



# South Asia | Funding challenges and future prospects for Indian think tanks

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This article was written by the Communication and Policy Engagement (CPE) team at the [Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy \(CSTEP\)](#) as part of the publication of the 2024 On Think Tanks State of the Sector Report. [Explore the report and resources here.](#)

The recently published Think Tanks State of the Sector report by On Think Tanks looked at the functioning and role of think tanks across the world, including India. The survey, answered by 11 Indian think tanks, reveals some interesting highlights about them. The number of think tanks in India—both government-led and independent ones are only increasing. With over [600 think tanks](#), as of 2020, India has the third highest number of think tanks in the world, after the United States and China.

## What is the funding context in which Indian Think Tanks operate?

Nearly half of the Indian think tanks surveyed functioned under mixed or project-based funding. Many of the think tanks stated that they often struggled to cover indirect costs. 50% of the organisations found it moderately hard to cover indirect organisational costs. 16% said they found it ‘very hard’ to cover indirect costs.

Project funding is for specific projects, such as research on a particular problem or challenge. It is restrictive in that it only covers only direct project-related costs and does not contribute to other departments that support the overall functioning of the organisation, such as communication, HR, or finance. Meanwhile, core funding is unrestricted and can be used for any relevant purpose of running the organisation. It’s essential for daily operations and often pays for salaries, rent, utilities, insurance, and other general overheads. Core funding gives organisations the flexibility to allocate resources as needed as well as to innovate.

Majority of the funding (45%) came from charitable institutions or foundations, followed by individuals and organisational consulting services. Private institution funding accounted for 18% and international development entities only 9%. The typical length of the funding was 1-2 years or 2-4 years, with very little project funding that was less than 6 months. Only 9% of think tanks felt that their share of domestic and international funding was evenly distributed; the data indicated that most think tanks were domestically funded.

Although funding and the number of think tanks have seen an increase in the last year, the future of think tanks seems uncertain. 36% of think tanks felt the funding environment may be ‘unfavourable’ in the country in the next 12 months, and a majority ‘agreed’ to the survey statement on whether the organisations were facing current challenges due to a shortage of new funding sources. In spite of this, 90% of the organisations in India taking the survey showed remarkable resilience. 90% of them agreed that they have a satisfactory ability to adapt to the challenges it is currently facing.

The ability to raise funds is a critical part of think tank functioning; with 50% of the think tanks, this ability was a key indicator of the success of the think tank, and more than half indicated that they spent a ‘significant amount’ of time and resources to increase or maintain their organisation’s budget.

All think tanks in the country agreed unanimously that political polarisation would directly affect funding.

## What is the focus of Indian Think Tanks?

The focus of think tank work is also spread almost equally between economic education, international affairs and relations, and technology and innovation, separate think tanks in these areas.

The trend in India is very similar to the global trends, with innovation and tec  
Gender and Social Policy were not priorities amongst the think tanks that par

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## Who drives the policy agenda?

The policy agenda is driven almost equally in India by academia, civil society organisations, funders, and think tanks, with the government and media. Policymakers are given a little more importance in driving the agenda, which is not very different globally, where the most importance is given to governance and policymakers.

## How do Indian think tanks participate in the policy conversation?

The most common products created by think tanks are policy briefs and other research-related documents (81.82%) and social media (infographics, blogs, posts on social media, podcasts). Public events, educational events, conferences, and symposiums are other platforms used by think tanks to engage with stakeholders.

Another form of engagement is those with the government, parliament, local governments, and communities.

## Think tanks relationship with the media

Think tanks and the media seem to work well together. 60% of the think tanks surveyed believe that the media is 'receptive' (compared to the global average of 31.02%). These numbers indicate that the Indian media is doing slightly better than its neighbours. (27.59% of South Asian think tanks have voted for 'Moderately receptive', and only 6.9% have voted for 'Receptive')

## Potential for growth

Key areas where Indian think tanks saw the potential for growth were 'innovation and adaptability', 'communication and marketing', and 'advocacy'. However, the global average leaned heavily towards the 'ability to fundraise', followed by 'strategic planning' and 'communications and marketing'.

India is one of those countries that firmly champions the potential of innovation and adaptability to drive change. India's commitment to innovation and policy is also seen in the technology and innovation sphere by being one of the only few countries that has think tanks in the area; the global average is 2.54%, and South Asia alone has 10-11% of their think tanks in this field.

## Artificial Intelligence in Think Tanks

54% of think tanks believed that AI would positively impact think tanks, with 45% intending to use AI 'frequently' for research and 36% for administrative tasks. Many think tanks were also looking at using AI for communication and marketing. And only 18% of the think tanks said they would not use AI.

Globally, the trend is not very different, with the majority voting for 'positive' (47.72%) and followed by 'neutral' (33.33%). However, the global north does not see the usage of AI as particularly impactful or, in some cases, even believes that the impact may be negative. With South Asia, however, the trend differs because only a small percentage of think tanks here believe AI will have a negative impact.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Looking ahead, India must secure its core funding for think tanks for longer-term adaptability, India can convert challenges such as AI into potential growth and solutions to resolve its developmental challenges.

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