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**Article**

## Learned from Mistakes? An Assessment of the "Global Go-To Think Tanks" Rankings 2011

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## LEARNED FROM MISTAKES? AN ASSESSMENT OF THE “GLOBAL GO-TO THINK TANKS” RANKINGS 2011

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### Introduction

The Global Go-to Think Tanks Ranking of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Programme at the University of Pennsylvania has been published annually at the beginning of every year since 2007. It aims to rank think-tanks worldwide, regionally and in terms of their expertise. The ranking is based on surveys of experts, journalists and the think tanks that feature in the ranking. Seiler and Wohlrabe (2010a,b) were highly critical of the ranking for 2009. In addition to a large number of technical errors, many problematic methodical aspects of the ranking were highlighted. On 20 January 2012 the latest ranking for 2011 was published.<sup>1</sup> We are taking this opportunity to investigate the extent to which the method underpinning the ranking has been changed and/or improved. To sum up, it can be said that the main problems have not been resolved and that the ranking fails to fulfil its own objectives. Its results should therefore continue to be interpreted with great caution.

Before assessing the methodology used to compile the ranking, we begin with a brief introduction to it. Many of these changes were already implemented in the 2010 ranking. For the sake of comparison we refer below to the 2009 survey. For a summary of the methodology used at the time see Seiler and Wohlrabe (2010a).

The latest study is based on a three phase survey, just as it was two years ago. However, the procedure followed at each stage differs. In the first stage the think-tanks were no longer nominated for the ranking by a panel consisting entirely of 293 experts, but by 6,545 previously identified think tanks<sup>2</sup> and 6,500 experts, journalists, politicians and donors from around the world. The reason cited for this change was a potential distortion of the ranking by the survey of experts conducted previously. As with the 2009 ranking, participants were asked to give between five and twenty-five nominations per ranking category from the list of 6,545 organisations. These categories remain divided up according to geographical, specialist and other criteria. Table 1 provides details of the exact classification. The categories have remained the same on the whole, with the introduction of an additional category for think tanks with an annual budget of below five million dollars.<sup>3</sup> This is supposed to pay tribute to smaller think tanks, which (in some cases) do not historically have a large budget at their disposal (p. 11). Think tanks with five or more nominations are covered by the ranking. This “democratic” approach (p. 2) increases the number of nominations considerably compared to the expert nominations of 2009. 5,329 think tanks were nominated at least once.<sup>4</sup> In the second phase the list of think-tanks with at least five nominations was once again sent to around 13,000 institutions and journalists, politicians, donors and experts. These individuals were asked to rank the think tanks. Their assessments then formed the basis for the ranking into the various categories. Finally, in the last stage, the survey results were sent to a group of 793 experts in regional and specialist matters, who checked the ranking for inconsistencies and made recommendations for key changes. The same experts were also called upon to check the consistency of the interim results.

<sup>2</sup> This selection is based on internal research conducted by the institute of the ranking publisher. The number of think tanks identified increased by 240 versus 2009. The database was improved. The think tanks covered by this survey are listed by region and country at the website <http://www.gotothinktank.com/directory/>. The respective internet addresses of most of the think tanks are also listed.

<sup>3</sup> It remains unclear who has filtered these think tanks and based on what information.

<sup>4</sup> In 2009 only 391 think tanks were nominated.

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<sup>1</sup> The current ranking can be downloaded at [www.gotothink-tank.com](http://www.gotothink-tank.com).

Despite meaningful changes, the new structure of the study is still riddled with weaknesses. Firstly, it should be pointed out that the survey often falls short of its aim to be rigorous, comprehensive and objective (p. 12). Although the report contains a large quantity of information (which is sometimes repeated), many points that are supposed to make it possible to assess the quality and meaningfulness of the ranking are vague, unclear or missing entirely.

There are no exact figures on how many of the 6,545 think-tanks and around 6,500 journalists, private and public donors and policy-makers responded in rounds I and II. On page 22 there is talk of 1,500 participants in both the nomination and the ranking process. In Table IV of the report (p. 82) the covering letter on participation in the ranking mentions that 875 individuals participated in the nomination

process. Moreover, it remains unknown how their responses are distributed geographically and in terms of specialist fields. This is important when assessing the meaningfulness of the regional and specialist ranking. Without knowledge of the origins of the think-tanks and individuals participating in the survey process, it is also difficult to assess whether the survey is justified in claiming that it has an “increasingly global reach” (p. 21).

