



SERIES



# THINK TANKS & ELECTIONS

edited by Leandro Echt

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**Some thinktankers may suggest that electoral years are dead for think tanks: they are not good for research or for communicating their findings because they do not know who might win and what they will decide to do -and so it is best to wait until after the elections. As the articles in this series show, this is not necessarily true.**



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SERIES

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THINK TANKS & ELECTIONS

## In this series:



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“Although there are numerous cases in the region in which think tanks have embarked in initiatives to influence electoral campaigns, this role has been under-studied. Therefore this series of blog posts intends to shed some light on those experiences.”

**LEANDRO ECHT**

Editor of the Think Tanks & Elections series for On Think Tanks

# Think Tanks and Elections:

Latin American think tanks have adopted an approach to influence electoral processes that offers lessons for other think tanks across the world. This series was edited by Leandro Echt as part of a collaboration between On Think Tanks and CIPPEC. It has been published at VIPPAL in Spanish. Some thinktankers may suggest that electoral years are dead for think tanks: they are not good for research or for communicating their findings because they do not know who might win and what they will decide to do -and so it is best to wait until after the elections. As the articles in this series show, this is not necessarily true. The series is accompanied by articles from other regions of the world and by a compilation of initiatives.

## ARTICLES IN THE SERIES:

**Think tanks and the electoral process: lessons from Latin America**

by Leandro Echt

**Focusing the electoral debate: CIES' experience during the Peru 2011 campaign**

by Javier Portocarrero

**Orazio Bellettini: "Think tanks can create spaces for dialogue among relevant actors of the policy community"**

by Leandro Echt

**Experience of Fedesarrollo in presidential campaigns in Colombia**

by Leonardo Villar

**Fernando Straface: "The challenge is refining the think tanks' technology for influence in electoral campaigns"**

by Leandro Echt

**Paraguay debate: The challenge of nourishing the political debate in times of elections**

by Marcelo Mancuello

**Lessons on the role of Latin American think tanks in electoral processes - the way forward**

by Leandro Echt

**FUSADES and 2012 elections in El Salvador: electoral reforms and promotion of the exercise of suffrage**

by Luisa Solano

**Think tanks and electoral processes: an opportunity that should not be missed**

by Enrique Mendizabal

## THE SCENARIO



“(...) in several countries of the region, political parties show weaknesses regarding the formulation of their political platforms: they no longer think about the government, but prepare themselves to win the elections. This creates an opportunity for think tanks, who are precisely trying to reflect on the best policies for the country.”

FERNANDO STRAFACE

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## THE OPPORTUNITY



“National elections are an exceptional opportunity to promote the link between research, political parties, civil society, international cooperation, and the media in order to achieve three objectives: making technical contributions to parties, raising the level of the electoral debate, and contributing to the new government’s policy design.”

JAVIER PORTOCARRERO

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## WHAT TO DO



“The real work begins when the think tanks take this policy portfolio to the parties, the media and the public. Unsurprisingly, during a year in which they are all open to listen to ideas, demand for this kind of input is particularly high. After all, whether they want to accept it or not, electoral years are a time when they definitely need new policy ideas.”

ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL

If we address Latin American think tanks' experiences in influencing electoral processes, we are able to identify some common features of what Fernando Straface, Executive Director of CIPPEC, has called "a Latin American technology of influence" in electoral campaigns. A technology we'd like to export to other regions.

LEANDRO ECHT

Editor of the Think Tanks & Elections series for On Think Tanks

# Think tanks and the electoral process: lessons from Latin America

BY LEANDRO ECHT



Some thinktankers may suggest that electoral years are dead for think tanks: they are not good for research or for communicating their findings because they do not know who might win and what they will decide to do –and so it is best to wait until after the elections.

Some Latin American think tanks would disagree: for them, this is the time to get busy. Particularly, if we consider that, with some exceptions, electoral campaigns in Latin America do not generally involve serious debates over strategic policy issues this is a time when think tanks can really show their worth and change, not just policy but also the policy context.

Although there are numerous cases in the region in which think tanks have embarked in initiatives to influence electoral campaigns, this role has been under-studied. Therefore this series of blog posts intends to shed some light on those experiences. Indeed, if we address Latin American think tanks' experiences in influencing electoral processes, we are able to identify some common features of what Fernando Straface, Executive Director of CIPPEC, has called “a Latin American technology of influence” in electoral campaigns. A technology we'd like to export to other regions.

This first post introduces some of the cases found in the region. The series does not pretend to be exhaustive, and we hope that other experiences out there that we are not aware of will come forward.

## Articles include:

- Focusing the electoral debate: CIES' experience in the 2011 electoral campaign in Peru, by Javier Portocarrero, Executive Director of the Consortium for Economic and Social Research (CIES), with the collaboration of Leandro Eght. CIES led two initiatives trying to influence elections in Peru, in 2006 and 2011. It was one of the pioneers of the idea in the region.
- Think tanks can create spaces for dialogue among relevant actors of the policy community – an interview with Orazio Bellettini Cedeño, Executive Director of the

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Foundation for the Advancement of Reforms and Opportunities (Grupo FARO). In the context of the 2006 presidential campaign in Ecuador, Grupo FARO developed the initiative ‘Ciudadanizando las políticas’ with the support of CIES. Afterwards the technology went ‘viral’.

- The experience of Fedesarrollo in presidential campaigns in Colombia, by Leonardo Villar, Executive Director of the Foundation for High Education and Development (Fedesarrollo), a Colombian think tank that developed two experiences intended to influence electoral campaigns, in 2010 and 2014.
- The challenge is refining the think tanks’ ‘technology of influence’ in electoral campaigns– interview with Fernando Straface, Executive Director of the Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth (CIPPEC). In 2011, CIPPEC developed an initiative called “Agenda for the President”, which has been reflected in the document Promoting a national policy forum: CIPPEC’s “Agenda for the President 2011–2015”. In 2014, CIPPEC started to work on an experience facing 2015 elections, called ‘Argentina Debate’.
- Paraguay Debate: the challenge of nourishing the political debate in times of elections, by Marcelo Mancuello, researcher and consultant of the Center of Analysis and Diffusion of the Paraguayan Economy (CADEP). In 2013, CADEP, Instituto Desarrollo and other 5 civil society organizations developed the Paraguay Debate initiative, in order to nourish the political debate in the country in face of the April 2013 elections.
- Lessons from Latin American think tanks’ role in electoral process – the way forward, by Leandro Echt.
- Implications for think tanks in other regions, by Enrique Mendizabal.

