

INFLUENCING AS A LEARNING PROCESS: THINK TANKS AND THE CHALLENGE OF IMPROVING POLICIES AND PROMOTING SOCIAL CHANGE¹

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Abstract

The growing participation of think tanks in policy processes, as well as the relevance donors give to policy impact, has opened a window of opportunity to further examine both the objectives and the exercise of policy influence. Drawing from twelve accounts of episodes of policy influence from research centers participating in the Think Tank Initiative, this document seeks to redefine policy influence and broaden the view of the work think tanks carry out. To achieve this, we contextualize the strategies employed in each story, characterize policy influence, and reflect on challenges and opportunities think tanks face under different circumstances. Since this document was compiled and prepared within a think tank, its authors also bring to it their own experiences reaching out to policymakers and navigating the policy arena. With these inputs, the study concludes that, despite the different scenarios think tanks face, they are political actors, a role that exceeds the traditional view of think tanks as knowledge producers and communicators. Consequently, for research centers to successfully influence policy they must develop the internal capacity to lead in complex scenarios.

I. Introduction

This document is based on twelve stories of policy influence from organizations participating in the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) from Africa, Latin America, and South Asia, with four cases coming from each region. The framework used to structure the stories is based on previous work on think tanks in Latin America (Botto, 2009). It includes the following sections: (i) description of the think tank, (ii) context of the case, (iii) summary of the policy proposal, (iv) impacts on policy, and (v) reflections on what could have been done differently.

The cases from Latin America were selected from a larger collection of episodes in Mercedes Botto's research (2009), which included both TTI grantees and other institutions. The original stories were reviewed by each organization and updated where necessary. For the selection of the cases from Africa and South Asia, a call for expressions of interest was circulated to TTI grantees and the TTI team made the final selection based on think tanks' geographical diversity and their availability to work within the proposed timeframe.

By "stories of policy influence" we refer to brief accounts of episodes that the contributing think tanks considered to be relevant and illustrative examples of successful policy influence. As the stories were composed by the research institutions themselves, they do not necessarily include the perceptions of other actors involved in the given episode.

Not surprisingly, the problem of attribution is a recurring concern when analyzing policy influence, especially when trying to determine policy impact. The authors' interactions with the different think tanks show that the organizations are aware of this issue and are also conscious that the impact they report is hardly attributable to them alone.

A definition of policy influence was not prescribed before the cases were written. In this sense, the cases also reflect the institutions' different interpretations of what constitutes influence. Furthermore, the stories collected here do not represent a comprehensive analysis or assessment of think tanks but rather a brief account of one of their involvements in a policy process. Given the broad initial framework, the final selection does not necessarily reflect what the authors or the TTI team consider successful influence. Rather, the stories show the think tanks' own voice and the following analysis stems from these. This creates the opportunity to reflect on the roles that think tanks play in different contexts and helps us understand the potential of think tanks to improve policies and promote social change.

II. Cases

This section briefly summarizes the stories used in the study, which were shared by the participating think tanks and have created a virtual laboratory to test hypotheses about policy influence. The complete set of cases is available in the compilation document.

ASIES

Guatemala City, Guatemala

The *Gran Campaña Nacional por la Educación* (GCNE) – the result of collaboration between various government, private sector, academic, religious, and education-oriented groups – is the spearhead of a social movement to improve Guatemala's education system. Since the GCNE's beginning in 1999, the *Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales* (ASIES) has acted as its Executive Secretary. GCNE started as a campaign to increase the budget allocation for education as well as increase its coverage and quality; the campaign has also focused on preparing annual assessments of the education system. What is more, the GCNE has become an important link between society and the Ministry of Education, the entity responsible for defining and implementing education policies and programs. Through the Campaign, ASIES developed the National Agenda for Quality Education. The document was adopted by the new administration and is central component establishing the education agenda for the country.

CADEP

Asunción, Paraguay

In the late 1990s, the Paraguayan government found itself increasingly paralyzed by institutional, political, and economic crisis. Since its beginnings, the *Centro de Análisis y Difusión de Economía Paraguaya* (CADEP) has been committed to studying and proposing State reforms. In 1998, its publication *Los Límites de la Transición: Economía y Estado en el Paraguay en los años 90* became a leading text on the country's situation. However, it was not until 2003 (five years and a new administration later) that CADEP was able to work with the Ministry of Finance to institute the reforms it had proposed. Three years later, in 2008, a new political party came to head the government and again invited CADEP to work with the government to institute reforms. Part of CADEP's technical staff joined the Ministry of Finance, which, while it diminished CADEP's institutional capacity, at the same time represented successful influence on government policy.