The report also gives no exact information on how many think-tanks were ultimately put to the vote in the respective categories. The report only states that 202 think-tanks were put to the vote in the world-wide ranking. It is not clear whether the 5,329 think tanks nominated (p. 22) were nominated once or several times. Five nominations were necessary to qualify for the ranking process. In addition, experts

were able to make their own additions. Once again, there is only a mention in annex IV (p. 82) that over 1,500 think-tanks were nominated in the 30 categories. The last key piece of quantitative information missing is the number of votes registered in each category. This is of central importance in order to be able to assess representativeness and robustness. The fewer votes cast per category, the more prone to fluctuations the series is. Finally, it would also be very interesting for readers to know the extent to which the votes cast are relatively distributed.

Another point concerns the influence of experts. On page 12 it is proudly stated that the use of experts has resulted in a significant reduction in distortions or major problems with the rankings. Page 90 contains a sample letter from round III, inciting the experts in question to indicate “any mistake, translation error or other points” related to the ranking. The same request had already been made in round I (letter as of p. 86ff). It remains unclear

Table 1

## Ranking Categories

**I. Top Think Tanks in the World**

Think Tank of the Year 2011 – Top Think Tank in the World  
Top Think Tanks – Worldwide (Non-US)  
Top Think Tanks – Worldwide (US and Non-US)

**II. Top Think Tanks by Region**

Top Think Tanks in the United States  
Top Think Tanks in Western Europe  
Top Think Tanks in Central and Eastern Europe  
Top Think Tanks in Asia  
Top Think Tanks in Sub-Saharan Africa  
Top Think Tanks in Mexico, Canada, and the Caribbean  
Top Think Tanks in Central and South America  
Top Think Tanks in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

**III. Top Think Tanks by Area of Research**

Top Security and International Affairs Think Tanks  
Top International Development Think Tanks  
Top Environment Think Tanks  
Top Health Policy Think Tanks  
Top Domestic Economic Policy Think Tanks  
Top International Economic Policy Think Tanks  
Top Social Policy Think Tanks  
Top Science and Technology Think Tanks  
Top Transparency and Good Governance Think Tanks

**IV. Top Think Tanks by Special Achievement**

Think Tanks with the Most Innovative Policy Ideas/Proposals  
Best New Think Tanks (Established in the last 18 months)  
Think Tanks with Outstanding Policy-Oriented Public Policy Research Programs  
Think Tanks with the Best Use of the Internet or Social Media to Engage the Public

Source: Go-To Think Tank Ranking (2011).

**Table 2**

**Nomination Criteria**

It is essential that you consider a variety of criteria in making your decisions.  
These may include, but are not limited to:

- Direct relationship between organization's efforts in a particular area to a positive change in societal values such as significant changes in quality of life within respective country (amounts of goods and services available to citizens, state of physical and mental health, quality of environment, quality of political rights, access to institutions)
- Publication of the organization's work by peer reviewed journals, books and other authoritative publications
- Ability to retain elite scholars & analysts
- Access to elites in the area of policymaking, media and academia
- Academic reputation (formal accreditation, citation of think tank, publications by scholars in major academic books, journals, conferences and in other professional publications)
- Media reputation (number of media appearances, interviews and citations)
- Reputation with policymakers (name recognition with particular issues, number of briefings and official appointments, policy briefs, legislative testimony delivered)
- Level of organization's financial resources (endowment, membership fees, annual donations, government and private contracts, earned income)
- Ability of the organization to meet the demands of those that fund it or to meet the goals of its respective grant-making institution
- Overall output of organization (policy proposals, publications, interviews, conferences, staff nominated to official posts)
- Number of recommendations to policymakers, staff serving advisory roles to policymakers, awards given to scholars
- Usefulness of organization's information in advocacy work, preparing legislation or testimony, preparing academic papers or presentations, conducting research or teaching
- The organization's ability to produce new knowledge or alternative ideas on policy
- Ability to bridge the gap between the academic and policymaking communities
- Ability to bridge the gap between policymakers and the public
- Ability to include new voices in the policymaking process
- Ability of organization to be inscribed within issue and policy networks; Success in challenging the traditional wisdom of policymakers and in generating innovative policy ideas and programs

Source: Go-To Think Tank Ranking (2011).

whether experts were also able to change the rankings (comments on page 20 indicate this), subsequently leading to a supposed reduction in distortions. If this was the case, there can no longer be any talk of an objective process, for the extent to which the rankings were adjusted after the survey is not comprehensible. There is no information whatsoever on this issue.