*This article is the first of a series of 8 articles on a Latin American think tanks’ initiative aimed at influencing electoral processes, published at VIPPAL in Spanish, and at On Think Tanks as part of the Guest Editor initiative launched last year. The series has been edited by Leandro Echt as part of a collaboration between On Think Tanks and CIPPEC.*



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SERIES

THINK TANKS & ELECTIONS

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**Most think tanks are still debating whether or not to join the race. As any politician would tell you, to win, you have to take part.**

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**ROWLAND MANTHORPE**

**From his article: Think tanks and the UK general election: who lost, who won and who decided not to play?**

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SERIES

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THINK TANKS & ELECTIONS

**National elections are an exceptional opportunity to promote the link between research, political parties, civil society, international cooperation, and the media in order to achieve three objectives: making technical contributions to parties, raising the level of the electoral debate, and contributing to the new government's policy design**

**JAVIER PORTOCARRERO**

# Focusing the electoral debate: CIES' experience during the Peru 2011 campaign

BY JAVIER PORTOCARRERO

*Javier Portocarrero is the Executive Director of the Consortium for Economic and Social Research (CIES). CIES led two experiences intended to influence electoral campaigns in Peru in 2006 and 2011 – as well as others focused on local elections. The author thanks contributions made by Norma Correa in the identification of lessons learned and Leandro Echt in the editing of this article, as well as the insights made by Gina Alvarado, Carlos Eduardo Aramburú, Micaela Pesantes and Jorge Salazar in previous reflections on both experiences.*



## Introduction

In 2010 the Consortium for Economic and Social Research (CIES) launched the project “Elections Peru 2011 – Focusing the electoral debate” (in Spanish, it is referred to “centrando el debate electoral”), reediting an experience first carried out in 2006. The project aimed to deepen the link between academia and political parties, as well as raising the Consortium’s profile both in the media and the political community as a whole.

The project sought to raise the level of the electoral debate through public policy proposals on key issues for national development. It intended to strengthen both the parties’ policy proposals and the next government’s policies.

## Funding and alliances

More than a year before the elections, a funding effort was promoted in order to develop the project. Compared to the 2006 initiative, it was possible to raise donors’ participations from 7 to 19, most of them from among the international cooperation in the country.

Since the 2006 effort had promoted the emergence of similar projects (e.g. Universidad del Pacífico launched its own project), the Consortium tried to minimize duplication of efforts

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by widening the net of strategic allies to eight institutions, even including the National Election Board.

## **Intervention model**

The intervention includes 5 stages:

1. Production of 15 public policy documents,
2. Discussion over them with main parties' planning teams,
3. Production of ad hoc resources for the press; and
4. Broad dissemination campaign in Lima and regions.
5. Electoral debates

## **Production of policy documents**

The objective of this stage is to systematise existing knowledge and prepare proposals concerning key policy issues. In the case of the Peruvian project these were:

1. Public Management;
2. Corruption and Governance;
3. Security and Narcotics;
4. Tax Policy;
5. Tax policies to minerals and oil;
6. Regional Development;
7. Rural Development;
8. Natural Resources;
9. Social Conflict;
10. Interculturalism;
11. Climate Change;
12. Social policies and poverty;
13. Education;
14. Innovation, Science and Technology; and
15. Genre

Once the issues were defined, a competition was launched to prepare the policy documents with terms of reference that aimed at standardising contents, emphasising available policy options, including costs and benefits, and taking into account obstacles to implementation and strategies to overcome them.

Furthermore, each team of authors would have to develop three roadmaps: one for the first 100 days, another for the first year, and another for the full five-years period.

The authors then prepared the documents between October 2010 and March 2011. Before they were published, they were reviewed by academic peers and draft presentations to donors were organised.



## **Dialogue with political parties' planning teams**

CIES contacted the policy planning leaders from the main five political parties (according to the surveys) and promoted 25 close-door meetings between the authors and the party technocrats. The meetings took place away from the press and were focused on the presentation of two or more documents, depending on each party's interests.

## **Dissemination tools**

Six different communication formats were designed to disseminate the content of the documents:

1. A folder with 15 policy documents (1,000 copies), distributed among candidates, politicians, academics, journalists and policy makers;
2. A special edition of the CIES' Economic and Society magazine, "Contributions to the Peruvian government 2011-2016", with an abstract of the 15 documents (3,000 copies);
3. An insert with a one-pager journalistic version of each document, distributed by the most important newspapers of Lima and other regions (142,000 copies);
4. 30 radio spots (two for each document) disseminated by 150 radio stations;
5. Press dossiers with suggested questions for the press to interrogate the candidates;
6. 15 brief videos (7 minutes) about each document; and
7. Informative brochures shared in different regions (87,500 copies).

In addition, videos and policy documents were used as background information for the authors to participate in various radio and television programs devoted to the election. Regarding digital communications a website was developed in order to gather everything linked to the project: policy documents, Power Point Presentations, videos, etc. Social networks and massive mailing were also used reach interested people.

## **Seminars in Lima and regions**

The dissemination campaign included 7 seminars in different regions (Piura, Loreto, Trujillo, Chiclayo, Ayacucho, Cusco and Arequipa), which reached out to more than 1,000 attendees. For this purpose, the Consortium worked with regional entities which also supported press conferences and meetings with opinion leaders as well as TV and radio interviews with the authors of the policy documents.

Two events were organized in Lima, the capital: a lunch workshop with national public opinion leaders and a seminar consisting of three consecutive working breakfasts with more than 300 attendees from academia, the public sector, civil society, political parties, international cooperation and press.

Moreover, meetings were organised in order to present the documents to different agencies from the public sector.

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## **Electoral debates**

In partnership with the National Election Board and the National Democratic Institute, CIES co-organized a debate among the 11 first-round presidential candidates, and two debates during the second round.

The first one was named “programmatic” and was promoted by the Consortium following the 2006 example. The negotiation between the parties was facilitated by the three co-organizers. This collaboration led to the organisation of a technical debate between the teams of the two parties that met during the second-round (Fuerza 2011 and Gana Perú), broadcasted live through the State channel to a record of audience.

The last debate was held between Keiko Fujimori (Fuerza 2011) and Ollanta Humala (Gana Perú). The negotiation among candidates’ representatives was very time consuming in a context of high political polarisation, typical of a second-round in which surveys talked about as a virtual draw.

