



# The Role of Think Tanks in the Swedish Political Landscape

Sigurd Allern , Ester Pollack

First published: 08 July 2020

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12180>

## Abstract

The term ‘think tank’ represents a heterogeneous concept and is used to characterise a diverse group of organisations. This diversity also characterises the Swedish organisations and institutions that currently fall under the think tank umbrella. In the Swedish political context, most organisations known by the public and news media as think tanks are *advocacy* organisations with an unambiguous ideological and political profile. Further, during the last decade, we have seen a proliferation of independent, self-declared think tanks with more specific policy agendas, such as the environment and health care. However, according to the broader understanding used in global rankings, the Swedish think tank landscape includes a range of research institutions in different policy areas. Some receive funding from the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, corporations and private donors; others are government-funded, with Stockholm's International Peace Research Institute as a prominent example. The aim of this article is to map the Swedish think tank landscape and its borders and analyse the roles of different types of think tanks in consensual or confrontational policymaking. Strategic differences among these types are related to historical background and funding. While government-funded and some policy-sector think tanks typically represent a tradition of consensual policymaking, those funded by the Corporation of Swedish Enterprise and other business interests represent a post-corporatist development advocating neoliberal ideas and assuming a confrontational role in the expansion of private ownership and market solutions.

## Introduction

Over the last decades, organisations and institutes characterised as *think tanks* have been established all over the world, including in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries. However, concerning their ideological profile and background, organisational type and funding, such think tanks represent a varied political landscape. Some of the most well-

known think tanks are advocacy organisations with an unambiguous ideological profile and outspoken worldview, representing a long-term, strategic perspective concerning research, publications and policy advice. Others are organised and funded as research institutes in different societal areas and play a less partisan and more consensual 'expert role' in policy debates. Sometimes, as the history of institutes of international affairs around the world has shown, think tanks may even 'play a vital role in elaborating an elite consensus and in mobilizing public opinion behind major official policy initiatives' (Parmar [2004](#), 19).

These variations in the think tank landscape make think tanks difficult to define; thus, they are also hard to map and count. According to the *2018 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* (McGann [2019](#)), an influential listing of international think tanks, there are 90 Swedish think tanks – far more than in the neighbouring Nordic countries – placing Sweden behind only the United Kingdom and Germany on the Western European think tank map. However, only 17 of these policy and research organisations are specified and named on the report's different ranking lists, among them, the Stockholm International Research Institute (SIPRI) and Timbro, a neo-liberal advocacy think tank.

Despite Swedish think tanks' assumed importance and international visibility, there have been few attempts to map the Swedish think tank landscape. One exception is a report on their funding by journalist Sverker Lindström ([2018](#)), who lists 36 organisations belonging to this category, with 3 described as non-functioning or discontinued.

There are several reasons for the discrepancy between the lists mentioned above, but the most important seems to be different interpretations of what a think tank is. The *Index Report* (McGann [2019](#)) appears to be based on a 'catch-all' definition that includes varying types of think tanks and policy organisations, including government institutions and university institutes engaged in public policy research. Lindström's ([2018](#)) report, without defining the concept, is limited mostly to advocacy think tanks and non-governmental research/policy organisations linked to corporate interests. However, the last interpretation basically corresponds to how *tankesmedjor* – the Swedish word for think tanks – have been described in the mediated, domestic debate (Allern & Pollack [2016](#)).

The examples above demonstrate that a 'think tank' is a heterogeneous concept used to characterise a rather diverse group of organisations that have little, if anything, in common. As Adrienne Sörbom ([2018](#), 365) writes in an organisational study on such organisations, think tanks appear as 'something of a conundrum'. They 'vary considerably in size, structure, policy ambit and significance' (Stone [2004](#), 2) and are difficult to define. Another complication is that organisations *outside* of most definitions of the think tank sector, such as commercial management consultancies or traditional university departments, may also be engaged in the market for policy advice and expertise (Pautz [2011](#)). Against this background, this article aimed to accomplish the following:

“ (1) *Discuss and map the Swedish landscape of think tanks and policy organisations* and (2) *discuss the societal roles of different types of Swedish think tanks in consensual or confrontational policymaking* . ”

Our expectation is that advocacy think tanks will generally play an adversarial and confrontational role in policy debates, while think tanks and policy organisations of a more corporatist character, or dependent on regular government funding, will tend to represent consensus-oriented proposals and solutions. However, patterns of conflict and consensus are influenced by changes in the climate of opinion, and thus, the societal role of think tanks may also change over time. While today, free-market ideas are influential across the world, this has not always been the case. Marie Laure Djelic (2014) sums this up in an article where she discusses the role neo-liberal think tanks have had in ‘spreading ideas to change the world’. In the first decades after World War II, neo-liberal think tanks ‘were presenting minority views in opposition to hegemonic paradigms of the social liberal era...’ (Plewhe 2011, 172).

The article is organised as follows: In the next section, we briefly define and discuss the societal roles of think tanks before addressing some problems concerning data and methods. Following this, we describe the historical emergence of think tanks in Sweden, and then we provide an overview of the Swedish think tank and policy organisation landscape. The final section summarises the results and discusses the diverse roles of Swedish think tanks as knowledge producers and policy advisors.

## The Societal Role of Think Tanks

In the last decades, there has been a rise of think tank organisations on a global scale. Entanglement between political policy actors and commercial affairs has an older history, and some organisations and research centres that are characterised as think tanks today, such as the Brookings Institution in the United States, were founded more than a century ago. However, as a label used for a specific *category* of organisations, the history of think tanks is much shorter: ‘Indeed, it is worth remembering that there was no *think tank* category per se, either in public or specialised discourse, until roughly the 1960’s’ (Medvetz 2012, 116).