FOSDEH

Tegucigalpa, Honduras

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Honduras began accumulating a sizable foreign debt that would eventually become crippling. Between 1996 and 2005, the *Foro Social de Deuda Externa y Desarrollo de Honduras* (FOSDEH) studied extensively the country's foreign debt problem and how it has presented an obstacle to development. FOSDEH made the foreign debt problem a national priority. The organization aided the national government in negotiating with international financial institutions for debt relief in exchange for instituting development and poverty-reduction programs. However, the Honduran government failed to implement these programs and instead used the newly-freed financial resources to finance its current expenditures, a move which FOSDEH denounced.

FUNDAUNGO

San Salvador, El Salvador

The Municipal Government of Chalchuapa, El Salvador tasked the *Fundación Dr. Guillermo Ungo* (FUNDAUNGO) with carrying out two studies: in 2001, the organization examined citizen involvement in local government; later, in 2002, the organization was asked to determine public opinion regarding channels for citizen participation. The results informed the constitution of the Citizen Participation Commission, a formal space where citizens could actively participate in public debates. FUNDAUNGO was instrumental in furthering citizen participation and fostering transparent government that responds to the needs and rights of the citizenry.

EEA

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

As part of Ethiopia's new national development plan and with the aim of improving its domestic resource mobilization capacity, the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' (SNNP) Regional State of Ethiopia commissioned the Ethiopian Economics Association (EEA) to carry out a study on the revenue potential and tax structures of the region. The study, which was completed in May 2011, revealed the low ratio of tax revenue to regional GDP and the large untapped revenue potential of the region, resources that could be used to finance development initiatives. State, zonal, district, and local governments were very much involved in the process, ensuring that the study would be effectively integrated into the region's policy. EEA's thorough analysis and subsequent recommendations have allowed the government to begin revising its strategies and tax policies in order to generate greater revenue. What's more, the study has attracted national attention and encouraged other regions to conduct similar studies.

IEA

Accra, Ghana

The chaotic transfer of political power following Ghana's historic 2001 presidential elections – in which one dominant political party ceded the reins of government to the other and political power was transferred from one democratically-elected president to another – resulted in a highly-polarized, contentious political climate that jeopardized the nation's new democracy. The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) decided to examine this polarization and its origins. Their research highlighted the lack of an established protocol for political transition as one of the main contributing factors and recommended that political parties collaborate to create a transition framework. Through workshops and dialogue with political parties and leaders, civil society organizations, the media, and other key decision-makers, IEA worked to turn these recommendations into a concrete policy. The resulting Presidential (Transition) Bill was passed in March 2012. Not only does the newly-passed legislation regulate political transition, but it has strong potential to enhance good governance in Ghana.

IPAR

Dakar, Senegal

Initiative Prospective Agricole et Rurale (IPAR) is dedicated to bringing rural and agricultural issues to light. During Senegal's February 2012 presidential elections, IPAR worked to introduce four salient rural problems – food security, rural employment, land reform, and agricultural financing – into the national public agenda. By involving and allying with a variety of actors throughout the process, the campaign successfully sensitized candidates to rural issues, promoted open debate and the creation of innovative solutions, and resulted in a renewed commitment from candidates to address the needs of the rural population. Additionally, the elected president has been working to enact concrete proposals to tackle specific rural problems.

REPOA

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

In 2001, the Government of Tanzania appointed Research on Poverty Alleviation (REPOA) as the secretariat of the newly-formed Research and Analysis Working Group (RAWG), a component of the Poverty Monitoring Master Plan, the latest in a series of poverty-reduction strategies. RAWG identifies research priorities, commissions studies, monitors their progress, and disseminates findings. REPOA has carried out significant research on poverty issues and saw the working group as an opportunity to actively participate in the policy process. Through its leading role in RAWG, REPOA has been able to influence poverty alleviation policies so that these include not only social aid aspects but also the promotion of productive sectors.