During both debates, the two parties demanded fixed time schemes for intervention, questions and cross-examinations. Each issue and question was had to be previously known by both candidates. Citizens all across the country sent 1000 questions through the website and they were selected by a committee. The audience for the presidential debate broke records, being broadcasted by every channel that requested to retransmit it. The debate was also broadcasted by CNN in Spanish.

## **Impact**

The Project contributed to enrich the policy proposals and government plans of the parties that participated of the 2011 electoral process. It also offered technical elements to the debate and inputs to the journalists covering the process. Moreover, it offered the new government a roadmap with 15 important issues for Peru’s development and governance. The initiative also facilitated links between researchers, technocrats and politicians beyond the project.

## **Post elections**

After the elections, CIES participated of an official induction seminar with the newly elected congress, organised by the Major Office of the Congress. In that opportunity, the project participated with an presentation of the challenges for the Peruvian economy between 2011-2016 and with a presentation of the project itself, complemented with a distribution of the 15 documents to each representative.

The relevance of the second round debates stimulated the organisers to publish a memoire of the debates, a responsibility that fell to CIES. In addition to the report of the discussions the book included interviews with key stakeholders, in order to facilitate the organization

of future debates. The publication was distributed among politicians, journalists and members of academia.

## Lessons

A number of lessons can be learned from the experience:

### *About the context:*

- National elections are an exceptional opportunity to promote the link between research, political parties, civil society, international cooperation, and the media in order to achieve three objectives: making technical contributions to parties, raising the level of the electoral debate, and contributing to the new government's policy design.

### *About the funding:*

- CIES was an already established and solidly reputed consortium, an asset at the moment of obtaining funding.
- The shaping of a basket of funds among many agencies was essential, with a leading donor and a flexible scheme, where the Consortium adapted to each donor's modus operandi.
- The participation of 19 donors led to a meaningful fund, and none of them had to commit a big amount of resources.
- From the donors' point of view, the main incentive was participating with their peers in an interesting, highly-visible project, that offered a channel to facilitate the continuity of their technical contributions to the government.
- It was important to involve the donors not only in the funding, but also in designing and implementing the project.

### *About the life of the project:*

- It is difficult to ensure complete synchrony between the project's schedule and the electoral calendar. Ideally, funding should be anticipated and the policy documents be ready before the parties present their government plans.

### *About the choice of policy issues:*

- The weight of the international cooperation in the funding of the initiative meant that the definition of issues was eventually biased to their interests. This should be addressed early on.

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*About the policy documents:*

- The technical quality of the papers is very important, since it promotes the project's capacity to dialogue with different stakeholders. In Peru, parties and the National Electoral Board did not have that technical expertise, and they needed it.
- However, technical quality is not enough. Documents should include practical and actionable recommendations and be friendly to their audiences.
- The terms of reference and some guidance through their production are important for ensuring their quality and studies' standardisation.
- CIES is a 'second-floor' entity that gathers centres with different orientations. In these cases, a dilemma between plurality and coherence of policy advice could arise. The former is useful as a contribution for debate, whereas the latter is helpful as a contribution for the next government.
- It is important to promote cross-fertilisation among authors.
- It is necessary to include non-academic readers' perspective, too.

*About the coordination of activities:*

- Paying attention to the agendas, priorities and administrative requests of a diverse group of donors is a challenge for the management of the project.
- The nature of CIES' network facilitated that the studies were carried out in a decentralised way via a competition, while the dissemination was centralised and coordinated in collaboration with strategic allies.
- This type of initiative requires a balanced investment between research and dissemination. The documents, more than new studies, are systematisations and updates by professionals already experts on the issues. Most of the efforts were instead directed to communication.
- The coordinator is very important and must be experienced in the interaction with different type of actors, particularly politicians. Moreover, it is important to avoid or mitigate possible conflicts that would emerge among allies (for instance, due to appearance in the media).
- Although the organisation of the debate reported a greater visibility to CIES, this process took a great cost in terms of time. As an example, organising the first debate took 15 meetings with the parties and the electoral authorities.

*About building alliances:*

- It is important to map the institutional context and the actors' location, orientation and interests. The alliance with the National Electoral Board was very important in order to get closer to the parties and organising debates.



- It is also important to generate synergies with similar initiatives.

*About communication:*

- Communications staff are key. The editing of the original documents is very important, but its translation to different formats (newspaper, radio, TV) was even more so. Press conference organisation, interviews, and brochures, as well as the media training of the authors were critical.
- If evidence demand from the media is stimulated, it is important to have the resources and the interest to answer those requirements (reciprocity relationship).
- The project focused the communication of documents depending on the parties' demand. However, this decision produced a heterogeneous dissemination of the documents among the various technical teams. Some issues, like gender, require more promotion to be perceived as important.

*About the links with political parties:*

- The closed nature of the meetings with parties injected a degree confidence in their campaign managers.

*About the expected impact:*

- The major strength of the project has to do with diversifying and decentralising spaces of debate, incorporating new voices and calling the attention on key issues for the public agenda. It cannot guarantee impact in specific policies. In future projects the influence strategy with the elected government could be reinforced.
- Another strength of the project was its replication in other Latin-American countries where CIES has contributed as an advisor.
- M&E of the project should be strengthened for institutional learning as well as for future fund-raising.

*About the link with other activities of the institution:*

- A tension between circumstantial projects –as the electoral ones– and middle term projects may arise. That is why it is very important that what is achieved in the electoral influence projects (as a greater relation with parties and media) is used in daily institutional activities.

*This post was translated to Spanish by Federico Frasccheri and Fiorella Ormeño.*

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SERIES

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THINK TANKS & ELECTIONS

**Due to their nature, the role of think tanks in campaigns is to nourish the debate about different public policy proposals and to challenge existing policy paradigms.**

**ORAZIO BELLETTINI**

# Orazio Bellettini: “Think tanks can create spaces for dialogue among relevant actors of the policy community”

BY LEANDRO ECHT

*Orazio Bellettini Cedeño is the Executive Director of the Foundation for the Advancement of Reforms and Opportunities (Grupo FARO). In the context of the 2006 presidential campaign in Ecuador, Grupo FARO developed the initiative “Ciudadanizando las políticas”.*

## **Leandro Echt: What roles can think tanks play in electoral campaigns?**

Orazio Bellettini: Due to their nature, the role of think tanks in campaigns is to nourish the debate about different public policy proposals and to challenge existing policy paradigms.

