



Think tanks and political parties in Latin America

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The main conclusion of the study of think tanks and political parties in Latin America (co-financed by ODI and International Idea) is that, unlike in other more studied contexts, Latin American think tanks originated from within the political space: first during the long struggle for independence and then in development of the new republics.

The precursors of modern think tanks are the academic societies of the 1790s and the liberal and conservative newspapers of the second half of the 19th century. These were spaces for intellectual and academic debate with fundamentally political objectives.

In Latin America, think tanks play a number of functions, including:

1. Seek political support for policies – This is an accepted definition of the main role of think tanks across the world.
2. Legitimise policies – This has been clearer in Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru. New governments in Ecuador and Peru have approached think tanks for support for already defined policies. In Bolivia, the government led by Evo Morales has been working with NGOs and other research centres to do the same. However, in the more developed Chilean context, many think tanks during the 1990s appeared to support and maintain the legitimacy of policies implemented during the previous decade.
3. Spaces of debate – In this case think tanks serve as sounding boards for new policies. In Chile, during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, many left wing intellectuals and researchers found ‘asylum’ in think tanks. In Ecuador, think tanks are seen as spaces where politicians can test the soundness of their policies and government plans.
4. Financial channels for political parties or other interest groups – In Ecuador and Bolivia, German foundations have been able to provide funds to think tanks that work with certain political parties. This approach has provided support to the system as a whole rather than individual CSOs.
5. Expert cadres of policy-makers and politicians – In Peru after the fall of the Fujimori regime, and in Chile after the fall of Pinochet, think tank staff left to form part of the new governments. In the U.S., the role of leading think tanks is precisely that: host scholars for a few months or years and then see them off to work in policy.

These functions provide many opportunities for collaboration and competition between think tanks and political parties.

This has led to the continuous strengthening of the close relationship between both sets of organisations. As a consequence, in Latin America it is possible to observe a strong correlation between the strength of the political system and the existence of modern and effective think tanks. In Ecuador and Bolivia, where political systems are weak, think tanks suffer from a systemic lack of resources. In Chile and Colombia, with more developed systems, think tanks are well funded and effectively organised to address their context.

Lessons and recommendations on strengthening the relation between knowledge and policy:

Lessons –

1. Think tanks are political actors in Latin America – both in origin and in evolution.
2. Think tanks are a highly heterogeneous group that include academic institutions, networks of research centres, consultancies, semiformal networks, NGOs, and both internal and external policy research centres.
3. Their structure and functional focus greatly depends on their context.
4. The relations between think tanks and political parties are equally diverse and depend on a number of factors including: their origin, the roles of key individuals, ideological allegiances, funding models, and the effect of external forces on both groups.

Recommendations –

1. Recognise a less prescriptive definition of think tanks by focusing on their functions.
2. Ensure that programmes that target think tanks consider the political context and how their support to think tanks might affect the political system as a whole.
3. Strengthen the relations between think tanks and political parties (and other political actors) through the development of spaces for policy dialogue.
4. Improve the quality of communication between think tanks and parliaments, which is where political parties make most of the decisions.
5. Develop the capacities to promote collaboration instead of competition between think tanks and other political actors.
6. Take advantage of the leadership roles that key individuals play in both groups of organisations and in developing linkages between them.
7. Strengthen the relationship between think tanks and the media to encourage the development of a knowledge culture that values the contribution that research can make.