

# The 4 institutional types of think-tanks ( May 2026 edition )

Anicet Delporte  
Founder of [Think-Tanks' Guide](#)

[Overview :](#)

[Consortia :](#)

[The method :](#)

[Notes :](#)

[Civil Society is often funded by the state or by companies](#)

[The differentiation can be very subtle](#)

[“business-backed only” can be “nonprofit”](#)

[“Business associations” are not in the “Civil Society” category](#)

[Examples :](#)

## Overview :

I define a think-tank as an open-access public policy research and communication platform.

The initiative to create such a platform can originate from four different types of organizations:

- a **Civil Society** organisation
- a **Government** organisation
- a **Company**
- or a **University**.

On this basis, there are four “institutional types” of think-tanks:

- **Civil Society think-tanks**
- **Government think-tanks**
- **Business-backed think-tanks**
- **Academic think-tanks.**

## Consortia :

The first obstacle to the classification of think-tanks by their institutional type, is the fact that when we look more closely, we realise that in fact, many of them are of an heterogeneous nature.

Most large think-tanks are backed by different types of institutions.

A think-tank is often a coalition of, for example,

- some university research centers
- a few philanthropic foundations
- a number of large companies

- and some state institutions.

## The method :

In order to know in what of these 4 categories a think-tank falls,

firstly,

we must ask ourselves the following question :

In this think-tank,

what kind of person, or what type of organization

- leads ?
- has the initiative ?
- is the main driver of the project ?

and secondly,

in order to verify,

this question :

Without this kind of person or this type of organization,  
would the think-tank still

- exist ?
- be able to function ?

( The answer must be “no”.

A “yes” means that our choice of category is wrong. )

The goal is to understand whether this class of person or organization is CRUCIAL, VITAL,  
PIVOTAL, for the work of this think-tank.

## Notes :

## Civil Society is often funded by the state or by companies

### **Civil society-led consortia :**

Civil Society is often state-backed and/or business-backed,  
BUT is Civil Society-LED :  
what matters is WHO has the INITIATIVE.

The question is :

Who leads it ?

Who is the main driver of the initiative ?

## The differentiation can be very subtle

See, in the list below, this example :

- Net Zero Tracker

## “business-backed only” can be “nonprofit”

For example :

### **Chapter Zero**

[chapterzero.org.uk](https://www.chapterzero.org.uk) en GB

> **Business-backed**

( <https://www.linkedin.com/company/chapter-zero-the-directors-climate-forum> )

A think-tank founded and funded by a group of companies, is not necessarily a “for-profit” initiative.

## “Business associations” are not in the “Civil Society” category

Because, if all companies withdraw from the association, it will cease to exist.

Even if the goal of this association is a nonprofit one, it remains primarily business-led.

## Examples :

Let's take 15 green L1 think-tanks at random,  
5 from each of these 3 countries : United States, United Kingdom and France.

### Carbon MAPPER

[carbonmapper.org](https://carbonmapper.org) en US

> **Civil Society**

### EFI Foundation

[efifoundation.org](https://efifoundation.org) en US

> **Civil Society**

### Data-Driven EnviroLab

[datadrivenlab.org](https://datadrivenlab.org) en US

> **University**

### Climate Promise ( UNDP )

[climatepromise.undp.org](https://climatepromise.undp.org) en US

> **Government**

## **Sustainable Mobility for All**

[sum4all.org](https://sum4all.org) en US

> **Government**

“Its diverse membership reflects the representative and broad range of actors involved in the transport space. It includes 13 UN agencies and intergovernmental organizations, five development banks, four bilateral partners, 10 private companies and business associations, and 25 civil society organizations”

But it is primarily Government-backed.

(“The Secretariat function will be performed by the World Bank.”

<https://www.sum4all.org/secretariat>

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Qmnf2OxEHXvIEAkB\\_7wqXsQML1I7HtWr/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Qmnf2OxEHXvIEAkB_7wqXsQML1I7HtWr/view) )

## **Centre for Economic Transition Expertise**

[cetex.org](https://cetex.org) en GB

> **University**

## **Net Zero Tracker**

[zerotracker.net](https://zerotracker.net) en GB

> **Civil Society**

<https://zerotracker.net/about> : really integrated with university research institutes, but the INITIATIVE is first and foremost private, with a “civil society”, genuinely “non-profit” approach.

<https://zerotracker.net/meet-the-team>

in conclusion : “Civil Society”, but really at the border with “University”.

## **Chapter Zero**

[chapterzero.org.uk](https://chapterzero.org.uk) en GB

> **Business-backed**

## **Global Witness**

[globalwitness.org](https://globalwitness.org) en GB

> **Civil Society**

### **Ember**

[ember-climate.org](https://ember-climate.org) en GB

> **Civil Society**

### **BLOOM Association**

[bloomassociation.org](https://bloomassociation.org) fr FR

> **Civil Society**

( <https://bloomassociation.org/nous-connaître/nos-financements/> )

### **Institute for Climate Economics**

[i4ce.org](https://i4ce.org) en + fr FR

> **Government**

( <https://www.i4ce.org/en/about-us/our-governance/> )

### **Observ'ER**

[eurobserv-er.org](https://eurobserv-er.org) en FR

> **Government**

( <https://www.eurobserv-er.org/> )

### **France renouvelables**

[france-renouvelables.fr](https://france-renouvelables.fr) fr FR

> **Business-backed**

( <https://www.france-renouvelables.fr/qui-sommes-nous/> )

### **Sustainable Finance Observatory**

[sustainablefinanceobservatory.org](https://sustainablefinanceobservatory.org) en FR

> **Government**

(

<https://sustainablefinanceobservatory.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Annual-Report-2024.pdf>

“The Observatoire de la finance durable (the Observatory) is set up by the French Minister of Economy and Finance” )