A second role that think tanks may fulfill is to create spaces where relevant actors of the policy community can meet. This task is especially relevant in societies like the Latin Americans, where campaigns typically emphasise the differences more than the consensus over the countries’ strategic policies. It is hard for the Latin American political culture to find spaces for consensus. Given this situation, through the initiative “Ciudadanizando las políticas” Grupo FARO tried to generate spaces for dialogue among three groups of actors: citizens, parties and politicians.

## **LE: How did you design the initiative “Ciudadanizando las políticas”?**

OB: One of the first steps consisted on shaping an Advisory Council, which had multiple objectives: to offer financial and technical support to donors, to strengthen the process of selection of policy issues and to keep independence, and to ensure the quality of the production of the documents along the project. Afterwards, we launched a call to researches who were interested in writing proposals on strategic policy issues for the

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development of the country. Once the documents were written, they were presented during the election's first round, and the event was replicated in four cities. Finally, the documents were presented again when facing the second round.

**LE: It has been 8 years since that electoral campaign. What is your evaluation about the experience?**

OB: It was a very positive experience for Grupo FARO. Firstly, we verified that there was a fine timing management of the proposals, since a great number of them were incorporated to the winner's government plan.

Moreover, the initiative was a big opportunity to show Grupo FARO and its researchers' work. In 2006, FARO only had two years of existence: the initiative not only helped to position Grupo FARO as a promoter of evidence in public policy but also worked as a strategy to present the activities the institution performed to the new government. An indicator of this visibility is the fact that three researchers that took part of the project went to work for the State, and even got to become Ministers.

At the same time, as a consequence of the production of the studies, Grupo FARO was able to identify researchers that were then engaged in different projects within the organisation.

Last but not least, the experience was an interesting opportunity to shape networks with civil society at national and supranational level. For instance, FARO was supported by CIES in Peru in the design of the methodology of the initiative.

**LE: What were the main lessons learned from the experience?**

OB: The main lesson is that a minimum of political competence must exist if you want this type of experienced to work out. This was absent during the elections that followed the 2006 campaign.

The challenge ahead is to prepare a similar initiative but in the local level, where more spaces for debate and policy discussions exist.

Plurality is another crucial element for the success of these initiatives: in term of proposals, allies, donors and politicians spheres.

Another lesson refers to the importance of decentralising the debate and includes citizen's voice in the proposals. Although we tried to do this in 2006 through presentations in different cities, it should be further encouraged in a new edition.



**LE: How could Latin American think tanks continue to work to strengthen this ‘technology of influence’ during election campaigns?**

OB: The first step is to develop a comparative analysis involving academics and practitioners that dedicate to the study of social, economical, political and cultural conditions that stimulate this type of initiative, and make them systematise differences and similarities among the experiences, and bring lessons that might be useful to other think tanks.

Moreover, regional network alliances should be shaped in order to promote initiatives by country adapted to national characteristics.

These actions will contribute to strengthen think tanks learning regarding the capitalization of elections as an opportunity to show their work and promote policy debate.

*This post was translated to Spanish by Federico Frascheri.*

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THINK TANKS & ELECTIONS

**Regarding promotion of debates among the candidates, our experience reveals that an electoral campaign with low competitiveness discourages the participation of those candidates with the best vote intention.**

LEONARDO VILLAR

# Experience of Fedesarrollo in presidential campaigns in Colombia

BY LEONARDO VILLAR

*Leonardo Villar is the Executive Director of the Foundation for High Education and Development (Fedesarrollo), a Colombian think tank that developed two experiences intended to influence electoral campaigns in 2010 and 2014.*



For the 2014 presidential elections in Colombia, Fedesarrollo prepared a series of five research documents on a number of relevant issues for the next government's economic and social policy, which were used as the main inputs to promote public debate among the various candidates that participated in the election. The organisation intended to replicate a successful 2010 experience. The final balance, as in 2010, was very satisfactory.

The fact that one of the candidates, Juan Manuel Santos, was the President with reelection chances gave the last campaign new features that reduced the possibility of public debate to take place. However, we were still able to organise events with the presence of candidates and the proposals were presented in the documents prepared by Fedesarrollo had and keep having a high media visibility. It is certain that these documents will be of big help at the time of defining the priorities and implementing the policies of the government that took office on August 7th 2014.

## Choice of topics

The first decision we made had to do with the policy issues that the project would address. This choice took place nine months before the elections, in order to have enough time for writing. This decision was made between the Executive Office and a specific Committee designated by the Council of Fedesarrollo.

We considered issues that we believed to be central for the social and economic development of the country for the next four years. At the same time, we discarded issues in which the current government showed a well-defined direction (for instance, road infrastructure), those in which we felt enough had been said already, those in which we perceived that important decisions would be made before the elections hence diminishing the relevance of our studies (that was the case of health for instance), and

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those issues in which, even though fundamental for the economic and social development of the country, we did not feel that we had enough expertise and technical strength to contribute as an institution (for instance, judicial reform).

In the end, we chose the following five issues:

1. Rural and Agrarian Development,
2. Education quality improvement,
3. Comprehensive care for early childhood,
4. Innovation and business entrepreneurship, and
5. Tax perspectives.

In every case, the authors were encouraged to consider the political feasibility of their proposals.

## **Choice of authors**

We chose the authors based on a range of criteria, but mainly on their expertise on each of the policy issues. It was necessary to make sure that we had a group of authors that combined senior and junior researchers of Fedesarrollo (that was the case of the study on tax perspectives), with colleagues from other academic institutions (researchers from Los Andes and del Rosario universities developed an educational quality study and the Director of the Center of Studies on Economic Development from the Los Andes University helped with the research on early childhood), and former policy makers (a former Minister of Agriculture and two-times Minister of Finance and a former Vice-Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development were involved in the production of the document of Rural and agrarian development; and a former Director of the National Planning Department participated in the Innovation and business entrepreneurship document).

In every case, we tried to involve people with broad experience and credibility, in order to ensure not only the quality of the studies but also to increase the possibility of influencing public opinion and the presidential candidates.

Thus, the choice of authors reveals, on the one hand, the need to build alliances with other researchers and institutions with methodological expertise to carry out the research required for these initiatives, and on the other hand, the importance of involving recognised actors in their fields and who possess the capacity to influence the policy community.