Tracing the origins of modern neo-liberal think tanks, Djelic (2014) cites an essay written by Friedrich A. Hayek in 1949, in which he argues for a collaboration between liberal Utopians and a broader network of intellectuals, characterised as ‘the second hand dealers in ideas’ (Hayek 1960 [1949], 372), that is, persons able to perform the role of intermediaries in spreading ideas, wielding their power ‘by shaping public opinion’ (371). Two years before, in 1947, Hayek had initiated the Mont Pelerin Society, an elite forum for

market-liberal scholars, mostly economists, with the aim of battling 'what he saw as the tide of collectivism sweeping the world' (Desai [1994](#), 31). Socialism, planning, welfare state economics and Keynesian-inspired interventions in the economy were, and still are, the sworn ideological enemies of this neo-liberal 'thought collective' (Mirowski & Plehwe [2009](#)).

For Hayek and the Mont Pelerin Society, the first important 'second hand dealer of ideas' became the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA) in the United Kingdom, founded by the businessman Anthony Fisher. Together with some other New Right think tanks, this policy organisation came to play an important role in Margaret Thatcher's electoral success and rise to power in 1979. Allied with other influential actors, some of which were members of the Mont Pelerin Society, Fisher also helped to establish think tanks of a similar type in Canada and the United States. In 1981, he took a more comprehensive step and initiated the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, known today as the Atlas Network. 'Friends like Milton Friedman, Frierich Hayek, and Margaret Thatcher, applauded the idea of replicating the IEA model far and wide', the organisation summarises on its homepage, now claiming to represent more than 450 think tank partners in nearly 100 countries, including Sweden (Atlas Network [2019](#)).

A characteristic feature of think tanks is that they 'work to influence agendas outside the regular decision making channels' (Garsten [2013](#), 142), but they do this without any formal role in the polity. Think tanks trade in ideas, make policy proposals to political elites, develop networks with stakeholders and try to influence public opinion. They provide public policy research and attempt to influence public policy strategies and decisions (Kelstrup [2016](#)). Their funding base varies, but donations and contributions from foundations, corporations and industry organisations are typical. In Nordic countries, some research and policy organisations of a think tank character are government funded.

According to Stephen Barley ([2010](#)), in the 1970s and 1980s, US corporations extended their contributions to think tanks as part of an attempt to increase their influence on federal government decisions. Via political spending, contributions to lobby organisations, think tanks and public relations (PR) campaigns, corporations were able to build 'an institutional field' to mould the political environment (Barley [2010](#), 779). Their actions involved flows (back and forth) of money and personnel, as well as subsidised information to both media and legislators. Trade unions, citizen groups and their think tanks are embedded in an analogously structured field, albeit 'less powerful, less prominent, less well organized, less well funded and less well informed' (Barley [2010](#), 796).

Since think tanks vary considerably in their background, organisational type and funding, it is necessary to distinguish between different types of policy organisations. On one side

of the think tank spectrum, we find research organisations – ‘universities without students’ (Weaver [1989](#), 564). These are academic institutions that combine political, economic and social research with policy proposals, advice and recommendations. In the Nordic context, few of these institutes characterise themselves as think tanks, and their funding and role concerning policy advice vary. Research organisations funded by private businesses will often share their principals' free-market values. There are also think tanks in specific policy areas (e.g. economic policy, foreign policy and environmental policy) that are organisationally independent but government funded.

On the other side of the think tank spectrum, we find advocacy think tanks, mostly *without* independent research departments. These ‘second hand dealers in ideas’ are ideologically motivated and engaged; they see themselves ‘primarily as advocates for specific solutions to public policy problems or for their own political worldview’ (Thunert [2004](#), 77). In their knowledge production, they rely on cooperation with scholarly networks and intellectuals who can contribute with reports, articles and books. Finally, between the two ‘ideal types’ are several intermediate think tank types that occasionally finance smaller research projects.

Market-liberal advocacy think tanks and policy organisations are mostly funded by business associations, trade organisations or corporations. Some advocacy think tanks are linked to political parties or political foundations, while others are sponsored by trade unions and interest organisations.

In organisational terms, think tanks have features that can characterise them as *partial organisations* (Ahrne & Brunsson [2011](#); Sörbom [2018](#)). In democratic organisations, members elect their leader and traditionally make decisions regarding their membership, hierarchies and rules. They can also issue commands and monitor their activities, and they have the right to decide on sanctions. However, think tanks are not traditional membership organisations led by elected leaders. In an economic sense, they depend on their funders, who can be more or less actively involved in the organisation. In think tanks with full-time employees, the hierarchies are similar to those of other professional enterprises. At the same time, as Sörbom ([2018](#)) summarises, think tanks can use different ‘membership-like’ relations to engage people other than their employees in their activities. The weakest form of membership-like relation is to be put on a think tank's e-post list; this is a quasi-membership where individuals are regularly informed about reports and activities and receive invitations to seminars. Having pundits and journalists on such lists is especially valuable. Another and more binding type of engagement is to be appointed a board member, member of a reference group or member of a scientific advisory committee. Some think tanks also establish *partnerships* with other organisations, such as foundations, corporations or interest organisations, or they participate in international networks with other think tanks.

# Mapping Think Tanks: Data and Methods

A basic prerequisite for any mapping of think tanks is, as mentioned above, how we draw the borders between think tanks and other types of organisations. Since our aim is to map the specific Swedish think tank landscape, we find it reasonable to operationalise the think tank concept by examining the domestic organisational terrain. A starting point could be to include all institutes and other organisations that define and present *themselves* as think tanks. However, as Kelstrup ([2017](#), 130) remarks, such self-classifying comes with variable bias because ‘some practitioners are cautious of the term and prefer terms such as “research organisation”, whereas others embraced it more eagerly’.