CPD

Dhaka, Bangladesh

In 2006, Bangladesh's fragile democracy was threatened by increasing political polarization, leading many to doubt the fairness and representativeness of the upcoming parliamentary elections. The Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) set out to give voice to citizens and pressure political parties to heed their demands for a transparent development process and a truly representative governance. Through extensive, interactive discussions with major stakeholder groups and strategic partnerships with prominent media outlets, CPD developed a "Vision" document which articulates important electoral reforms as well as the long-term developmental aspirations of common citizens. CPD's efforts mobilized public opinion, stimulated active dialogue among citizens, and raised awareness about the challenges and opportunities facing the country. CPD's efforts set the agenda of developmental discourse in the country and a number of its reform proposals were subsequently adopted by the policymakers.

CSTEP

Bangalore, India

In 2008, the Government of India embarked on the National Action Plan for Climate Change (NAPCC) of which the National Mission for Enhanced Energy Efficiency (NMEEE) is a part. The

Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP) assisted the Ministry of Power's Bureau of Energy Efficiency in developing a methodology to implement the government's energy efficiency goals as established by the NMEEE. The assignment involved developing methodologies to measure specific energy consumption, undertaking an extensive study of several cement plants, and recommending specific solutions to improve the energy use of each of the plants. CSTEP worked closely with government officials, cement manufacturers, and non-governmental organizations to develop proposals that aligned with their diverse interests. The collaborative effort resulted in the development of a definitive, time-bound plan for participating manufacturers to their reduce greenhouse gas emissions in accordance with the national government's energy goals.

IIDS

New Delhi, India

Structural adjustments implemented by the Government of India in the 1990s resulted in the extensive privatization of public entities. This led to a significant decrease in the number of public sector jobs subject to an affirmative action policy meant to benefit two of India's most widely-discriminated groups: scheduled-castes (SC) and scheduled-tribes (ST). Since its founding in 2003, the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) has worked to instate an affirmative action policy for the private sector to ensure fairness in the hiring process. After considerable research and open dialogue with stakeholders, IIDS proposed a compulsory, quota-based affirmative action policy. While the policy eventually adopted by the government was not legally-mandated, IIDS's years of work did result in the implementation of a voluntary affirmative action policy for the private sector by which employers are accountable to the government for implementing the agreed-upon policy.

ISET-N

Kathmandu, Nepal

Climate change is greatly affecting Nepal's water systems and as a result is impeding the country's development. In 2008, Nepal's Ministry of Environment partnered with the United Nations Development Program, UK Aid, and the Danish International Development Agency to create the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) to Climate Change, a plan to enable the country to respond strategically to the challenges presented by climate change. As part of this initiative, the Institute for Social and Environmental Transition of Nepal (ISET-Nepal) examined how adaptation strategies can be implemented on a local level. By engaging with community-based organizations, local NGOs, government agencies, as well as district-level government offices, ISET-Nepal was able to effectively highlight the effects of climate change and the dynamics of adaptation on a local scale. This process contributed to the development of Local Adaptation Plans of Action (LAPA) framework to implement local level adaptation strategies in various regions of Nepal.

III. Analytical framework

In order to effectively analyze and compare the assortment of episodes summarized above, it is necessary to review literature on i) the links between evidence and policy, ii) the policy cycle and its relation to the political context, and iii) think tanks themselves.

The link between research and policy is a topic that has been gaining interest. Sumner et. al. (2011) point out to three main reasons for this: the interest of funders of research of knowing the results of their investments, the concern of development studies research community on whether their work is 'making a difference' and the frustration of policy makers with the theoretical nature of research and the limited suggestions for implementation. Research has focused heavily on defining what policy influence is, with a wide range of perspectives available (i.e. Carden, 2009; Steven, 2007; Hall, 1993). These definitions have been mostly focused on either levels or dimensions of influence. Although we take the implied definitions of policy influence from the different cases, this literature is useful to better understand the cases in light of the proposed framework.

The relation between political context and the policy cycle is very relevant for the analysis proposed here, since it combines a technical perspective with a political perspective of the process of policymaking. The notion of the policy cycle has been developed to create a theoretical framework of the decision making process in the policy arena. Although this framework has been described as a classical rational perspective, it is useful to identify different stages in the policy process, even though these particular steps may in real life blur between each other. What is important is to recognize what Lin (2003) identify as 'competing rationalities' that policymakers balance in the decision process which are: technical, political and cultural. This means that policy processes are always political, despite efforts for advisors, scientists and even policymakers to maintain it technical in scope. Within this view, those involved in this process become political actors.