## **Funding of the studies**

Fedesarrollo has limited resources of its own and the greatest part of its research has to be produced as part of projects commissioned by third parties. For the presidential debates, however, it was fundamental to define the policy issues independently from

the availability of funding. For three of the studies, resources from a patrimonial fund built over years and based on donations were used –the Germán Botero de los Ríos Fund, which is used to fund one or two annual projects awarded through public competition by Fedesarrallo. Regarding the other two studies, we were able to obtain funding from two foundations interested in the issues: Fundación Compartir, which had promoted a study on teaching, collaborated with the document of education quality improvement, and Fundación Éxito provided resources for comprehensive care for early childhood.

In both cases, the foundations had already supported similar studies, and helped by involving the same researchers in the project.

## Public debates, Alliances and the Media

The most complex issue was to secure the candidates' commitment to participate in public debates. The fact that President Santos had big chances of being reelected, and that at the beginning of the campaign the surveys showed he had a very large advantage over his contenders led to his advisors recommending him not to expose himself to a debate that may affect his public image. Moreover, candidate Enrique Peñalosa emerged with great strength from a public consultation process developed by the Green Party, matching the legislative elections that took place in March. Surveys situated him second, far from the other three candidates from the Uribista movement “Centro Democrático”, from the Conservative Party, and the left-wing movement Polo Alternativo.

Under these circumstances, both Santos and Peñalosa adopted an explicit non-participation policy towards public debates, at least during the first phase of the campaign.

This situation created big obstacles for organising the events we had planned in order to entice the candidates to discuss the findings of our studies. Initially, we planned to carry out debates in four cities: Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Barranquilla. To make this happen, we developed an alliance with Portafolio, the most important economic newspaper of the country, and we looked for local engagements with chambers of commerce in Bogotá, Cali and Barranquilla. In the case of Medellín, we made a deal with Proantioquia, an influential business foundation that promotes regional development.

The difficulties involved in bringing together the two best-positioned candidates, Santos and Peñalosa, forced us to cancel events in Barranquilla and Cali, leaving us with the ones in Medellín and Bogotá.

Despite these difficulties, we were able to finally execute these two events with success. In the case of Medellín, we gathered four out of five candidates to the Vice-presidency. The only candidate that did not assist was Santos' candidate. The meeting was attended by 250 people, a high number if we consider the apathy towards the electoral process that had taken hold in Colombia. On the other hand, the event in Bogotá aimed to bring together the presidential candidates themselves. This event took place very close to the

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elections, when the vote intention of the candidate of Centro Democrático had already increased. The debate was therefore more attractive: 500 people assisted plus 11,500 who joined via web-streaming. However, Santos did not assist and the candidate for the left-wing movement, Polo Alternativo, had to cancel due to last-minute difficulties linked to the fact that the debate was held the day before all campaigns were due to end.

## **Publication and post-electoral public debate**

Apart from the events' attendance, the work developed by Fedesarrollo for the presidential debates produced and keeps producing an important impact. The documents were published in the form of five books which are part of a series we called Fedesarrollo's Notebooks, which were massively disseminated (more than 1,000 copies each), besides their availability on the internet, where they received a big number of consultations.

Moreover, in our monthly publication, *Tendency*, we have written two editorials that helped center the issues in the general public debate, even after the elections, considering the decisions that the next government will have to adopt. We carried out several interviews and our work was used in different media. At the same time, we trust that the documents will have a determining influence in the Development Plan and the definition of many policies from the next government.

## **Some final lessons**

Regarding the choice of topics, it is important to focus on those relevant for the development of the country. Moreover, it is necessary to recognise which issues the organisation does not possess enough expertise on and consequently needs to build alliances with other institutions and researchers.

Regarding the authors, in addition to the recognition they enjoy in their fields of expertise, it is necessary to consider their relational capital so that it contributes to the influence of the initiative.

Regarding funding, it is desirable to count with one's own funds in order to define the policy issues independently. Another option is to involve business foundations to support some specific issues of their interest.

Regarding promotion of debates among the candidates, our experience reveals that an electoral campaign with low competitiveness discourages the participation of those candidates with the best vote intention.

In a country with strong regionalisms as in Colombia, it is important to promote debates in different regions. In order to do this, alliances with national actors with territorial scope may be considered (newspapers or chambers of commerce), as well as regional actors.

Regarding the timing of the debate, it is important to keep certain distance from the campaign's closure, since the candidates will have less time to participate. However, we need to consider that the candidates' interest to participate in these public events as well as the willingness of citizens to listen to them will increase as we get closer to the election date.

As for how to continue after the elections, we consider that it is very important to consolidate the production in broader publications, which ideally should be part of a usual editorial line of the organisation.

*This post was translated to Spanish by Federico Frascheri.*



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THINK TANKS & ELECTIONS

The region has created an innovative method in terms of policy discussions during elections. In many cases, these processes concluded with debates among the candidates in front of society as a referee.

FERNANDO STRAFACE

# Fernando Straface: “The challenge is refining the think tanks’ technology for influence in electoral campaigns”

BY LEANDRO ECHT

*Fernando Straface is the former Executive Director of the Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth (CIPPEC). In 2011, CIPPEC developed an initiative called “Agenda for the President 2011-2015”, which has been reflected in the document “Promoting a national policy forum: CIPPEC’s Agenda for the President 2011-2015”. A year before the 2015 election, CIPPEC started working on “Argentina Debate” alongside a group of young entrepreneurs and referents of the public, political and cultural life in Argentina. In this interview Straface talks about this experience.*

## **Leandro Echt: What is the role that Latin American think tanks can play in electoral campaigns?**

Fernando Straface: After looking at several presidential electoral processes in the region, one can confirm that some think tanks have taken on a leading role in promoting dialogue and public policy proposals. From Chilean think tanks, pioneers in these type of experiences, to organisations such as Fedesarrollo (Colombia), CIES (Perú) y Grupo FARO (Ecuador) and numerous Mexican civil society organisations, a considerable number of experiences and lessons around think tanks’ participation in electoral campaigns can be found.

At the same time, one can observe at least three contextual factors that have favored this role.

First, Latin America has a solid think tanks’ tradition: in each country you will find at least one think tank that is relevant to the national public debate.

Second, in several countries of the region, political parties show weaknesses regarding the formulation of their political platforms: they no longer think about the government, but

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prepare themselves to win the elections. This creates an opportunity for think tanks, who are precisely trying to reflect on the best policies for the country.

Third, think tanks of the region have not only been bridges between politics and academy, but also good translators of complex ideas for the media and, through it, to citizens. Parties' weakness to communicate with society makes the media conceive think tanks as a source of information; easier and more directly to access in the context of elections.

