, no single African country has reported numbers closer to the cases shown in countries such as China (100,000 cases), the USA (29,468 cases), or the UK (219,183).

The encouraging performance of African countries in containing the pandemic is a result of measures taken by all countries, including lockdowns, testing of suspected cases, and contact tracing. Other measures include grounding of passenger carriers, restricting congregational meetings, disinfecting public places, providing public sanitisers, raising public awareness, closure of schools, higher learning institutions and places of worship, and working from home.

Think tanks have been at the core of continental, regional and national COVID-19 response strategies in Africa. For instance, in Cameroon, the Cameroon Policy Analysis and Research Center (CAMERCAP-PARC) has been supporting the government by providing evidence-informed analysis and policy options to inform its COVID-19 response and recovery. Similar support in terms of research, policy analysis and dialogues have been provided by think tanks in Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and many other African countries.

The first survey on the impact of COVID-19 On Think Tanks (OTT) survey provides insights into how African think tanks are responding, and the support they need.

The survey results show that **African think tanks that responded to the survey have reviewed their research strategy for the year to ensure its relevance to COVID19 and the crisis.** Many have already produced various knowledge products (such as policy briefs, blogs, think pieces, case studies) and organised online trainings and workshops on COVID-19 to support government efforts.



African think tanks need to be effectively assisted so they can better play their roles in providing homegrown policy solutions to COVID-19 challenges facing African countries. The OTT's first survey offered an opportunity to shed light on the type of support needed, as expressed by African think tanks.

Indeed, **most of the think tanks indicated that they have been negatively affected by the pandemic.** The areas affected include:

- staff being overwhelmed and stressed,
- funding commitments not materialising,
- civic space being compromised, and
- development partners' priorities changing to short term focus on COVID-19 response.

The respondents indicated that **think tanks are likely to suffer significantly, with some institutions probably having to close down or downsize during and/or after COVID-19.**

The majority of think tanks that responded to the survey said that **they have not been considered by support or stimulus packages announced and/or offered by governments.** At the same time, they have expressed a pressing need to ensure that they continue to provide capacity building, research, policy analysis and advocacy services to governments and key stakeholders during and after COVID-19.

Key among the needs expressed by think tanks is the **availability of flexible funding to ensure that context-specific research agendas are developed, and the real challenges faced by African countries are addressed using practical and home-grown solutions.**

Another need expressed by think tanks is **institutional development support to strengthen virtual operations and reach and engage experts in areas that have become critical in this changed environment.** This is important as most African think tanks were not prepared to work from home.



JULIE LAFRANCE

HOW IS COVID-19 AFFECTING THINK TANKS? SILVER LININGS AND BUILDING BACK

Think tanks are no strangers to volatility, uncertainty and disruption. The COVID-19 crisis presents significant challenges to a sector that is already struggling with funding shortages, credibility and relevance.

But there are reasons to be optimistic. A crisis has a way of catalysing change that may not otherwise happen, or that would take years if not decades to achieve under everyday circumstances. During times of duress, resilience can thrive and people and organisations can be transformed to build back better.

Because of their familiarity with adversity, think tanks have a solid foundation and understanding of what is required to survive during turbulent times. In some ways, many would say that think tanks are well conditioned to face the uncertainty that COVID-19 has surfaced; they have always needed to be flexible, adapting to donor interests while respecting their own mandates.

In recent years, many think tanks have ventured out of their comfort zones to explore new activities, new partnerships and new approaches to differentiate themselves and find new paths to influence policy and practice.

As described in [TTI Insights: Exploring Think Tank Funding Models](#), many have strengthened relationships with donors built on credibility, integrity and trust. Through these relationships, some think tanks have been able to negotiate with funders more favorable contract terms and conditions, including more generous overheads costs. Additionally, think tanks have been able to leverage their strengths in financial and managerial capacity to negotiate with their funders.

Over the past decade, those that have been successful have found creative ways to innovate and stay relevant, and to find opportunities even amidst challenging times. It will be these foundational principles that will enable think tanks to navigate these choppy waters, as they continue to learn in real-time about what is required to respond and adapt to disruption on a global, national and local scale.