Within this framework of the link between research and policy, and the policymaking process, what are the functions of think tanks? Mendizabal (forthcoming), Bellettini & Carrión (2009), Abelson (2009), and others have discussed think tanks' functions in society. These range from identifying problems, connecting people and ideas, and even identifying and developing policy leaders. This means that think tanks functions go beyond those specifically related to influencing policies directly. Think tanks carry out activities that, even though related to policy influence, are not meant as direct activities to change a particular policy. This wide range of activities frames the roles that think tanks play in the process of policy influence which are outlined in detail in the following sections.

Working from this literature, we built an analytical framework that relates the context in which think tanks work to the strategies they employ to influence policy. The basis of this framework is that context is a major determinant of what research institutions do to influence policy. Although other factors also determine strategy (institutional values, internal capacities, etc.), this study will focus on the way think tanks approach their contexts. The rich variety of cases lets us look at this

idea from a fresh perspective and gives insight into new research questions resulting from this exploratory framework.

IV. On context

Think tanks respond differently to diverse contexts.³ Hence, understanding context is crucial to successfully analyzing how and why think tanks are able to contribute to policy change. Understanding contexts is, in itself, a complex endeavor that may include many dimensions. For this study we will focus on the policy problems that think tanks face. For this, we will draw on the typology developed by Hisschemoller & Hoppe (1996) and Hoppe (2010) that looks into two dimensions of a policy problem: on the one hand, the level of certainty regarding relevant knowledge for the policy process and, on the other, the level of consensus on relevant norms and values. The first refers to the availability and validity of the knowledge related to a problem, and the second refers to the agreement on the values that are confronted on a given problem. The intersection of these two dimensions yields four general types of policy problems that think tanks may encounter: on the two ends one finds structured problems (with significant certainty and consensus) and unstructured problems (where both are missing); in the middle ground one finds moderately structured problems that lack either consensus or certainty.

As an example, here is a hypothetical case of a think tank is working on health care systems. If the think tank faces a setting where there is agreement that a country must establish universal health care coverage as a right, and has decided on a model to provide coverage to all (i.e. a completely public model), then it is a structured problem. If there is no agreement on whether health care is a right but all parties agree that there should be private provision of services, it would be a partially structured problem with disagreement on values. If stakeholders agree on universal coverage, but not on whether the best solutions should include public or private providers, then it would be a problem characterized by a lack of certainty on knowledge. As the stories are written from the point of view of the think tanks, we categorize the cases as they are presented by their authors.

³ Context is understood as “the situation, events, or information that are related to something and that help you to understand it”.

Figure 1. Cases According to the Type of Policy Problem

		On norms and values at stake	
		Far from agreement	Close to agreement
On relevant and available knowledge	Far from certainty	<i>Unstructured problems</i> CPD (Bangladesh) IPAR (Senegal)	<i>Moderately structured problems (value agreement):</i> ISET-N (Nepal) FOSDEH (Honduras) ASIES (Guatemala)
	Close to certainty	<i>Moderately structured problems (knowledge certainty):</i> IIDS (India) IEA (Ghana)	<i>Structured problems:</i> EEA (Ethiopia) REPOA (Tanzania) CSTEP (India) FUNDAUNGO (El Salvador) CADEP (Paraguay)

Based on framework developed in Hisschemoller and Hoppe (1996)

Based on this typology, a first analysis of the twelve stories reveals that think tanks work in situations with different kinds of policy problems. The most common is the structured problem, as this context tends to be the most welcoming for think tanks to participate and provide inputs to already well-defined issues. Additionally, as Hisschemoller and Hoppe (1996) conclude, policymakers prefer well-structured problems as they minimize uncertainty and limit the range of solutions; this may contribute to increasing the government’s receptivity to research (Carden, 2010).

In a moderately structured scenario where there is a lack of certainty on evidence, although not as common as structured problems, seems to be a space where think tanks appear to participate in relative comfort. These are cases where, although stakeholders agree on what should be achieved, there is little certainty on the evidence to solve that problem, either due to lack of knowledge or to divergent evidence.

Fewer think tanks act in unstructured problems, which are characterized by general discomfort or unrest and confusion of what is really causing the problem or what direction to take. They may also be semi-structured problems where, despite certainty in knowledge, there is no agreement on values or norms. One could argue that these contexts challenge think tanks to move out of

their comfort zone and begin to conceive themselves as actors with the capacity to generate not just technical knowledge but also to change minds, behaviors, relationships, and influence the institutions required to overcome the problems being faced.