All together, these factors bring about a scenario in which think tanks emerge with a leading role regarding public policy discussion. Moreover, think tanks managed to develop a sort of "technology of influence" in the context of electoral campaigns: an approach designed to take advantage of a high-intensity political moment in order to foster discussion in the public agenda. It is about improving the quality of public communication about the national development strategy at the moment in which society chooses who will lead that strategy.

From these experiences, one is able to identify patterns that were replicated in the various influencing strategies, in many cases associated to the type of government and political culture of the region: such as personalised-center government options, and policy discussions focused on the past instead of the future, just to mention some of the features. These common characteristics are found in the management of the production of evidence, the communication products, the target audiences, and the projects' governance, among other aspects. Thus, the region has created an innovative method in terms of policy discussions during elections. In many cases, these processes concluded with debates among the candidates in front of society as a referee.

It is important to underline the cross-fertilization process through which lessons were shared among different initiatives conducted by think tanks in the region. Latin America counts with a huge advantage concerning this: language consistency. At the same time, initiatives like the Think Tank Initiative, projects supported by GDNNet and ODI, On Think Tanks, CIPPEC's work with FARO and CIES, and CIPE's support to several initiatives during electoral periods have promoted a more frequent exchange among institutions. Latin American think tanks have been capable of producing collective action in order to learn from each other. This has contributed to turn the elections into a common object of interest.

**LE: What did you learn from CIPPEC's first experience, "Agenda for the President"?**

FS: Most of the lessons from Agenda for the President were reflected in the document Promoting a national policy forum: CIPPEC's "Agenda for the President 2011-2015". I will focus on the most relevant ones.

The first lesson is that the political context affects the willingness and capability of the political system to participate in the kind of processes of dialogue that we intended to

promote. Lack of competitiveness among candidates as well as government continuity scenarios discourage governments from getting involved in a process of dialogue. This was the Argentine scenario in 2011: an asymmetric configuration among the candidates and a presidential reelection that was almost certain. Moreover, the legitimacy of the candidate with a better position was not based on these type of dialogues. Thus, the winner had little incentives to dialogue, since it could lead to greater restriction of its space for action in the future. CIPPEC was able to dialogue directly and deeply with the opposition candidates and their teams about different issues, but the dialogue with the incumbent candidate was mediated by academic and political institutions linked to the government.

On the contrary, it is expected that conditions of higher uncertainty about the outcome may foster this type of exercises because there would be more than one actor interested in investing in government formation since their strategies would be less structured. It is very important that think tanks understand this context at the time of investing in these efforts.

A second lesson is related to the number of issues that the think tank aims to address with an initiative like this one. In 2011, CIPPEC worked on 15 public policy issues, for which 15 memos were produced, each with their respective proposals. The initiative intended to address whole State, thus generating a comprehensive and systemic view of the government's responsibilities. Although it meant an extraordinary exercise of systemic coherence within the organisation, this focus also meant developing a diversified influencing strategy in order to reach every stakeholder. This resulted in a huge effort in terms of production, reflection and dialogue. Thus, facing 2015, the new initiative Argentina Debate will focus only on a series of leading issues (Education, Infrastructure, Early Childhood and Institutional Quality). This will make it possible to better focus the influencing strategy.

I should say that neither of these two strategies is necessarily better than the other. The choice will depend on the context and the think tanks' capacity (for instance, in 2011 we built alliances with other institutions on issues in which CIPPEC had no expertise). Moreover, the holistic exercise of 2011 gave CIPPEC a panoramic vision of different policy issues, and many actors saw the institution as a space capable of making contributions with policy proposals for electoral campaigns. This 'capital' will be used facing the next presidential election, but now we will focus on the most relevant issues on the public agenda.

Third, such an important initiative cannot be developed in isolation. It is important to build alliances with organisations with sectorial relevance, public legitimacy, and influencing capacity. This will raise the initiative's capacity to generate dialogue. In 2011, we invited peer organisations with expertise in certain policy issues to produce some of the documents. Facing 2015, a Strategic Committee was set up (with former Foreign Ministers, ambassadors, journalists, unions, and other figures with social relevance) with the objective of building legitimacy for the project. We have also associated with a group of young private entrepreneurs who expressed their intention to contribute to improve the culture of public debate in the country.

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A fourth lesson is related to the fact that influencing exercises in elections suppose a kind of “seasonality” regarding the think tank’s influencing strategy. I mean, every 4 years (this is the case in Argentina), the institution takes the decision to focus on certain policy issues. Nonetheless, this effort represents a challenge concerning the communication of those other issues on which the institution works on and that, although they might not be part of this initiative, are still relevant for the organisation’s reputation and sustainability.

The fifth lesson is related to the dilemma between developing a proposal-based initiative or a dialogue-based one. In 2011, the experience was mainly a proposal-based: we bet for a deep reflection on different issues with a range of very specific proposals. Facing 2015, Argentina Debate tries to be more a platform to promote public debate about the country’s development rather than about a set of specific proposals. To do this, the initial documents, produced by CIPPEC’s and other organisations’ experts will be used as triggers for dialogue that will lead to a new set of documents strengthened by the dialogue with leading politicians, academics and business leaders in each topic.

Sixth, it is necessary to think about how the influencing strategy will be operationalised. I refer to the dilemma between the visibility of actions vs. what we call “silent influence”. Related to this, another issue is the timing of the activities. In Agenda for the President, we prioritised the production in 2010 (a year before the elections), followed by a strategy of dialogue and debate in 2011. But we learnt that the electoral year leaves little time for dialogue, since every actor is fully dedicated to the campaign. Thus, facing 2015 we will develop a programmatic influencing strategy during 2014, thus strengthening the public campaign for the presidential debate in 2015.

Finally, dialogue processes tend not to have very tangible final impacts. Although dialogue is worth to seek in of itself, since it entails the improvement of political culture conditions, it is necessary to materialise its dialogue into something more specific. Generating documents that promote discussion is not enough; it is also important to count with material that shows how the framework of ideas has been enriched by the dialogue. After the 2011 campaign, CIPPEC gathered both the work in the policy memos and the results of the dialogue in the book 100 policies to foster development.

### **LE: What would be the best funding model for this type of initiatives?**

FS: Ideally, this type of exercises should be developed with the organisations’ own resources. This would give the initiative more freedom to shape the agenda and will mean less transactional cost in terms of agreeing actions with donors.

