

Post-print of Brazilian Think Tanks’ Operation and Development Trends Abstract: This paper systematically analyzes the operational mechanisms, funding sources, research agendas, and influence on public policy formulation of Brazilian think tanks. Through case studies and comparative analysis, thi...

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Abstract

On May 28, 2016, on the occasion of the opening of “Shanghai Forum 2016”, the editorial department of *Think Tank: Theory and Practice* conducted an interview with Professor Renato, a think tank expert from the Brazilian Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV) who was attending the conference, on “issues related to Brazilian think tanks”, in order to further understand the overall landscape and characteristics of Brazilian think tanks as well as the development trends of FGV as a world-class think tank. As the interview reflects only a single perspective and time was limited, the content of this article is not entirely comprehensive and requires careful evaluation and consideration, and is provided for reference only.

Full Text

Preamble

Interview on the Operation and Development Trends of Brazilian Think Tanks—An Exclusive Interview with Professor Renato, Think Tank Expert from the Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV) of Brazil

By Lu Qing and Luan Ruiying, Journal Reporters

Editor’ s Note: On May 28, 2016, during the opening of the “Shanghai Forum 2016,”the editorial team of *Think Tank: Theory and Practice* interviewed

Professor Renato, a think tank expert from Brazil's Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV) who was attending the conference. The purpose was to gain deeper insights into the overall landscape and characteristics of Brazilian think tanks, as well as the development trajectory of FGV as a world-class think tank. As this interview represents the views of a single expert and was conducted under time constraints, the content may not be comprehensive and should be considered with appropriate discernment. It is provided for reference only.

Brief Introduction to the Fundação Getúlio Vargas

Founded on December 20, 1944, the Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV) is a prestigious private Brazilian foundation that exemplifies the successful integration of teaching, academic research, and think tank operations. The foundation plays a significant role in social sciences—including economics, law, history, and political science—as well as in management and public policy, dedicated to promoting Brazil's economic and social development through high-quality education. *Foreign Policy* magazine has ranked FGV among the top five “policymaker think tanks” worldwide. The foundation comprises eight schools, two research institutes, technical assistance programs, and a publishing unit. The FGV International Intelligence Unit is a small think tank under FGV that reports directly to the foundation's president. It focuses on analyzing international issues relevant to Brazil and provides professional perspectives on Brazil to foreign investors, diplomats, and government officials. The interviewee, Professor Renato G. Flôres Jr., serves as Director of the FGV International Intelligence Unit.

1. Overall Situation and Main Characteristics of Brazilian Think Tanks

Q: Could you describe the overall situation and main characteristics of Brazilian think tanks?

A: Brazil began paying serious attention to think tanks about five years ago. Prior to that, universities had economics and political science departments that performed some think tank-like functions, but these differed from genuine think tanks because academic institutions prioritize scholarship. Approximately five to ten years ago, people began recognizing the distinction between think tank work and academic research. For instance, some scholars may conduct in-depth research on an issue yet remain unclear about its future trajectory, showing little interest in the specific practical problems that might arise during development. To offer concrete policy recommendations, one must understand both the technical aspects of problem-solving and the surrounding real-world context—not merely study literature and publish papers, but more importantly, provide policymakers with genuinely useful advice.

This is easier said than done, as it requires sophisticated methodology. Think tank work demands strong practical applicability, necessitating the articulation

of one's position within two pages to persuade policymakers, rather than through a stack of academic reports.

Currently, Brazil has few think tanks, and they are relatively small in scale. Most focus on international relations, public relations, urban policy, and economics, with many originating in the field of international relations. Modern think tanks, however, have largely become independent from universities.

2. Differences Between University-Affiliated and Independent Think Tanks

Q: What are the differences between university-affiliated and independent think tanks?

A: There are many differences. First, university think tanks consist primarily of professors who focus on specialized issues. Moreover, professors receive salaries, and their institutions provide basic research funding. In theory, independent think tanks must raise their own project funds from sources such as government agencies, corporations, or international foundations. Generally, university think tanks rarely worry about funding. Second, university think tanks are constrained by academic research imperatives, constantly concerned with whether their findings can be published. Independent think tanks, by contrast, must write policy recommendation reports and then engage users in discussions to promote these reports. These two work models differ fundamentally because for independent think tanks, completing a report represents only half the work—the other half, or even the majority, involves advocacy and whether the report can influence user decision-making.

3. FGV's Operations and Research Overview

Q: Could you briefly introduce FGV's main development path?

A: We are a private foundation with over 70 years of history and considerable scale, but we are not a standard think tank like the RAND Corporation in the United States because we also operate graduate schools—including law schools, business schools, and political science schools—that can grant master's and doctoral degrees. The foundation employs 700-1,000 teaching and research staff. Additionally, the foundation has several think tanks, and I lead one that focuses on international intelligence, particularly information useful to Brazil. Other think tanks within FGV focus on management issues.

Q: Does your think tank employ foreign researchers?

A: More than half of my team consists of foreign researchers, and we welcome Chinese think tank researchers to join FGV. In terms of personnel and funding, our think tank ranks as the second-largest in the world, after the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Q: How do you determine research topics, and how do you conduct research?

A: When selecting topics, we must consider their importance and be persuasive enough to convince funders of their value. For example, we might consider internet policy important. If there is no initial sponsorship, we would use our own funds to conduct research and publish papers. However, if we still cannot secure external funding after a year, we must discontinue the project because we ultimately need external financial support.

Q: If think tank research requires external funding, can research independence be guaranteed?