V. On strategies for policy influence

At the core of their ability to influence policy are the strategies think tanks use throughout the process. By strategies we mean the tactical decisions regarding i) at which stages of the policy cycle to participate in, ii) what role the think tank plays, and, iii) what type of evidence it draws on.

The Stages of the Policy Cycle where think tanks participate

Policy formation follows a cyclical model— although we recognize this is by no means always a continuous or unidirectional process. Policies are born when a community visualizes a public problem; they grow during the design, decision, and implementation of a solution to that problem; and they are either sustained, come to an end when the original problem is solved, or merge into different policy processes. In each phase different disciplines, actors, and power relationships intervene (Belletini, 2007).

The concept of a policy cycle has been contested, arguing that the model is rationalist, that it is over focused on processes rather than in content and that it pays little attention to pressures outside the bureaucratic procedures (Everett, 2003). However, as Cosmo (2005) has argued, the policy cycle captures the basic concepts of policy formulation: various decision makers and the high degree of competition among policy advocates or advisers. Here, the policy cycle is used as a descriptive model to understand the strategies of think tanks and not as what Cosmo (2005) called a “normative ideal” of how the policy process should be.

Although think tanks may have a role in all of these stages in the cycle, several of the stories focus on the agenda-setting stage. This reflects Rich’s (2006) conclusion that substantive influence lies heavily on think tanks’ framing-strategies and their ability to describe problems to their societies in compelling ways. For instance, by identifying a major issue concerning the transfer of power from one political party to another following the 2001 presidential elections, IEA established the need for guidelines governing political transition in the Ghanaian political agenda. Participating in the agenda-setting stage may also lead to opportunities for think tanks to partake in the policy design and decision-making processes. FUNDAUNGO, for example, helped frame the problem of the lack of channels for citizen participation in local government and consequently also participated in designing a policy to institutionalize mechanisms for citizen involvement. Fewer think tanks participated in the implementation of a policy. Involvement at this stage requires a working relationship with the government. This is the case of CSTEP and EEA, both of which were commissioned to carry out specific tasks by their respective governments.

The stage of sustaining policies, which includes strategies such as monitoring and evaluation, was the least encountered in the cases reviewed. This might reflect the difficulty of influencing and changing already well-established, implemented policies. ASIES’s annual monitoring of the Guatemalan education system exemplifies work to sustain and continuously improve policy.

Roles think tanks play

In this particular case we are interested in the specific roles think tanks play to influence policies, which include: **facilitating dialogue**, **advising policymakers**, and **advocating for a policy**. A review of the different cases shows that most organizations play more than one role in the policy influencing process. While advising policymakers seems to be the most frequent role, it is often combined with other roles.

Where there was demand from policymakers for a particular piece of research, the think tanks primarily performed an advisory role. However, think tanks seemed to be able to play this role even at times when it was not explicitly solicited. For instance, by making the debt issue a priority in the public agenda, FOSDEH created the need for the government to seek advice in negotiating debt relief terms with international creditors. IIDS convinced members of Parliament of the need for an affirmative action policy in the private sector and policymakers subsequently urged the private sector to come up with a proposal, giving IIDS the opportunity to work with and advise private companies.

Although think tanks in general recognize a preference for certain policy options and prioritize certain topics in their agendas, they do play a role in facilitating dialogue and bringing different stakeholders together to open up a debate or to close it by consensus. At first sight, maintaining an independent agenda while also playing the role of facilitator may seem contradictory. Despite this apparent contradiction, think tanks successfully fill this role with different objectives in hand: in some cases the purpose is to facilitate support for an idea (e.g. IEA, ASIES), in others to provide a platform for debate (e.g. IPAR, CPD), or still in others to elicit the views of civil society in formulating recommendations or undertaking research (e.g. CSTEP, REPOA).

In some cases think tanks play several roles, generating spaces for dialogue, advising different stakeholders, and advocating for a policy, topic, or approach. This do-it-all strategy might not be uncommon in countries where there is no tradition of public debate on policies. In political contexts with 'robust' policy scenes (i.e. more open to participation, higher density of participants, informed actors, etc.) think tanks may focus primarily on informing policy debate directly. However, in contexts where these scenes barely exist think tanks create them by constructing spaces of dialogue, mobilizing the public, advising different stakeholders, and rallying for the topic simultaneously.