To put it more bluntly, some research and policy organisations never use the term ‘think tank’. One reason for this may be the connotation that advocacy think tanks have an unambiguous ideological profile. However, since organisations *characterised* as think tanks, especially during the last few decades, have been visible in the news with their leaders used as expert sources, there is a temptation for small organisations and networks (even individuals) to brand their public initiatives as a think tank. Even tiny groups with limited resources and infrequent public initiatives have practised this PR strategy in Sweden.

However, a ‘think tank’ without any visible public engagement or dissemination of knowledge is a contradiction in terms. Therefore, the mapping should be linked to an *activity criterion*. Let us give two examples. The Green Party's official think tank, Cogito, has in the last few years mainly been characterised by its inactivity. The Swedish think tank Eudoxa is described by [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org) as a think tank with a transhumanist, and liberal political profile, <sup>1</sup> and the *Index Report* ranks Eudoxa 29th among the Top Science and Technology Policy Think Tanks. This is, to put it mildly, a strange ranking given that Eudoxa has not undertaken any visible public activity in the Swedish society since the period 2005–2008. Even its website has been defunct for some years.

Against this background, we decided to use the following criteria for the mapping:

- The organisation must be a non-profit institution and engaged in independent research and/or dissemination of research-based knowledge in one or more policy areas.
- The organisation may be funded privately or by the government, but must be organised independently and represent its own voice in policy debates.
- The organisation must regularly produce and disseminate research articles and/or reports that are made available for a wider public.
- The organisation must be engaged in opinion building and networking via seminars,

conferences or other public events.

- The organisation must have known leadership.

Organisations' homepages and annual reports offer important sources regarding publications and staff. In some cases, we phoned responsible officers and asked for additional information.

Another source is Retriever's Media archive, which grants access to Swedish news sources. In the initial phase of data collection, we used the Swedish word for think tank – *tankesmedja*\* – as our search word. This gave access to organisations, foundations and groups characterised as think tanks in Swedish news stories, and we used it to create a preparatory list of 'assumed think tanks'. The names were then crosschecked against the think tank names published in the *Index Report* (McGann [2019](#)) and the oversight given by Lindström ([2018](#)).

Retriever's Media archive was also used to research the number of media mentions for all organisations referred to as think tanks in the years 2014–2018. Lack of visibility was interpreted as an indication of passivity – or that the organisation had closed down. If an organisation's home page did not document any other external activity in these years (or in 2019), the name was deleted from the list. In the text, however, we will mention a few smaller think tank initiatives that did not meet our inclusion criteria, plus a few more recent think tank initiatives.

We included private and government-funded research institutions that generally are known to combine their research with policy analysis and recommendations. However, institutes belonging to state universities that combine research and teaching were excluded. Our main argument is that they, as institutions, seldom give policy recommendations, even if individual scholars may play a role as public intellectuals in such debates. They also run the risk of undermining their reputation of academic integrity and independence if they turn into policy centres.

## Think Tanks in Sweden – A Historical Perspective

Sweden was for many decades, especially after the Second World War, known for its strong tradition of societal corporatism, integrating business associations, trade unions and other interest groups in its policymaking. However, like other European welfare states, Sweden faced economic and political problems, pressures and challenges in the 1980s and 1990s that weakened the role of societal corporatism (Lewin [1992](#); Hermansson et al. [1999](#)). An important event in the Swedish context was the decision by the Swedish Employers Association (SAF) in 1991 to unilaterally withdraw all of its representatives from the boards of government agencies. This ended the institutionalised cooperation, organised by the state, between employers and trade unions and has been

described as a basic shot against the traditional Swedish model (Johansson [2001](#)), and the subsequent development characterised as 'the fall of the strong state' (Lindvall & Rothstein [2006](#)).

One of the results of this de-corporatist development was the expansion of other channels of influence. This created, for example, an expanding commercial market for 'public affairs' services in the public sector. Another factor – both strengthening and symbolising this development – was the growth of non-governmental think tanks and policy institutions. Most of the organisations known by the Swedish public as *tankesmedjor* were founded after the millennium. Therefore, think tanks are a rather new phenomenon. However, some think tank types of organisations that currently perform the functions of knowledge producers and policymakers have a much longer history.

The oldest of these policy institutions is the Swedish Institute of International affairs (*Utrikespolitiska Institutet* [UI]) – an organisation that describes itself as 'an independent platform for research, analysis and information on international relation and foreign policy' (UI [2019](#)). Its parent body, the Swedish Society for International Affairs, was established in 1938. Leading Swedish academics and some newspaper editors, who represent different political parties, but define the committee as 'an apolitical association', took the initiative. The main aim was said to be disseminating unbiased information about international affairs.

The Swedish UI was clearly inspired by the establishment of institutes of international affairs in other countries, not least, the United States and United Kingdom after World War I (Parmar [2004](#)). The American Rockefeller Foundation was UI's most important funder during the first years, but UI also received support and grants from Swedish and other Nordic sources. The initiative was supported both by the Swedish Employers Organisation (Svenska Arbetsgivareföreningen [SAF]) and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (Landsorganisationen i Sverige [LO]). The first allocation from the Swedish government was granted in 1940, and the Swedish Foreign Department eventually became the basic funding institution (UI [2013](#)).

The establishment of UI was a typical consensus-based political initiative, and its history and profile centre on its corporatist background. Its research is aimed at being academic and policy focused and informing and initiating debates about foreign and security policy of relevance to Sweden. While UI 'does not take a stand on policy issues' (UI [2019](#)), it clearly plays an important background role concerning consensual policymaking.

Another early research and policy initiative was in 1939 undertaken by the SAF and the Swedish National Federation of Industry (*Sveriges Industriförbund*) through the foundation of the market-liberal Industrial Research Institute. Jacob Wallenberg, the head of Sweden's most important capitalist group, was chairman of the board for a long period

(1950–1975). In 2006, the organisation was renamed the Research Institute of Industrial Economics (IFN).