A: This is the typical dilemma that think tanks face. If you receive funding from an oil company to write a report on the future economic impact of oil development, you must write it to satisfy the funder. This predicament is difficult to avoid. Even think tanks independent from the state, while claiming independence, still face influence when encountering real-world problems. Furthermore, determining a think tank's independence requires case-by-case analysis. For think tanks wholly owned by the government, it is difficult to define whether they are completely state-dependent or independent. Although they can produce high-quality reports, these reports inevitably carry certain biases and must never contain anti-government content. For other think tanks, users will judge their independence for themselves.

Q: Does your think tank frequently engage with the media?

A: Yes, we frequently interact with both media and policymakers. Almost all think tanks publish their research findings on their websites, yet 90-95% of these reports go undownloaded. One might think these research results are useless, which is why I say this work is difficult. Therefore, we must identify our target users, communicate with them, fully utilize media for promotion, publish executive summaries on our websites, and employ various media channels to ensure users become aware of our research reports.

Q: How do you evaluate the quality of think tank reports?

A: Let users evaluate report quality. Each think tank has its own quality standards. It is difficult to assess quality based on a single report, but by examining several reports, quality differences become apparent. Quality control is primarily an internal matter. Report findings need not be scientific but must be reliable. For instance, I can examine the data and evidence collected to determine whether the recommended policies logically follow from them. However, verifying these data and evidence requires time and resources. Ultimately, the power to judge report quality rests with users.

Q: What experiences have you gained from working in think tanks?

A: Working in a think tank is not easy. As a think tank director, to outperform other think tanks, one must consider various issues comprehensively, maintain acute awareness of real-world changes and critical problems, and possess the ability to identify issues from reality while communicating promptly with report writers. This work is interesting, demanding, challenging, and arduous. My

own work falls into two categories: thinking-oriented and information-gathering. Additionally, a think tank director must also be a fundraiser.

4. Conditions and Environment Required for Think Tank Development

Q: What conditions and environment are necessary for think tank development?

A: Excellent researchers are crucial—at least one or two leading experts, plus qualified reserve personnel with appropriate credentials and academic titles. Fundamentally, funding is vital to think tanks. Therefore, poor countries struggle to operate think tanks long-term because they need minimum funding levels to cultivate and retain talented individuals. Regarding the environment needed for think tank development, sometimes think tanks can publicly discuss policy recommendations, and sometimes they cannot. This depends on societal complexity.

5. Information Technology and Think Tank Development

Q: In the era of new media and big data, how can think tanks utilize information technology? Does Brazil have any relevant experience?

A: In Brazil, some think tanks pay special attention to information technology, such as new ways of presenting data and simulating dynamic data changes. They have also conducted experiments in data transformation to make information more understandable and engaging, such as data visualization. However, we must return to the fundamental question: the purpose and value of think tanks lie in providing useful policy recommendations to influence decision-makers to change the status quo. Therefore, we try to use various technologies to analyze data more clearly or provide more attractive presentations to articulate viewpoints more effectively. Big data relates to data analysis, but whether think tank research needs to apply big data depends on the specific question. For example, regarding whether the UK would leave the EU, we could write a report without necessarily applying big data.

6. International Trends in Think Tank Development

Q: What are the trends in international think tank development?

A: I may not be qualified to answer this question, but I will try. I believe the world is currently in crisis and needs change. Precisely because we live in such a crisis-ridden environment, think tanks are needed to provide corresponding solutions. I think one of the most promising regions for global think tank development may be Asia, because Asia is experiencing rapid development and facing increasing problems. In the process of continuous development and creation, think tanks' capacity to solve new problems is also continuously strengthening.

Of course, international think tank development faces two contradictory paths: on the one hand, time constraints prevent think tanks from conducting adequate research, leading policymakers to bypass think tanks in decision-making; on the other hand, society is becoming increasingly complex, with more problems emerging in daily life, requiring professional teams to provide advice. Furthermore, each country's disharmonious elements concentrate mainly in government and ruling classes—such as power transitions, democracy, corruption, electoral systems, power politics, and centralization—while complex societal issues like retirement systems and social insurance require one or multiple think tanks independent from government to offer opinions and solutions. Therefore, nations and societies need think tanks. Overall, facing an increasingly complex environment, countries that can continuously obtain think tank support will gain advantages, while many countries that cannot obtain such support will miss opportunities.

7. Suggestions and Expectations for Chinese Think Tank Construction

Q: What suggestions and expectations do you have for Chinese think tank construction?

A: I do not know much about China. The purpose of my visit is to establish connections with Chinese think tanks. So far, what I have learned has been positive. Most Chinese think tanks provide general reports, though I fear few people are interested in them. Many think tanks rely on government funding. For example, the China Institute for Reform and Development (CIRD) focuses on economic issues, and I have obtained many of their reports. Some approaches at Fudan University are similar to ours, and Tsinghua University also has many think tanks. I believe China is promoting think tank development.

8. Suggestions for *Think Tank: Theory and Practice*

Q: What are your expectations for *Think Tank: Theory and Practice*? How can this journal demonstrate its value and status?

A: This journal holds value. For example, it could feature special topics introducing think tank development experiences in specific countries, such as how Brazil, China, and Russia develop their think tanks. Many think tanks in their early stages focus on international relations and national defense security. Therefore, I believe the journal could analyze the characteristics of think tanks globally that focus on defense and security issues. Additionally, many think tanks now focus on gender issues—it would be worthwhile to examine how they conduct their work, what results they have achieved, and whether they emphasize policy. If the journal could publish papers on these specific experiences, it would be very meaningful for think tank development. The journal could also address funding issues, such as the funding structure of major think tanks and whether they rely entirely on government support. Think tanks are becoming

increasingly important in China, and this journal serves as a witness to Chinese think tank development, holding significant value in promoting exchange and development among think tanks.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv – Machine translation. Verify with original.