Types of evidence

When discussing the influence think tanks may have on policy debates it is important to look at the type of evidence they generate and communicate for this objective (Broadbent, 2012). Think tanks employ a variety of evidence to influence policy. One taxonomy of research is based on the purpose of each: academic, planning, instrumentation, and action (Vielle, 1982; Reimers & McGinn, 1997). In this taxonomy, **academic research** seeks to answer questions on why things occur and usually results in frameworks that aid researchers and policymakers to outline a problem. Similarly, **planning research** focuses on what could be expected of a given policy; **instrumentation research** focuses on how to achieve a given outcome; and **action research** is

ultimately concerned with achieving the desired goal. Unsurprisingly, think tanks use planning and instrumentation research for their advocacy strategies the most since it connect theory and practice. On the other hand, academic and action research were used very little and might be more distant from the think tanks interests and capacities.

VI. Contextualizing strategies

Up to this point, we have described the contexts and the strategies think tanks use separately. However, as mentioned earlier, strategies are greatly affected by the context in which they are deployed. This section seeks to link context and strategy to better understand the complex dynamics under which think tanks influence policy and to draw some preliminary reflections on this challenge. By analyzing the strategies employed within each context, we seek to identify possible risks and opportunities that the research organizations faced and the internal capacities needed to handle them.

Structured problems

As mentioned before, structured problems seem to be the most welcoming scenario to the traditional work of think tanks: providing applicable knowledge to the policy process. When there is consensus on the goal and certainty about the knowledge needed the challenge is making things happen. These problems usually arise during the design and implementation of a given policy. In this case, think tanks play the advisory role by providing knowledge that can be used for planning and implementing policies. Think tanks that actively participate in this context are likely to be the ones that would focus in fixes to well-defined problems by turning ideas into action. When problems are structured, it is likely that solutions are narrow and well-defined.

Interestingly, both cases where governments commissioned work from think tanks – CSTEP and EEA – are cases in which the think tanks do not advise the government behind closed doors but rather involve a multitude of stakeholders. In fact, “closed door” advising does not occur in any of the cases. Although there might be temptation to speak directly and exclusively to the government, these think tanks have used the advisory role to open the doors and bring other actors’ positions into consideration. While this might reflect the strength of the participatory discourse in development policy, it might also be a strategy to mitigate the risk of losing independence. It also reveals that even the most structured contexts are not purely technical and free from politics.

The cases of REPOA and FUNDAUNGO, two other episodes that occur in structured circumstances, show implementation alliances between the government, donors, and think tanks. The nature of this three-way alliance keeps the issue in the public arena. An atypical case in this context is CADEP, whose participation in framing economic issues in Paraguay led to the inclusion of its staff in the government, to not only advise but also carry out reform from within.

Unstructured problems

As mentioned before, unstructured problems are characterized by both disagreement on values and uncertainty on the knowledge needed to solve them. In some of these cases the policy

problem is not even in the public agenda yet; it must be visualized and articulated by those struggling with it. In these cases, it is most probable that think tanks begin in the agenda-setting stage, where they must first frame the issue before considering any given solution. Research centers will likely try to facilitate the learning process and promote narratives that help frame issues in such a way that they can be tackled by public policies (Belletini & Ordóñez, 2011). In this sense, think tanks may play an important role by facilitating encounters that enable people to recognize that they are in a situation where the problem is not clearly defined and learning is required to define problems and implement solutions.

This type of scenario requires the creative, out-of-the-box thinking that the government can hardly carry out, as formal authority is usually constrained by its bureaucratic nature and its attachment to rules and processes. In this sense, think tanks have more “latitude for creative deviance” (Heifetz, 1994) and are in a position to use their legitimacy as independent, credible actors to promote conversations that help stakeholders clarify their values, accept uncertainty, and seize new possibilities. According to Heifetz (1994) some of the tasks that may help in this situation are: posing questions about the nature of the problem, maintaining the attention on the issue, and collecting front-line information.