In an effort to get a pulse on how think tanks across the globe are faring during the COVID-19 crisis, On Think Tanks (OTT) recently launched a survey.



Data from the survey shows that many are facing immediate disruptions to funding with expenses exceeding income; loss of direction of their research agenda; lost visibility in the policy space; most are having to re-design research methods to adjust to mobility limitations; staff are stressed, anxious and isolated, and facing challenges adjusting to remote working arrangements; and many have reported a closing of civic spaces as a side effect of government policies to combat the virus.

While the crisis has brought many challenges, some policy research organisations have identified emerging opportunities, and some have been able to take advantage of a sudden interest for expert advice – for instance, on the effect that COVID-19 will have on the economy.

Many have identified silver linings related to the move to virtual platforms, including the digitisation of dissemination and engagement strategies that have enabled them to amplify their voice, and opportunities to convene global experts online and to be heard in policy spaces. Think tanks that have tried to adapt, be flexible and pursue innovative approaches are finding ways to stay relevant.

In terms of significant, lasting challenges that think tanks foresee in the medium to long term, many worry that their funding will dry out over the next year as donors pull back on existing commitments and redirect investment to COVID-19 recovery. The looming global recession will likely result in a drop in governments' social spending so think tanks may need to pivot and re-think their value propositions and overall research agendas.

In the coming weeks, OTT will launch a series on re-thinking think tank business models that will take a deeper look at what lessons think tanks can draw upon from the past in order to help inform their strategies for navigating the financial uncertainty and recovery phase of this crisis.

Through reflection on these issues, and sharing what think tanks are learning during the COVID-19 response and recovery process, we hope to contribute to the knowledge and shared experiences that may help think tanks prepare for future external shocks.

Follow up COVID-19 surveys will explore think tank strategies in the following areas:

- Governance, leadership and management structures
- Financial sustainability
- Research agendas and their ability to deliver their strategies and projects
- Communication strategies and outcomes
- The wellbeing of staff and close stakeholders
- The evidence-informed policy field more broadly
- The political, economic and social contexts think tanks operate in

While think tanks have faced challenges throughout history, today and the coming months present an opportunity to harness the silver linings that have emerged throughout the current crisis to inform future strategies, build back better and be better prepared to weather the next big challenge.



INASP

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SOUTHERN RESEARCHERS

Last month, as part of a wider researcher study, INASP asked researchers about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their research. Here INASP shares key survey findings.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed almost every aspect of our lives over the past few months. Worldwide, it has changed our work, our social lives, impacted how we get our food, and brought new words into our vocabularies.

It has also put scientific research into the spotlight in a way that few could have imagined even six months ago.

INASP strongly believes in the important role of research and knowledge from everywhere in the world in solving the most pressing challenges. This focus on research, especially when coupled with a realisation of the expertise in many parts of the world that often get overlooked by researchers and policymakers in the world's wealthier countries, is a positive outcome of the pandemic.

But what of the people doing the research?

This year INASP, via our AuthorAID project, initiated a 'Voices of Early-Career Researchers' survey in April. As the survey launch date approached, the scale of COVID-19 was becoming clearer. We therefore made a late change to our survey plans by adding the important question:

'What impact, if any, do you think that the COVID-19 pandemic will have on your research work?'

THE SURVEY

Our survey (which ran for approximately two weeks until the 17 April) attracted responses from 752 researchers from 94 countries (just over 60% of which were in sub-Saharan Africa) and across the whole spectrum of academic disciplines. Analysis of the full survey will be shared at a later date but, given the timeliness of the COVID-19 question, we have shared the findings to this particular question in a [new paper](#).



Our COVID-19 question was answered by 531 respondents (70%), who gave answers ranging from single words to extended discussion.

It is important to recognise that each response in this survey represents an individual voice in a specific cultural, temporal and geographic context. However, some common themes emerged.

Key terms that jumped out immediately were ‘funding’, ‘delay’, and ‘collaboration’. A deep reading of the data confirmed an additional key theme of ‘restriction of movement/travel’. In addition, the data suggested mental health impacts, which we also explored.