In 1948, *Näringslivets fond* (Enterprises' fund), which had been established during the Second World War 'in defence of free enterprise and market economics' (Stiftelsen Fritt Näringsliv [2019a](#)), helped to establish a business think tank in Sweden – the Centre for Business and Policy Studies (*Studieförbundet Näringsliv och Samhälle* [SNS]). However, the founders of SNS chose a political strategy of dialogue rather than confrontation between the business community and the state. This focus on consensus came at a time when the Social Democrats were the governing party and made it possible to bring together policymakers, leaders from the business community and academics. Over the years, SNS became a non-profit association with members from both the private and public sectors.

## Timbro and the Right-Wing Ideological Offensive

During the 1970s, leading circles among Swedish capitalist groups wanted to develop a more confrontational stance against socialism and the development of a growing public sector. In 1978, *Näringslivets fond* initiated the establishment of a new think tank, Timbro, inspired by the pioneering think tank IEA in the United Kingdom, and new neo-liberal advocacy think tanks in the United States, such as the Cato Institute, which was founded the year before.

In contrast to SNS, the establishment of Timbro was an undisguised attempt to pursue the interests of the capitalist class in opposition to the Swedish labour movement and to counter any ideas connected with socialist economic planning and the rapid expansion of the welfare state. Although Timbro was not a research institute, it became an important right-wing ideological centre by publishing books, producing reports and pamphlets on current affairs and running a continuous seminar series dealing with different policy questions. Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and Ayn Rand were some of the authors published by Timbro. It was, according to the former CEO, Karin Svanborg-Sjövall, founded as 'an uncompromising free market policy institute' (cited in Kinderman [2017](#)). Beginning in the 1980s, Timbro became a household name among Sweden's political debaters and an important *symbol* of a changing and more confrontational political environment. Timbro runs *Stureakademin*, an educational academy for ideological training of young politicians and journalists pursuing careers as editorial commentators in liberal and conservative media. It is financially and organisationally independent of the political parties, but many of its leaders and spokespersons have been members of the Swedish Conservatives (*Moderaterna*) or the Liberals. Several younger politicians from the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats have attended Timbro's ideological courses. Since 2014, Timbro has been part of the European Policy Information Center (EPICENTER) – a libertarian network built to strengthen 'the principles of a free society'.<sup>2</sup> Timbro is also one of the partners in the neoliberal Atlas Network, mentioned above.

The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (*Svenskt Näringsliv*) was founded in 2001 through a merger of SAF and the Swedish National Federation of Industry. In 2003, the Confederation, together with the old funding institution, *Näringslivets fond*, established a new, well-funded organisation called the Swedish Free Enterprise Foundation (*Stiftelsen Fritt Näringsliv* [SFN]). This foundation became the economic base for various think tank and policy research initiatives aimed at supporting free enterprise and propagating the values of free market economics (Stiftelsen Fritt Näringsliv [2019b](#)). Since 2003, SFN has funded Timbro and its different initiatives and sub-organisations.

Another initiative by *Näringslivets fond* in connection with these organisational changes was its transformation from a *fund* into a research institute, named Ratio, focused on the conditions for private enterprise and how they can be improved. The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise today finances the institute's infrastructure, but Ratio is formally organised as a non-profit membership organisation. One of its largest arrangements so far has been a conference in Stockholm in 2009 – ‘The Market Economy in the Welfare State’ – arranged together with the Mont Pelerin Society.<sup>3</sup> Ratio is, as Timbro, a member of the Atlas Network.

Besides Timbro, SFN finances two smaller think tanks – namely, Stockholm Free World Forum (*Frivärld*), which specialises in foreign policy and security questions, and the Reform Institute (*Reforminstitutet*), led by the former chief economist of the Confederation for Swedish Enterprise, Stefan Fölster. The last initiative is mostly a ‘one-man-show’ with varying activities. SFN has also helped to finance the European Centre for Entrepreneurship and Policy Reform, an internationally oriented flower in the larger Timbro garden.

## How Did the Labour Movement React?

How did the labour movement and the Social Democrats react to this long-lasting, strategic think-tank offensive by Swedish employers? The short answer is this: compared with the many market-liberal initiatives, those from the labour movement have been limited and without comparable funding.

The largest of the policy groups and think tanks on the left side of the political spectrum is Arena Idé, which is part of the Arena Group. The group defines itself as radical and progressive and is organised as an independent, non-profit association. The Arena Group includes two publishing houses, a magazine, an online newspaper and a communication bureau. The think tank was founded in 2000 under the name Agora, but until 2014, it was a rather small organisation with limited public activity. Arena Idé was later refinanced via support from some of Sweden's largest national trade unions.

Another left-wing initiative, *Tankesmedjan Tiden*, was founded in 2006 under the name

Think Tank of the Labour Movement (*Arbetarrörelsens tankesmedja*), but was renamed in 2014. The Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions, the Social Democratic Party and the labour educational institution ABF supported the initiative. However, the think tank is first and foremost associated with its quarterly magazine, *Tiden*.

The latest left-wing think tank initiative is Katalys, a radical advocacy think tank launched as an independent 'idea institute' in 2012. Five blue collar unions belonging to the Swedish Federation of Trade Unions fund it. Its prioritised external activity is the publication of policy reports, often related to economic, social and labour market questions. In 2018, the think tank initiated a project on the topic 'class in Sweden', led by Cambridge (UK) sociologist Göran Therborn.<sup>4</sup>

Although such trade union-sponsored initiatives play a visible role in public policy debates, the Swedish labour movement and its leaders clearly have given much less priority to think tanks and similar policy initiatives than the leading factions of the Swedish capitalist class.