Both cases that we consider to fall in this category are the ones that take place during elections, veritable windows of opportunity to take on unstructured problems. IPAR used the pre-electoral process to press presidential candidates to express their policy ideas with respect to the rural sector. This expanded the presidential debate and revealed the differences among candidates, informing citizens’ votes. CPD, on the other hand, used the pre-electoral process as a venue to gather citizens’ opinions and reach consensus about the issue at hand; the slogan “honest and competent candidate” represented the public’s most pressing concern during the elections. Finally, it must be noted that the ability to facilitate dialogue is based more on the think tanks’ perceived independence and its alliance with a wide range of actors than its actual knowledge production, which in this context plays a secondary role.

In this scenario, think tanks need the hard-to-come-by capacity to develop a political perspective on issues. This means having the ability to understand “the interest, loyalties, beliefs and fears of everyone who has a stake or might be affected by the change” (Heifetz, et al., 2009). Think tanks must learn to sustain their work in these contexts as significant social change will occur in the long term, and they must also defy the project-based approach of donors, which might be shortsighted in such situations.

Moderately structured problems – close to certainly on relevant knowledge

There are also policy problems where there is no agreement on values despite certainty on the relevant knowledge. They tend to be those whose origins are complex and rooted in history, such as discrimination of ethnic groups or the weakness of political systems in countries formerly plagued by dictatorships or conflict. Think tanks can potentially contribute with evidence aimed at depoliticizing the debate so that concrete policies may be instituted. Such problems might arise in

the agenda-setting or the designing phase of policymaking. In this context, think tanks are likely to be heard because of their technical expertise and independence from divergent viewpoints. If this is the case, the think tank may play the role of an advisor and come up with technical solutions.

IEA proposed a concrete policy, the Presidential (Transition) Bill, as a response to a highly polarized political climate following a transfer of power between two parties. Although the proposal was passed with agreement across the political spectrum, it is unlikely that it will solve the political polarization immediately. However, the bill is a step towards this goal. IIDS works for policies that empower discriminated social casts and aimed for an affirmative action policy in the private sector, a difficult task since companies' value meritocracy and efficiency over social equality. Changing these values would be an arduous task, but IIDS created enough political urgency for a voluntary affirmative action policy to be adopted. Although IIDS favored a mandatory policy, a voluntary policy "accommodates" (as discussed by Hisschemoller and Hoppe, 1996) to the context of disagreement on values; otherwise, instituting an obligatory policy would probably have been unfeasible.

Think tanks, however, might face the risk of providing a technical solution to a problem rooted on values disagreement. As stated by Mencken, "for every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong". Oversimplifying an issue obstructs the learning process to build long term consensus on values and goals.

Moderately structured problems – close to agreement on values and norms

Settings in which there is a consensus of values but disagreement on the relevant knowledge may stem from diverse circumstances. There might be i) not enough knowledge on a topic due to its newness to the public policy scene or its complexity, ii) divergent evidence on the best way to reach a given objective, iii) solutions presented might not be implementable, or iv) those that are might be tough on society. In essence, having no clear-cut solution is at the heart of this scenario.

These problems are most likely related to the designing phase of the public policy cycle. Think tanks might either facilitate negotiation among groups proposing different solutions or come up with their own proposal. The lack of certainty on how to achieve a given goal might also make the solution eventually adopted vulnerable to constant changes or failure before it has been fully implemented, at which point the sustaining phase becomes relevant.

ISET-Nepal's research contributed to the development of a Local Adaptation Plans of Action to climate change. In a context of knowledge uncertainty, the policy proposed does not seek to prescribe specific solutions to adaptation at the subnational level; it is rather a framework that seeks to bring together both expert and non-expert local knowledge in order to find suitable solutions that may be implemented in the context of an uncertain future. FOSDEH had a direct impact in the debt relief agreements between the government and international lenders by assisting the government in the negotiation process. Although there was agreement on the need for relief, the specific terms had to be settled. Finally, ASIES actively participated in the education debate in Guatemala by regularly monitoring the education system. This kept the issue relevant

and generated spaces for dialogue among experts despite the wide range of policy options available.

Facilitating negotiation to decide on a solution poses the challenge of lack of control over the outcome, meaning that the resulting decisions – although agreed upon – might differ from the think tank’s policy preferences. In this situation a think tank requires credibility in order to be perceived as an “honest broker” with the flexibility to work with others; however, in an attempt to find a working solution (or satisfy the client in the case of demand-driven research), think tanks might risk significantly diverging from their own positions and policy preferences.