FUNDING

The majority of comments about funding concerned the potential lack of funding for future research. Some were already feeling the direct effects of reduced funding at the time of responding.

There were some concerns that funding for COVID-19 research would divert research funding from other areas, with some individuals suggesting that this redirection of funding might force them to redirect their research – although not everyone thought that this diversion of funding would be a permanent state of affairs.

Others were concerned that, beyond the direct funding of research, money would be limited for things like scholarships and travel.

Not all responses around funding were completely negative; some were more nuanced, indicating that there could be both positive and negative financial implications.

The few positive responses about financial issues tended to emphasise the possibility of increased funding for research born out of a recognition for the need to better understand and find solutions to the pandemic and its impacts, or more broadly out of increased recognition of the importance of research.

DELAYS

One of the words to occur most frequently in the data was ‘delay’ which cropped up in 62 individual responses. There was a general sense that COVID-19 was already delaying research, or would be a source of delay in the future.

Delays were anticipated across many areas including data collection, conference participation, carrying out fieldwork and defence of theses. Delay in the publication process and disseminating work were also areas of specific concern.

Although delays were seen as inevitable, and often seen as a negative outcome of the pandemic, some respondents could see positive outcomes of delays in terms of increased time to re-focus their research.

Statistically, women were 50% more likely to mention delays than men. This aligns with findings from other recent studies that suggest that the impact of COVID-19 on the careers of women researchers may be particularly detrimental (see, for example, [here](#)



and [here](#) for articles about journal submissions from women falling dramatically during lockdown).

COLLABORATION

The need for increased inter-disciplinary collaboration was widely expressed by respondents.

Some believed that existing collaborations would be negatively impacted due to increased focus on COVID-19 related research. Some expressed a frustration because tackling the pandemic seems to demand increased collaboration, but their own opportunities to collaborate were becoming more limited.

Not all the comments around collaboration were negative and some saw increased opportunities. Others saw an evolving research landscape, influenced by the pandemic, which would result in more international collaboration.

LIMITED TRAVEL

Travel is an essential part of work for many researchers, whether that be as part of carrying out research work, disseminating the results at meetings or conferences, or travel to conduct collaborative work.

Limited travel to international conferences was seen as having an impact on collaborative research and limiting the exposure and dissemination of research. Generally, there was a pragmatic acceptance that limitations in travel were probably inevitable and that research would have to find a way of adapting.

MENTAL HEALTH

We also looked to see if respondents had indicated that the pandemic would have an effect on their mental health. In truth, there were few specific mentions of mental health issues, but it was hard not to read many of the other comments through a lens of frustration and depression. Other mentions of mental health specifically related to research opportunities that might be opened up in that area.

POSITIVES AS WELL AS NEGATIVES

Although the major themes to emerge from this data all have negative implications, it is important to note that throughout the survey there was also some positivity – about 9% of respondents recorded at least some positives. Most comments focussed on increased opportunities, funding and collaborative work.

It was interesting, particularly in light of the comments above about delays, to note that women were proportionally 30% more likely to have recorded a positive response than men. There were also marked differences between disciplines with those in Medicine and Healthcare being the most likely to say something positive about the impact of COVID-19 – this was often evidenced as seeing new research opportunities.



This data offers a glimpse into how a global pandemic of unprecedented proportions was impacting young researchers around the world at a particular point in time. There are serious concerns evidenced about money and travel, about collaboration and delays. However, there is also hope for increased opportunities and global collaborations. Research by southern researchers will be essential to tackle this and future pandemics and other crises. While the concerns expressed by these early-career researchers at an early stage in the current crisis inevitably focus predominantly on short-term challenges and opportunities, they will also have a longer-term impact. Further research is urgently needed on the likely long-term impact of the pandemic on southern research capacity so that it is there when needed in the future.

This article was first published on the INASP website on 20 May 2020 and is a summary of a paper authored by Gary Dooley, an independent research consultant. See also INASP's AuthorAID blog for a growing collection of personal researcher stories in light of COVID-19 restrictions.