## The Swedish Think Tank Landscape

For advocacy think tanks, an important aim is to supplement their own publications, seminars and reports with initiatives that have an impact both in terms of legacy and on social media. Even the more research-oriented think tanks regularly provide commentaries and news briefs meant for a broad public.

According to a study on press coverage of Swedish advocacy think tanks in 2006 and 2013 (Allern & Pollack [2016](#)), they received regular coverage in the major newspapers. Nearly half of the stories were initiated by the think tank, most often offered as an information subsidy (Gandy [1982](#)) to a favoured news organisation. Timbro was by far the most referenced think tank in the years examined.

Table [1](#) shows the eight Swedish think tanks and policy organisations that received the most mentions in Swedish print newspapers and on radio/television during the period 2014–2018. The search is based on the Retriever's Media archive and includes national, regional and local newspapers as well as radio and television channels with news and current affairs programmes. Since most print newspapers today have online editions, most mentions in their printed pages also occur on their websites. Including these online articles would cause duplications; therefore, they were excluded from the data. All registered think tanks were searched by their name (and, when necessary, the word *tankesmedja*) each year in the five-year period under study.

**Table 1.** The Swedish Think Tanks that got most Mentions in the News Media, 2014–2018, Ranked

Name	Type of think tank	Mentions in newspapers	Mentions in radio and TV	Sum mentions
The Swedish Institute of international affairs (UI)	Research and policy institution (government)	7,277	279	7,556
Timbro	Neoliberal advocacy think tank	4,993	150	5,143
Centre for Business and Policy Studies (SNS)	Academic research institution and policy network	2,218	69	2,287
Fores	Liberal & green advocacy think tank	2,072	34	2,106
Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)	Research and policy institution (government)	1,801	86	1,887
Research Institute of Industrial Economics (IFN)	Research and policy institution (private)	720	43	763
Katalys	Left-wing advocacy think tank	691	48	739
Arena Idé	Social democratic advocacy think tank	506	44	550

UI – the Swedish Institute of International Affairs – somewhat surprisingly, is at the top of the list, followed by Timbro and SNS, respectively. UI's solid position as a source for news and commentary underlines how a typical consensual think tank can play an important role as a public information provider. It is also worth noting that the list contains as many as four advocacy think tanks, with the neoliberal Timbro and the liberal/green think tank Fores in the lead. One reason for this may be that advocacy think tanks prioritise media relations more than other types of policy organisations do, but also that a 'controversial profile' increases their news value in a commercial media landscape.

Tables [2-6](#) provide an overview of 31 think tanks and think tank-like research and policy organisations in Sweden. All are non-profit organisations and organisationally independent, but they are also *dependent* on grants and contributions from principals and/or other supporters, which may include foundations, research institutions, corporations/businesses, interest organisations, governments and individuals. The

subdivision is primarily based on the organisations' main type of funding.

**Table 2.** Think Tanks, Policy Centres and Research Institutions Initiated and Funded by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise/Foundation Free Enterprise

Name	Year of foundation	Type of institution	Funding sources	Staff positions	External activities
Timbro	1978	Neoliberal advocacy think tank	Foundation Free Enterprise	20	Books, reports, seminars, pod cast, media chronicles, youth academy
Stockholm Free World Forum	2011	Neo-liberal advocacy think tank	Foundation Free Enterprise	2,5	Books, reports, seminars, educational academy activity
The Ratio Institute	2002	Research and policy institution	Basic grant from the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise. Membership fees. Research grants	18	Research articles, reports, seminars
Research Institute of Industrial Economics	1939	Research and policy	Basic grant from the Confederation of Swedish	36	Research articles,

**Table 3.** Think Tanks, Policy Centres and Research Institutions Initiated and Primarily Funded by Other Corporate/Business Groups

Name	Year of foundation	Type of institution	Funding sources	Staff positions	External activities
Centre for Business and Policy Studies (SNS)	1948	Academic research institution and policy network	Membership fees (corporations and some public institutions). Research grants	25	Research reports and books, seminars. Education academy for top leaders
Swedish Entrepreneurship Forum	1994	Research foundation and policy network	Grants from corporations and some public institutions	16	Reports and other publications, seminars, awards
The Leading Health Care Foundation	2009	Academic think tank	Grants from partners and principals in the corporate sector and some public institutions	6	Research projects, reports, seminars and workshops
Stockholm Institute of	1989	Research and policy institution (Stockholm	Core funding from	19	Research publications,

**Table 4.** Think Tanks, Policy Centres and Research Institutions Initiated and Funded by Trade Unions

Name	Year of foundation	Type of institution	Funding sources	Staff positions	External activities
Arena Idé	2000	Social democratic advocacy think tank	Grants from national trade union federations	4	Books, reports, seminars, pod cast, lectures
Tiden	2006	Social democratic advocacy think tank	The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), Social Democratic Party, the Labour movement's educational association (ABF)	7	Quarterly magazine, reports, newsletters
Katalys	2012	Left-wing advocacy think tank	Grants from five unions in the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO)	4	Reports, seminars, media chronicles
Futurion	2016	Trade union think tank (concerning labour market challenges)	Funded by the trade union federation TCO (officials/white collar workers)	3	Reports, seminars

**Table 5.** Other Think Tanks and Policy Institutions

Name	Year of foundation	Type of institution	Funding sources	Staff positions	External activities
Fores	2008	Liberal & green advocacy think tank	Centre Party/Bertil Ohlin Institute/other sponsors	23	Books, reports, seminars, round table discussions, research
Global Challenge	2005	Think tank and policy network for sustainable development	Freja Foundation, private corporations and some public institutions	5-6, plus some part time consultant services. 85 senior advisors are linked to the network on a voluntary basis	Reports, seminars, newsletters
Bertil Ohlin Institute	1994	Liberal, foundation and advocacy think tank	Liberal press foundations	No information available	Books, seminars, lectures, pod casts
The Clapham Institute	2008	Christian advocacy think tank	Donations from organisations and individuals	No information available	Books, reports, chronicles,

