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# The world knowledge of the think tanks – last bastion of US global power

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# The world knowledge of the think tanks – last bastion of US global power

Bonn, 14 March 2011. Early this year the **Global “Go-To Think Tanks” Rankings** for 2010 appeared, the international leader in its field, published jointly by the University of Pennsylvania and the United Nations University. The German Development Institute/Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) is ranked fourth among the think tanks concerned with global development issues, behind two internationally renowned US institutes (the venerable Brookings Institution and the Center for Global Development) and Britain’s Overseas Development Institute. The DIE is proud of this accomplishment, though it is aware of the imperfections of any ranking system. Under other headings, too, German research and advisory institutes are to be found among the leaders, examples being the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research/Potsdam-Institut für Klimafolgenforschung (environmental think tanks), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs/Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (security policy) and the Kiel Institute for World Economy/Kieler Institut für Weltwirtschaft (world economy).

It is important for German research and advisory institutes to be perceived as internationally influential, since think tanks influence the image that politicians, the public and international organisations have of the world. They participate in the debate on which problems should be regarded as urgent and the direction in which solutions should be sought, as in the case of climate change, the new role of emerging powers in the world, lessons to be learnt from the international financial crisis or the current collapse of authoritarian regimes in North Africa. Countries that do not have any influential think tanks cannot play an effective part in the global competition of ideas on the future framing of global policy. For Germany, an export economy, and for Europe, with its claim to be able to play an effective part in the shaping of globalisation, it is vital to have knowledge organisations that analyse global trends and risks, identify appropriate options for action and propose innovative solutions to problems. Internationally oriented research and advisory institutes have access to global networks of experts, contribute to a better understanding of actors and their interests through-

out the world and so build bridges between nations when it comes to dealing with global economic, development, environmental and security issues.

The *Global “Go-To Think Tanks” Rankings* tell us something about the unequal distribution of “world knowledge” generated in think tanks and about different traditions in policy advice. The Anglo-Saxon countries can look back on a long history of research institutes that also engage in policy advice. Researchers who have mastered both fields are highly respected. In many European countries (including Germany) research institutes also involved in policy advice are still frequently considered suspect. Anyone who abandons pure research and takes his knowledge out into society is at times viewed critically from the ivory towers of academe.

The world’s greatest density of renowned think tanks is to be found on Washington’s Massachusetts Avenue: for a mile one top US institute in the field of the world economy, international policy or global development follows another, all featuring in the *Global “Go-To Think Tanks” Rankings*. While the US economy is in deep crisis, the US government is having to come to terms with being the largest debtor to the emerging Chinese economy and the US military is principally concerned with ending two wars it has ultimately been unable to win, the American think tanks continue to dominate the international debates on the future of global policy and the world economy. It is an irony of history that the aging US global power, which was always proud of its economic and especially its military strength, is now the unqualified leader only in the think-tank sphere. The USA is becoming a “soft power” nation. This is not at all what President Bush Jr had in mind. For President Obama it is a chance to redefine the USA’s role as a global power.

What is surprising is that the *Global “Go-To Think Tanks” Index* continues to clearly reflect the old transatlantic domination of the world order, while in the real world the emerging powers of Asia are keeping us in suspense. Another striking factor is that developing countries’ research and advisory institutes hardly feature in the lists of the best in the *Global “Go-To Think Tank” Rankings*. The ten most influential think tanks in the global development

field are five American and two British institutes, the UN Development Research Institute on Development, the Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, with its global network of research partners. The top 25 development research institutes include only two think tanks located in developing countries (Brazil and Bangladesh)!

The picture is similar in other areas of international policy. Of the ten most important environmental think tanks, seven are based in the USA, two in Germany (the Potsdam-Institute for Climate Impact Research and the Ecologic Institute) and one in Sweden. A Kenyan research institute has at least made it into the top 25. Much the same can be said of institutes devoted to the global economy: seven think tanks in the USA, one in the United Kingdom, one in Germany (Kieler Institut für Weltwirtschaft) and one in Belgium. The top 25 do at least include the Institute of World Economics and Politics of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations. The top ten in

the security field are dominated by seven American and two British institutes; only the Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) appears in this leading group.

Four conclusions can be drawn: first, despite its economic and military crises, the USA's institutes will continue to be the most important "agenda setters" for international policy for the time being. Second, the think tanks in China, India and Brazil will soon gain in importance because their governments are investing a great deal of money in them. Third, European institutes should improve the pooling of their strengths so that they may attain and increase their power to shape the debates on the future of global policy and global governance. Fourth, Europe should have an interest in strengthening research and advisory institutions in the developing countries, so that they may play an independent role in international policy. This is, after all, the only legitimate way to shape globalisation so that it reflects more than just the interests of the strongest actors.



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