But counting with the support of international cooperation resources enhances the ability of the initiative to have compared perspective to other similar exercises (for instance, for CIPPEC it was very important to count with CIPE’s support in order to learn from Mexican experiences). International support may fulfill a fundamental role at enhancing South-South cooperation schemes that allow the transfer of the influence technology in elections between peer organizations. But to be implemented, these initiatives require knowledge from and relation with national actors; and that is the think tanks’ main contribution.

At the same time, domestic funding facilitates a broader discussion, since it commits more stakeholders to the policy dialogue. The challenge is that this funding will not be perceived as a conflict of interest behind the support to the initiative.

In short, the funding of these processes creates dilemmas that need to be solved according to the national context and the political culture.

**LE: How could cooperation among think tanks be coordinated in order to improve this technology of influence?**

FS: Firstly, it is necessary to document national processes and identify patterns in the political context that allow to understand the differences among influencing strategies.

Secondly, it would be important to make visible what other countries do in the context of electoral campaigns. To do this, it is necessary to deepen the inter-regional dialogue in the world.

Finally, specific workshops could be developed for think tanks' staff, in which these type of initiatives may be analysed. These workshops could address the different components of this new technology of influence: editorial strategy, governance, funding, etc.

*To read a more systematic reflection about the initiative “Presidential Agenda 2011–2015”, see the document “Promoting a national policy forum: CIPPEC’s Agenda for the President 2011–2015”. This interview was translated to Spanish by Federico Frascheri.*

**As a key lesson it is necessary to recognise the pragmatic role of political campaigns: parties and candidates will participate of a broader discussion just as long as they consider that they will obtain political advantages from doing so; unless in situations in which public pressure makes this unavoidable.**

**MARCELO MANCUELLO**



# Paraguay debate: The challenge of nourishing the political debate in times of elections

BY MARCELO MANCUELLO

*Marcelo Mancuello is a researcher and consultant of the Center of Analysis and Diffusion of the Paraguayan Economy (CADEP). In 2013, CADEP, Instituto Desarrollo and other 5 civil society organizations developed the Paraguay Debate initiative, in an effort to nourish the political debate in the country in face of the April 2013 elections.*



Paraguay Debate has its origins in the pre-electoral period of the 2013 General Elections in Paraguay. It was an initiative of the think tanks CADEP and Instituto Desarrollo, which had presented proposals to the Think Tank Initiative to fund the preparation of Public Policy Notes as a contribution to the debate in the electoral process. From this original idea, and inspired by CIES's experience in Peru, CADEP and ID sought coordination with different actors of civil society interested in taking part in the electoral process in order to develop an inter-organisational platform that eventually gathered several institutions: besides CADEP and Instituto Desarrollo, the alliance also included Centro de Información y Recursos para el Desarrollo (CIRD), DECIDAMOS Campaña por la Expresión Ciudadana, Desarrollo en Democracia (DENDE), Gestión Ambiental (geAm), Semillas para la Democracia) and 5 others as organisations.

The challenge was huge. Since the events that led to the parliamentary destitution of former President Fernando Lugo, the social and political climate was troubled. Besides of the known patronage logics that signaled the transition process of democracy in Paraguay, political speeches often ended in confrontations and the prevailing approach to political campaigns in the country tended towards the construction of images and the use of marketing tools.

In this context, it was hard to reorient the debate towards public policy content and show that different political groups could come together around their approaches and proposals and not just through conflicts or aggressions. These kind of personality-based discussions which led to confrontation were also promoted by the media, which created an inertial effect that ended with society expecting little or nothing from the political debates.

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Within this scenario, and in order to fulfill the objectives of the Paraguay Debate platform, the alliance designed an influencing plan that eventually promoted a TV debate among the main contenders over topics related to economic and social development.

During the experience, communication activities were targeted at three different audiences. First, Paraguay Debate tried to reach politicians by producing evidence-based information for the development of government's plans and programmes. Second, political journalists were targeted with materials that aimed to qualify the topics they were interested in and strengthen their capacity to delve deeper into a number of issues relevant for development. Finally, the general public, the main beneficiary of the initiative, was a focus of the partners' efforts in order to wake up their interest towards the candidates and their parties' proposals over the main topics affecting their lives and the country's development.

The main strategy consisted in the production of Policy Notes, based on the expertise of each of the organisations involved in the platform. A total of 12 Policy Notes were produced on:

1. Economic Development
2. Governance
3. Environmental Sustainability
4. Climate Change
5. Education
6. Health
7. Public Finance
8. Agricultural Development
9. Childhood Investment
10. Tax Reform
11. Open Government and
12. Justice Reform.

Different formats were used in order to communicate the notes: they were published in digital form, disseminated through social networks, presented in radio, printed as technical summaries, compiled in publications for the general public, analysed through interviews, presented and debated with candidates and their political teams, and their main aspects were emphasised in various publications directed to political journalists in order to help them to ask the candidates the key questions about their government plans. All these tools were inspired by documents and mechanisms implemented by CIES during the General Elections in Peru in 2011.

This strong awareness campaign led to quick changes among the different social actors we were targeting. The presence in the media of Paraguay Debate's messages raised the interest of the candidates to offer their opinions about the topics considered in the policy notes. It also increased the public's knowledge of the candidates' opinions and of journalists who began to demand answers to the candidates and parties. At the same time, it triggered a considerable increase in public debate activities in the media, which started to consider the policy implications of the electoral campaign more assiduously.

But Paraguay Debate aimed further: the project tried to bring the candidates' confrontation of ideas onto the public sphere. The platform promoted a series of 4 debates with each candidate's technical teams. This activity had to tackle the usual obstacles of

political confrontation, and the two main parties (Asociación Nacional Republicana and Partido Radical Liberal Auténtico) did not participate of the discussion. They thought that they would be conceiving an advantage to their opponents if they were to present their programmes in public.

Despite the absentees, the debates worked as a test of the methods that would be used for the presidential debate. Moreover, interest in the initiative was triggered among subnational actors, who promoted 2 additional debates among the candidates for Governor of the Departments of Caaguazú and Ñeembucú.

Finally, the debate on TV was agreed by the partners of the platform, the 4 main candidates (including current president Horacio Cartes) and the Center of Regulation, Norms and Communication Studies (CERNECO), which gathers the main radio, TV and press companies of the country. The debate was broadcasted by every terrestrial channel, cable channel and was also web-streamed. According to estimates, the broadcast reached 1.5 million households. The debate took place in a context of respect and compliance with the rules established and agreed with during the preparations.