**Table 6.** Research/Policy Institutions and Think Tanks Initiated and Funded by Government or State Agencies

Name	Year of foundation	Type of institution	Funding sources	Staff positions	External activities
Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)	1966	Research and policy institution	A basic grant from the Swedish Government, plus grants from research institutions	50–60 persons in administration, research staff and support staff	Yearbook, research publications, reports, fact sheets and several data basis
The Swedish Institute of international affairs (UI)	1938	Research and policy institution	A basic grant from the Foreign Department, plus grants from research institutions, donations and sales	40–50, plus some project workers and PhD-students	Digital information services, newsletters, printed information publications, seminars
Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI)	2001	Research and policy institution	Approbations from the Government, commissions from the Armed Forces, EU research grants	958	Research articles, reports, newsletters, conferences, seminars
Stockholm	1989	Research	A basic grant from the	250	Journal articles,

Table 2 lists think tanks and research/policy organisations funded by, and affiliated with, the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise or Foundation Free Enterprise. Together, they represent an economic stronghold for the advancement of market-liberal ideas and policies. There is, however, a clear division of labour between the different organisations. While the three advocacy think tanks – with Timbro in the lead – first and foremost are disseminators of neoliberal policy proposals and participants in public debates, organisations such as IFN and the Ratio Institute are academic research institutions. Concerning policy questions and strategic initiatives, however, they are bound to take a business-friendly and market-liberal line. The ECEPR seems to represent a mix of these two think tank types, mixing policy research with Timbro engagements.

Corporate/business groups are the prime funders of all seven organisations listed in Table 3, but the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise controls none of them. Only one of these organisations, the New Welfare, is an advocacy think tank. Its funders are mainly

small businesses, and the think tank promotes right-wing positions concerning immigration and welfare policies. A special case is Forum Axess, which does not formally define itself as a think tank, but functions as an intellectual hub for multiple political, cultural and ideological activities of the liberal Ax:son Johnson Foundation, representing one of Sweden's leading capitalist groups.

The other five organisations listed in Table 3 are research and policy organisations that are primarily financed by corporate/business groups, but they also receive some government funding. The consensual and nearly corporatist character of SNS, which was mentioned above, has led to discontent from influential Swedish employers who wanted a more confrontational strategy. In 2011, then research director Laura Hartmann presented an SNS report that she had edited on the privatisation of education and health care in Sweden. The researchers' results showed that it was not possible to conclude that privatisation and competition lead to greater efficiency – a view that angered several SNS corporate members. The research director was not permitted to comment on the report publicly and subsequently resigned.

Table 4 lists four think tanks that are funded by trade unions. Arena Idé, Tiden and Katalys (referred to above) are all advocacy think tanks belonging to the centre left or left end of the political spectrum. Futurion, founded by the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees and affiliated trade unions, includes journalists, teachers, financial officers, the police and other professional groups. Its main topic of interest is changes and challenges in the future labour market.

Table 5 lists a few other think tanks and policy institutions of various characters and ideological profiles. The Clapham Institute is part of an international Christian organisation with the Lausanne Covenant<sup>5</sup> as its statement of faith. It relies on funding from private donations. Another, but rather small think tank is the libertarian *Ludwig von Mises-Institutet*, a Swedish affiliate of the international Mises Institute, the world centre for libertarian political theory and policy proposals inspired by Ludwig von Mises and the Austrian economic school.

An advocacy think tank that has expanded in the last few years is Forum for Reforms, Entrepreneurship and Sustainability – *Fores* – an organisation which defines itself as a 'green and liberal think tank'. It propagates 'market-based solutions to climate change and other environmental challenges', but also 'the long-term benefits of migration and a welcoming society, the gains of increased level of entrepreneurship, the need for the modernisation of the welfare sector and the challenges of the rapidly changing digital society' (Bergström & Goldman 2018, IV). *Fores* is formerly party-independent, but its main funder has been the Centre Party, which obtained substantial financial resources after the sale of its local press in 2005. Another supplementary funder of *Fores* is the liberal think tank Bertil Ohlin Institute (*Ohlin-institutet*), funded with money from liberal

press foundations. On migrant policy questions, the profile of Fores is parallel to the policies of the Centre Party and the Liberals – two parties that have opposed the anti-immigration policies of the nationalist and populist Swedish Democrats.

Global Utmaning (Global Challenge) is a think tank and policy network devoted to questions concerning sustainable development. It was founded by Kristina Persson, an economist and social democratic politician.

Economically speaking, the Centre for Justice (*Centrum för rättvisa*) is a collection foundation based on contributions from foundations and individuals. It was launched in 2002 with economic support from Foundation Free Enterprise, and today, it is part of the Atlas Network. Its basic policy is to support citizens' individual freedom through *lawsuits* against government agencies, municipalities, trade unions and enterprises. The ideology is based on the defence of 'the little man' against the authorities; public advocacy activities are an important part of the Centre's lawsuits.

Table [6](#) lists seven different think tanks that are financed primarily 'by the taxpayers' – that is, funded by the government or via state agencies. As mentioned above (see Table [1](#)), UI seems to be the most cited think tank in a Swedish news media context. However, in a more international context, the most influential think tank is, according to the *Index Report*, the SIPRI, ranked 32nd among the world's top think tanks. SIPRI is a non-profit research institution, established in 1966 by a decision of the Swedish Parliament. It receives most of its funding in the form of an annual grant from the Swedish government, but also seeks financial support from other sources. The institute is dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control and disarmament, and 'provides data, analysis and recommendations, based on open sources, to policymakers, researchers, media, and the interested public'(SIPRI [2019](#)).