In conclusion, this study suggests that think tanks understand they navigate in complex and changing contexts. These realities at times require them to advocate a technical solution or help make things happen and other times to challenge basic assumptions and promote a learning process to change perspectives and encourage new practices and behaviors. Generating social change, after all, is not only about reforming public policies or legislation but also about successfully expanding opportunities and capacities in order to create a different future.

VII. Conclusions

The preceding analysis allows us to draw some preliminary conclusions about the strategies think tanks use to influence policy.

1. *Redefining policy influence.* The cases have shown us that think tanks’ influence goals include not only changing a policy or legislation but also changing values, practices, relationships, and institutions. The stories have also altered our view of policy influence from a tactical and narrow perspective to a more strategic and holistic one. As analyzed by Correa and Mendizabal (2011), the notion of the research-policy interface as a ‘market of ideas’ distorts the relationships between researchers, policymakers, and other actors in the public sphere, turning researchers into producers of knowledge and others into clients and consumers of such information. This has probably contributed to the view that “exerting influence” refers to that set of chores carried out to make ‘my’ research or solution accepted by policymakers; these tasks include marketing of ideas, communication strategies, and so on (Broadbent, 2012). However, the analysis of the cases above shows that policy influence can be better understood as the exercise of leadership and collaboration with other stakeholders to find solutions and carrying out tasks beyond the production of relevant research. Leading, as seen throughout this analysis, does not come without its risks – both internal and external – and should be carried out strategically and responsibly by think tanks.

2. *Different influence goals require different capacities.* Even though the stories did not offer descriptions of each institutions internal capacities, it can be assumed that different problems require the development of – among others – the following capabilities:

Organizational adaptive capacity. Think tanks face the difficulty of differentiating knowledge uncertainty from disagreement in values. The subtleties of the policy debate in some cases make it difficult for us to realize if people cannot reach a consensus because of values or because of knowledge, since these are not clearly separated entities. Becoming a learning organization allows think tanks to develop a responsive culture to what is happening in the outside environment and produce creative solutions to different types of problems and contexts.

Strategic leadership. Think tanks are complex organizations. They need leaders with the capacity to understand politics both externally and internally. The first dimension refers to the capacity to recognize the context they are acting in and the role they might serve to achieve the influence goal. In the internal dimension, leaders must understand the interests, loyalties, as well as the technical and political skills of their staff and allies. With this understanding, leaders can create a climate that is both safe and rigorous to orchestrate a sound response to the problem at hand.

3. *Think tanks are political actors, even more so than they consider themselves to be.* Although various authors (Botto, 2010; Mendizabal and Sample, 2009) have argued this point, this collection of stories confirms it. Being a political actor does not mean being partisan or dependent on political parties but rather refers to being able to alter not only the content of policy but also how it is created. We have been able to identify that think tanks work in all types of problems; although most stories relate to structured problems, there are stories that refer to unstructured and moderately structured problems as well. The fact that most relate to structured problems could reflect the demand-driven nature – either by donors or the government – of the work being carried out. This context calls for the traditional role of a think tank: advising on concrete and measurable problems. But even in these more technical and welcoming settings think tanks play a political role, and have chosen not to act behind closed doors by maintaining open debates with external stakeholders bringing new voices into the deliberation process.

Think tanks may also choose to get involved in unstructured and semi-structured problems where thinking and acting politically is even more relevant. In other words, think tanks are required to consider power relations, networks, and political coalitions to be able to untangle problems of disagreement, uncertainty, or distrust. These problems usually require what Heifetz (1994) calls “leadership without authority”. According to him, there is a difference between the two roles: whereas authority figures “serve a social function of direction, protection and order” (p. 184), leadership “mobilizes people to tackle tough problems... push us to clarify our values, face hard realities, and seize new possibilities, however frightening change may be” (p. 15, 184). In public policy this can be seen in the difficulty politicians often have exercising leadership in situations when his or her constituency expects protection and guiding. Sometimes think tanks and other organizations that work in public policies can promote those changes with much more freedom and creativity than people in authority.

In conclusion, this study suggests that think tanks understand they navigate in complex and changing contexts. These realities at times require them to advocate a technical solution or help in making things happen and other times to challenge basic assumptions and promote a learning process to change perspectives and encourage new practices and behaviors. Generating social change, after all, is not only about reforming public policies or legislation but also about successfully expanding opportunities and capacities in order to create a different future.

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