

COMMENT

## Less activism, more research

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**Since all NGOs are required to be registered within the same set of laws, legally and in public perception, think tanks and the more activist NGOs are often perceived to be the same**

The recent Intelligence Bureau report on NGOs has generated a heated debate. The [report](#) claims that foreign-funded NGOs' activism is a threat to internal security as it stalls projects and lowers GDP growth.

While millions of [Indian NGOs](#) continue to make contributions in multiple ways, in recent times the mention of an NGO unfortunately brings to mind the image of an activist organisation, which leads protests and is often perceived as obstructing building of coal, hydro and nuclear power plants. Several NGOs, for instance, actively campaigned against

CRISIS. THE Kudankulam nuclear plant, built at a cost of nearly Rs. 17,000 crore, could not be commissioned for several months even as Tamil Nadu reeled under power shortage.

## Other options?

No doubt, citizens voices must be made to count and they reflect reason based on scientific enquiry. However, it is also important to provide alternative solutions rather than merely protest against public policies. For instance, India needs to increase its electricity generation by at least four times to ensure energy security. A legitimate question therefore to ask is: if we abandon coal, nuclear and even hydro power projects, what are the options to meet our soaring energy demands? Sadly, not many NGOs have offered feasible alternatives based on robust evidence. Raising concerns at construction sites of energy plants is the first step, but it is inadequate for a debate on energy policy.

While the distinction between an **>‘activist’ NGO and a ‘think tank’** is not always clear, the latter is an institution with a stronger focus on research. Unfortunately in India, since all NGOs are required to be registered under the same set of laws, legally and in public perception think tanks and the more activist NGOs are often perceived to be the same. The goal of think tanks is to engage in evidence-based policy research in subjects of national importance. With that as basis, they provide pragmatic policy options. Of the over 3 million NGOs, only a handful would qualify as ‘high-quality think tanks.’ The fact that leading international think tanks recently commenced operations in India highlights the relative paucity of good Indian think tanks. The National Planning Commission was envisioned as a think tank to ensure that policymaking was backed by sound analysis and research.

The demand for good-quality evidence for decision-making is increasing because of a growing public scrutiny of government actions and demands for inclusive development. As our Prime Minister recently reminded us, India needs more organisations which can undertake objective, high-quality policy research. Such analyses often use sophisticated, multi-disciplinary tools in economics, mathematics and statistics. For instance, investigations into Game Theory by RAND Corporation, a leading U.S. think tank, led to strengthened mathematical basis and applications of the theory into areas such as auctions, international trade, and even war scenarios. The question then is: why has the supply of think tanks not matched the demand for good-quality information and analyses?

A major part of the answer lies in the quantum and **>nature of funding** that is available to NGOs, including think tanks, and the related concerns around international funding. It’s a fact that several NGOs obtain funding from international sources. This inevitably causes public perceptions about the “motivations” and presence of a “foreign agenda.” However, it is important to distinguish source from influence – foreign funding by itself doesn’t imply the presence of an agenda. As a starter, the largest recipient of foreign funding is the

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remain sovereign. As for NGOs, the funding received by them amounts to just about 0.1 per cent of the Government of India's budget and 0.1 per cent of India's GDP. It would be preposterous to believe that this paltry level of funding would influence India's policy agenda. Moreover, it is wrong to assume that all foreign funding is "bad." Some of the top institutions in this country have been set up using seed funding from foreign donors. For instance, the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation played an important role in heralding India's Green Revolution. The multi-donor Think Tank Initiative (TTI) programme managed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a unique and bold experiment, which provides long-term, core and unrestricted support to 16 South Asian think tanks (including nine in India) to strengthen policy research.

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The bigger question then is: why are Indian think tanks forced to seek funding from foreign sources? The simple answer is that they find it difficult to raise the desired support both from government and domestic corporate philanthropy. The government is the main customer of knowledge-based products from think tanks. There is ample evidence to demonstrate that the government is

increasingly finding great value in research from good think tanks, especially in developing analytical models, data collection and analysis, and often puts it to good use through public policy announcements. However, government funding is severely constrained by rules and regulations and is inadequate to cover the total cost of undertaking high-quality research. It also has a high transaction cost, which think tanks are often unable to bear. On the other hand, corporates seem to prefer supporting direct intervention causes such as poverty, education, health and gender, which have tangible impact. They often don't seem very comfortable in supporting think tanks, perhaps because the outputs are less tangible and have impacts only in the long run. As a result, think tanks are forced to rely on international funding. But that dependence has not necessarily led to foreign influence. In fact, especially in the case of core funding support, such as that provided through the TTI, such funding has fundamentally strengthened autonomy, operational and research capabilities in think tanks and has enabled them to be on the path of institutional sustainability.

## A deeper malaise

Public concerns and government anxiety with foreign funding is therefore at best a symptom of a larger and deeper malaise that has structural roots. The government must

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they have done in recent decades. And building institutions requires a bold rethink. As the Prime Minister has rightly said recently, the country does need outstanding think tanks, which can strengthen government hands for better-informed public policies. However, the government needs to come forward and invest long-term in think tanks. Building world-class institutions requires a consistent, systematic support to a research infrastructure as much as venture capital investment in think tanks. Can India create a national or regional venture capital/entrepreneurship fund to invest long-term and build home-grown global think tanks? The TTI model could be a useful guide.

Let's therefore turn the question on its head. If foreign foundations can generously support select think tanks, isn't it time for our own government and corporates to do the same? The IB would have at least one less report to write.

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