Two other government-funded think tanks – both specialised in environment research and policy questions – are Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI). SEI's aim is to 'connect science and decision-making for a sustainable future for all' (SEI [2019](#)). Its main office is in Stockholm, but the organisation – involving 250 employees – has offices on five continents and works both regionally and locally. SIWI, primarily funded by the state aid agency SIDA, prioritises research and debates about water governance. Both organisations serve global audiences and represent a consensual tradition in Swedish policy discussions.

A special case in this company is the think tank *Humtank*, based on cooperation among the faculties of humanities at 15 universities. Its public policy aim is to further the development of a humanities-friendly research policy and influence public opinion favourably towards the humanities. Another academic initiative is Tobaksfakta – a think tank initiated by 16 member organisations in the health sector – whose primary aim is to

counter the public policy campaigns and PR initiatives of the tobacco industry in Sweden.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Summing up, it is necessary to remind the reader of a reservation mentioned in the introduction: since think tanks are difficult to define, they are also difficult to map and count. In this article, we have chosen to use a relatively broad definition including both classical advocacy think tanks and research organisations that are knowledge producers in different policy areas, but excluding ordinary university institutes. All in all, we think that this mapping, covering 31 organisations, gives a realistic picture of the diverse think tank landscape in Sweden. The number is much lower than the high and undocumented 90 think tanks mentioned in the Index Report (McGann [2019](#)). The main difference in relation to Lindström's ([2018](#)) overview is that his list includes several small organisations without any recent documented activity, while all government-funded policy organisations are excluded.

However, while many of the think tanks mentioned seem to be relatively stable organisations, there are also – from time to time – regular changes in the think tank landscape. In the last two decades, some think tanks have disappeared or been reduced to digital ‘mailboxes’, while new think tanks have been established. A late initiative is a conservative think tank, *Oikos*, which was launched in February 2020 by Mattias Karlsson, a leading politician and MP from the right-wing Sweden Democrats.

In Sweden, with its strong tradition of social corporatism in the several decades following the Second World War, it is evident that think tanks have played different and changing policy roles. UI has, from its inception in 1938, represented an attempt to produce and disseminate knowledge which represents a consensual orientation – and with clear restrictions concerning independent policy proposals. Institutions like SIPRI and SEI basically play a similar consensual role in policymaking. However, according to their consensual character, they are seldom looked upon as part of the Swedish think tank landscape. While SNS was founded in 1948 as a pro-market think tank, it also gradually became an expression of corporate traditions and cooperation between leaders in the private and public sector. These built-in contradictions later led to conflicts and tensions, but SNS did not become any kind of spearhead *against* social corporatism and the welfare system associated with ‘the Swedish model’.

In the Swedish media and public debate context, a think tank is primarily perceived as an advocacy organisation with a confrontational political role. The ideological vanguard in relation to this has been the neoliberal Timbro, leading the struggle for privatisation and deregulation in all areas, including health care and education. The expansion of different types of neoliberal and free market policy institutions has basically supported the same confrontational line. Both advocacy think tanks and more academic, business-friendly

research institutions have been used, and are still used, as a discursive power resource in this struggle (Kinderman [2017](#)).

As Stefan Svallfors ([2015](#), 14) observes, the general tendency in Sweden is 'a strengthening of elite-driven politics and policy-making that is very different from the old corporatist structures'. Financial resources have become more important in most areas, not least in lobbying – but also for the funding of think tanks. This political development has supported increased privatisation and facilitated the expansion of financial capital in such areas as education, health and social care (Therborn [2018](#)).

The Swedish think tanks include both consensual and confrontational traditions in public policymaking, but the moving forces in recent decades have been those following a market-liberal and confrontational line.

## References



---

Ahrne, G. & Brunsson, N. 2011. 'Organizations outside Organizations: The Significance of Partial Organization', *Organization*, 18(1), 83– 104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508410376256> .  
[Crossref](#) | [Web of Science®](#) | [Google Scholar](#)

---

Allern, S. & Pollack, E. 2016. 'Swedish Advocacy Think Tanks as News Sources and Agenda-Setters', *Politik* 19(1), 61– 76.  
[Crossref](#) | [Google Scholar](#)

---

Atlas Network. 2019. *About our Story* . Available online at:  
<https://www.atlasnetwork.org/about/our-story>  
[Google Scholar](#)

---

Barley, S. R. 2010. 'Building an Institutional Field to Corral a Government: A Case to Set an Agenda for Organization Studies', *Organization Studies*, 31, 777– 805.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840610372572> .  
[Crossref](#) | [Web of Science®](#) | [Google Scholar](#)

---

Bergström, A. & Goldman, M. 2018. *What is a successful think tank? Best practice on quantifying results*. Stockholm: European Liberal Forum/Fores.  
<https://fores.se/what-is-a-successful-think-tank/>  
[Google Scholar](#)

---

Desai, R. 1994. 'Second-Hand Dealers in Ideas: Think-Tanks and Thatcherite Hegemony', *New Left Review*, 203(1), 27– 64.  
[Google Scholar](#)

Djelic, M.-L. 2014. *Spreading Ideas to Change the World – Inventing and Institutionalizing the Neoliberal Think Tank* . Available online at:

[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2492010](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2492010)

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Gandy, O. H. 1982. *Beyond Agenda Setting: Information Subsidies and Public Policy*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Company.

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Garsten, C. 2013. ' All about Ties: Think Tanks and the Economy of Connections', in C. Garsten & A. Nyqvist, eds, *Organisational Anthropology: Doing Ethnography in and among Complex Organisations*. London: Pluto Press, 139– 154.