A central point of criticism in Seiler and Wohlrabe (2010a) was that the ranking was based on the purely subjective assessments of the survey participants. There was an attempt to take this point of criticism into account. Alongside the nomination criteria (Table 2) a catalogue with quantitative indicators (p. 24–25) was introduced to provide orientation for survey participants prior to drawing up their rankings. These indicators are presented in Table 3. This consideration is correct, but cannot be practically implemented. A summary of this information for a

large number of think-tanks for just one of these categories would be very complex and would merit its own publication.<sup>5</sup> It is to be assumed that the survey participants have access to only minimal information on a small selection of think-tanks. This gives rise to two potential conclusions. Firstly, the think-tanks are only ranked by survey participants that have information on them. This means that both the number of votes falls, as does the representativeness of the results, which means that the rankings are distorted. For it is to be assumed that some think-tanks are better according to objective criteria, but are not ranked. This selection bias could only be potentially overcome through a very big sample. The information available in the report as a sample does not lead us to this conclusion. The same problem applies to

<sup>5</sup> A ranking for faculties and institutes in the field of economics based on a multitude of quantitative indicators published by the REPEC network ([www.repec.org](http://www.repec.org)). See Seiler and Wohlrabe (2010c).

the assessment of think tanks in different fields. It is difficult for an economic research institute, for example, to assess the influence of political and scientific think tanks and vice versa. A potential consequence here is also a distortion of the results if only certain specialist fields have participated and/or if these are over-represented. Secondly, the lack of objective information leads to a ranking based purely on perception and the criticism of Seiler and Wohlrabe (2010a) is applicable here. Only think-tanks that have sufficient information on all nominated institutes should take a position.

Another critical point is potential strategic response behaviour among the think tanks taking part. Although self-nominations are rightly excluded, there is nevertheless an incentive not to nominate direct competitors in corresponding research areas or regions in order not to improve their ranking. Moreover, it cannot be excluded that think tanks which do not feature on the nomination list tend not to answer since they feel excluded. However, such behaviour is difficult to correct through survey design.

Finally, we would like to take a look at the current results in terms of the development of the ranking over time. The think tank of the year was the Brookings Institution from the USA. It was selected best think tank of the year for the fourth year in succession. Figure 1 shows the placement of the top ten best think tanks worldwide (excluding the USA) in the rankings since 2008. It is striking that the majority have been among the top ten think tanks since 2008. The exceptions are Bruegel, the European Council on Foreign Relations and Amnesty International, which were not even among the top 50 in 2008. In the top 20–50 (excluding the USA) the fluctuation is higher. This year seven think tanks made it into the top 50 since the start of the survey. Human Rights Watch was even selected directly at place 18. The other newly ranked think tanks include three from emerging countries, although the Western countries continue to dominate the ranking. There are still a large number of inconsistencies between the various categories. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), for example, ranked lower than Amnesty International at place four in the Western Europe category, while in the worldwide category (non-US) it was placed above Amnesty International at rank two. The same applies to a direct comparison of the institutions Transparency International and International Crisis

Group. In the Western Europe category Transparency International ranks higher in the worldwide category (non-US) than the International Crisis Group.

Finally, we wish to compare the survey ranking and a quantitative ranking. The latter is the worldwide ranking of economic faculties and institutes of the RePEc. This aggregates the 31 output indicators into an overall ranking. These indicators reflect the number of publications (weighted and unweighted), the number of citations and the number of downloads among other factors. See Seiler and Wohlrabe (2010c) for a detailed description of the ranking methodology. Figure 2 presents a scatter plot diagram that compares the rescaled ranking positions of the think tank rankings of the “International economic policy” category (p. 53) with those of the worldwide RePEc ranking. The first striking fact is that only nine institutions from the top 30 are ranked in the RePEc. This may be due to three possible reasons. Firstly, the top think tanks from the field of economics are not rated in the think tank ranking. Examples are the World Bank (ranked two by the RePEc), the International Monetary Fund