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Hayek, F. A. 1960 [1949]. ' The Intellectuals and Socialism', in G. B. Huszar, ed, *The Intellectuals: A Controversial Portrait*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 371– 84. Reprinted from The University of Chicago Law Review (Spring 1949).

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Hermansson, J., Lund, A., Svensson, T. & Øberg, P. O. 1999. *Avkorporatisering och lobbyism – konturerna till en ny politisk modell*. Demokratiutredningens forskarvolym XIII. SOU 1999: 121. Stockholm: Kulturdepartementet.

<https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/sou-1999-121-GNB3121>

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Johansson, J. 2001. *SAF och den svenska modellen. En studie av upprottet från förvaltningskorporatismen 1982–91* . Fil. dir. avhandling, Department of Political Science, Uppsala University.

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Kelstrup, J. D. 2016. *The Politics of Think Tanks in Europe*. London: Routledge.

<https://www.coleurope.eu/politics-think-tanks-europe>

[Crossref](#) | [Google Scholar](#)

---

Kelstrup, J. D. 2017. ' Quantitative Differences in Think Tank Dissemination Activities in Germany, Denmark and the UK', *Policy Science*, **50**, 125– 37.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-016-9254-0> .

[Crossref](#) | [Web of Science®](#) | [Google Scholar](#)

---

Kinderman, D. 2017. ' Challenging Varieties of Capitalism's Account of Business Interests: Neoliberal Think-Tanks, Discourse as a Power Resource and Employers' Quest for Liberalization in Germany and Sweden', *Socio-Economic Review*, **15**(3), 587– 613.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mww040> .

[Web of Science®](#) | [Google Scholar](#)

Lewin, L. 1992. *Samhället och de organiserade intressena*. Stockholm: Nordstedts.

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Lindström, S. 2018. *Pengarna bakom samhällspolitiken. En granskning av finanserna bakom svenska tankesmedjor*. Stockholm: Arena.

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Lindvall, J. & Rothstein, B. 2006. 'Sweden: The Fall of the Strong State', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 29(1), 47– 63.

[Wiley Online Library](#) | [Web of Science®](#) | [Google Scholar](#)

---

McGann, J. M. 2019. *2018 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

[https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=think\\_tanks](https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=think_tanks)

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Medvetz, T. (2012) "Think tanks" as boundary organizations. in D. Courpasson, D. Golsorkhi & J. Sallaz, eds, *Rethinking Power in Organisations, Institutions, and Markets. Research in the Sociology of Organizations*. Bingley, UK: Emerald, 34, 113- 133.

[Crossref](#) | [Google Scholar](#)

---

P. Mirowski & D. Plehwe, eds. 2009. *The Road from Mont Pelerin. The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Parmar, I. 2004. 'Institute of International Affairs: Their Roles in Foreign Policy Making, Opinion Mobilization and Unofficial Diplomacy', in D. Stone & A. Denham, eds, *Think Tank Traditions: Policy Research and the Politics of Ideas*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 19– 33.

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Pautz, H. 2011. 'Revisiting the Think-Tank Phenomenon', *Public Policy and Administration*, 26(4), 419– 35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952076710378328> .

[Crossref](#) | [Google Scholar](#)

---

Plewhe, D. 2011. 'Who Cares about Excellence? Social Sciences under Think Tank Pressure', in T. Halvorsen & A. Nyhagen, eds, *Academic Identities – Academic Challenges. American and European Experiences of the Transformation of Higher Education and Research*, 159–93. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

[Google Scholar](#)

---

SEI. 2019. *About* . Available online at: <https://www.sei.org/about-sei/>

[Google Scholar](#)

---

SIPRI. 2019. *About Sipri* . Available online at: <https://www.sipri.org/about>

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Stiftelsen Fritt Näringsliv. 2019a. *Näringslivets fond – the Predecessor of Stiftelsen Fritt Näringsliv* . Available online at: <http://frittnaringsliv.se/the-swedish-free-enterprise-foundation/>

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Stiftelsen Fritt Näringsliv. 2019b. *Historia* . Available online at:

<http://frittnaringsliv.se/naringslivets-fond/>

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Stone, D. 2004. 'Introduction: Think Tanks, Policy Advice and Governance', in D. Stone & A. Denham, eds, *Think Tank Traditions: Policy Research and the Politics of Ideas*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1– 16.

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Svallfors, S. 2015. *Politics as Organized Combat. New Players and New Rules for the Game in Sweden* . MPIfG Discussion Paper 15/2. Cologne: Max Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung.

<https://ideas.repec.org/p/zbw/mpifgd/152.html>

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Sörbom, A. 2018. 'Från snack till organiserade nätverk. Om tanke-medjors arbete för att värva andra för sina ideer', *Sociologisk Forskning*, 55(2–3), 365– 87.

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Therborn, G. 2018. *Kapitalet, överheten och alla vi andra*. Stockholm: Katalys.

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Thunert, M. 2004. 'Think Tanks in Germany', in D. Stone & A. Denham, eds, *Think Tank Traditions: Policy Research and the Politics of Ideas*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 71– 88.

[Crossref](#) | [Google Scholar](#)

---

UI. 2013. *The Swedish Institute of International Affairs 1938–2013*. Stockholm: UI. Available online at: <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/about/pdf-about-ui-from-1938-2013.pdf>

[Google Scholar](#)

---

UI. 2019. *About* . Available online at: <https://www.ui.se/english/about/>

[Google Scholar](#)

---

Weaver, R. K. 1989. 'The Changing World of Think Tanks', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 22(3), 563– 78.

[Crossref](#) | [Web of Science®](#) | [Google Scholar](#)

## About Wiley Online Library

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Cookies](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Help & Support](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Opportunities](#)

[Subscription Agents](#)

[Advertisers & Corporate Partners](#)

[Connect with Wiley](#)

[The Wiley Network](#)

[Wiley Press Room](#)