**Figure 1**

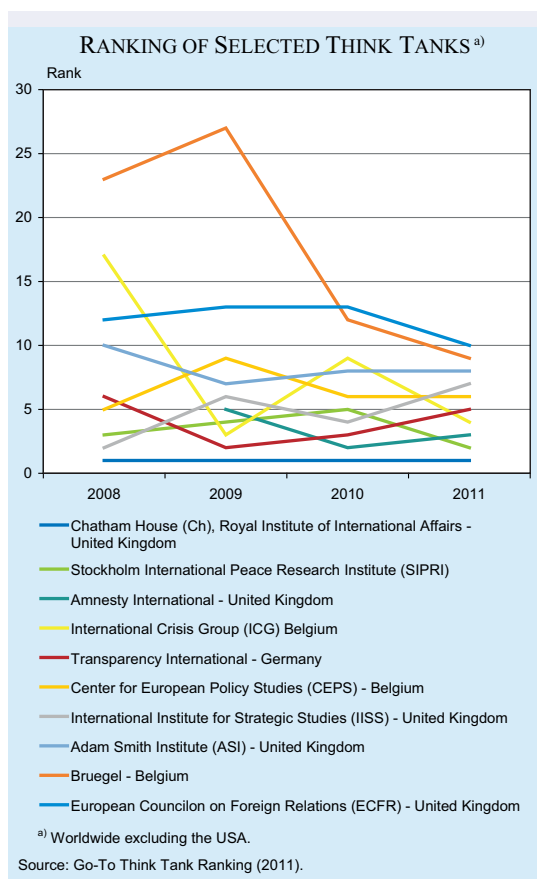


Table 3

Quantitative Ranking Indicators

Resource indicators	Ability to recruit and retain leading scholars and analysts; the level, quality, and stability of financial support; proximity and access to decision-makers and other policy elites; a staff with the ability to conduct rigorous research and produce timely and incisive analysis; institutional currency; quality and reliability of networks; and key contacts in the policy academic communities, and the media
Utilization indicators	Reputation as a “go-to” organization by media and policy elites in the country; quantity and quality of media appearances and citations, web hits, testimony before legislative and executive bodies; briefings, official appointments, consultation by officials or departments/agencies; books sold; reports distributed; references made to research and analysis in scholarly and popular publications and attendees at conferences and seminars organized
Output indicator	Number and quality of: policy proposals and ideas generated; publications produced (books, journal articles, policy briefs, etc.); news interviews conducted; briefings, conferences, and seminars organized; and staff who are nominated to advisory and government posts
Impact indicators	Recommendations considered or adopted by policymakers and civil society organizations; issue network centrality; advisory role to political parties, candidates, transition teams; awards granted; publication in or citation of publications in academic journals, public testimony and the media that influences the policy debate and decision-making; listserv and web site dominance; and success in challenging the conventional wisdom and standard operating procedures of bureaucrats and elected officials in the country

Source: Go-To Think Tank Ranking (2011).

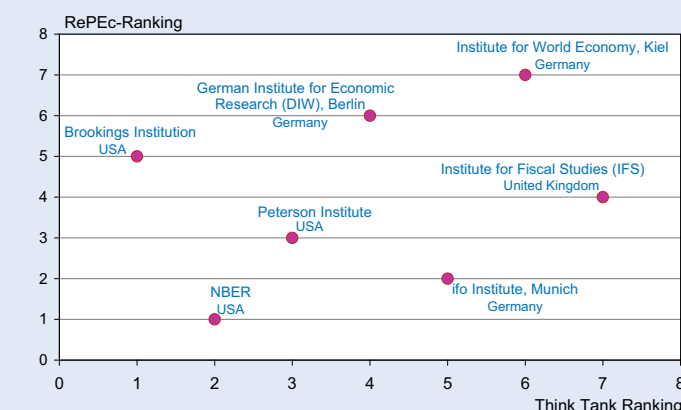
(ranked nine by the RePEc) and the central banks (Federal Reserve Banks). These institutions generate a large amount of relevant output as required by the definition of output criteria stated in Table 3. Secondly, it may be the case that the think tanks ranked by the RePEc are not listed or ranked. The RePEc only features the top five percent of over 5,000 institutes and faculties currently in existence. So the think tank Bruegel, for example, is only among the top eight percent in the RePEc, while it is ranked three in the think tank ranking. This leads to the third reason, namely that there are major differences between the intended survey based on

quantitative information and an actual quantitative ranking. This is clearly illustrated by the scatter plot diagram in Figure 2.

To conclude, it can be said that the think tank ranking does not fulfil its own objectives. Many points that would make it possible to assess the quality and meaningfulness of the ranking are very vague, unclear or missing entirely. The methodology of the ranking and the presumably very low case numbers could potentially lead to major distortions of the results. Any conclusions and interpretations drawn from the ranking should therefore continue to be treated very cautiously.

Figure 2

COMPARISON OF THINK TANK RANKING AND REPEC-RANKING, 2011



Sources: Go-To Think Tank Ranking 2011; RePEc.

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