As a final balance, it is possible to say that Paraguay Debate produced a series of positive results: organisations were able to influence as they had never been able to during the public debate by introducing the issues that interested each of the organisations integrating the platform as the key topics for the discussion; after the elections, the platform became new space of reference regarding policy proposals; the proposals in the documents were considered in many of the government programmes of the main parties; the current National Development Plan, with its main pillars (Inclusive Economy, Poverty Reduction and Paraguay's International Insertion), was clearly influenced by the analyses included in the Policy Notes; and the importance of approaching these topics was installed in the media and among journalists, whose role in the success of the initiative was central.

As a key lesson it is necessary to recognise the pragmatic role of political campaigns: parties and candidates will participate of a broader discussion just as long as they consider that they will obtain political advantages from doing so; unless in situations in which public pressure makes this unavoidable. Moreover, during the discussions previous to the TV debate it was necessary to make concessions regarding the procedures and rules of the debate, which modified the dynamics of the discussion. As this practice becomes increasingly consolidated election after election, the methodology may be improved and the quality of the discussion should also be enhanced.

*This post was translated to Spanish by Federico Frascheri and revised by Enrique Mendizabal.*

The articles and interviews presented in the series “Think tanks and electoral processes: lessons from Latin America”, have approached the experiences of five important think tanks in the region that put their trust on their ability to raise the quality of public debate facing elections in their countries. Considering some nuances, the five cases put in practice a kind of “technology of influence” to meet their objectives.

# Lessons on the role of Latin American think tanks in electoral processes – the way forward

BY LEANDRO ECHT



Presidential campaigns in many developing countries do not typically include serious discussions on strategic public policy issues. On the contrary, they usually revolve around vague references to desirable universal goals without specifying how these initiatives would be funded, what is the concrete action plan that will be implemented to achieve them, and what are the alternatives to be considered.

While there are numerous cases in which civil society, through think tanks and civil society organisations, has influenced the policy choices and decisions of governments, the role of think tanks in presidential campaigns has been under studied, particularly in Latin America.

The articles and interviews presented in the series “Think tanks and electoral processes: lessons from Latin America”, have approached the experiences of five important think tanks in the region that put their trust on their ability to raise the quality of public debate facing elections in their countries. Considering some nuances, the five cases put in practice a kind of “technology of influence” to meet their objectives.

## Lessons

If we observed carefully approach these experiences, the following strategies appear to be more common:

- The production of policy documents or briefs with recommendations on a range of strategic issues for national development.
- Alliances with other CSOs and think tanks with sectorial expertise, public legitimacy and/or advocacy capacity.
- Meetings with political parties’ technical teams or presidential candidates to present and discuss the proposals developed in the policy documents.

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- Close work with the media to increase the impact of the initiative.
- Building links with relevant public sector agencies to encourage (and even organise) a debate between the presidential candidates.

In turn, the different experiences, with different results, have left a series of lessons that are presented below.

### **About the context**

- For these experiences to be somewhat fruitful, it is important that the electoral process presents a minimum level of competitiveness between the candidates. In cases where the candidate with the most voting intention is clearly ahead of its competitors, there won't be any incentives for dialogue and debate with civil society. On the contrary, with a solid advantage, candidates would prefer to stay out of spaces for public dialogue.
- At the same time, scenarios in which the current government is the main alternative discourage the incumbent to engage in the kind of dialogue that think tanks seek to promote.
- It is expected then that greater conditions of uncertainty about who will win the elections favour this type of exercise, as there would be more than one stakeholder interested in shaping the next government's policy plans.

### **About the funding**

- Ideally, this type of initiative should be carried out with think tanks' own funds. This will give them more freedom to set the agenda and will reduce transactional costs in terms of the agreeing actions with several donors (FEDESARROLLO).
- If think tanks need to get funding from among organisations from the international cooperation, it is important to create a common fund with contributions from different agencies (CIES 2011).
- On the other hand, having resources from the international cooperation could enhance the ability of the initiative to gain a comparative perspective of other similar exercises (CIPPEC 2011 and CADEP). Donors can play a key role in enhancing South-South collaboration schemes to transfer the experience to other organisations.
- In turn, funding from national entrepreneurs facilitates a broader discussion since this scheme commits the participation of a wide range of actors from within the policy community (CIPPEC 2011). The challenge is to prevent this funding from being seen as a source of conflict of interest for the initiative.
- In any case, funding these processes inevitably generate dilemmas that must be solved according to the relevant context and political culture.

- It is important to involve donors (where ever they are from) not only in the financial support but also in the design and implementation of the project (CIES 2011).

### **About policy documents**

- The technical quality of the policy documents is critical because it enhances the initiative's capacity to dialogue with different actors. However, technical quality is not enough. The documents must contain practical implications and be friendly to their audiences.
- The terms of reference for the studies and guidance throughout the written process are important to ensure the quality and standardisation of the studies.
- It is important to consider a general coherence among the various documents and sectorial proposals presented by the initiative (CIPPEC 2011).

### **About the choice of topics**

- Think tanks can opt for a few policy issues that are strategic for national development and on which they are clear experts; or they may prefer to cover a broad range of policy issues thus addressing a comprehensive and systemic view of all the responsibilities of government.
- The choice of issues is important as it can define who will be likely to listen; it may affect the skills and resources necessary to communicate the initiative's key messages; and should determine the make up of the networks that will be necessary.

### **About the authors**

- Think tanks can engage their researchers in the production of the documents (CIPPEC and the coalition Paraguay Debate), they can cast a wider net launching open or closed called for authors from among their networks to choose the authors (CIES and FARO), or may combine both accruing to the sectorial expertise of the organisations (FEDESARROLLO and CIPPEC 2011).
- In addition to the recognition that the authors possess in their fields of expertise, it is necessary to consider their relational capital so that they can contribute to the impact of the initiative.
- In those policy issues in which the think tanks have no or little expertise, most organisations have chosen to forge alliances with other civil society organisations and universities with sectorial knowledge (CIPPEC and FEDESARROLLO).
- In any case, it is important to promote cross-fertilisation of ideas between the authors of the documents.
- It is necessary to involve the perspective of non-academic readers and the public –and even from foreign sources.



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### About the influencing strategies

- In most of the experiences, policy documents fulfilled the role of triggering the dialogue with the parties' technical teams and candidates.
- When you choose to work on a wide range of topics, it is necessary to have a diversified influencing strategy to reach all the different audiences in each policy sector, which may imply strenuous efforts of production, reflection, and dialogue.
- To achieve the greatest impact in terms of media presence and policy influence, activities that would be required from the authors must be established from the beginning and included in their work plans. In addition, think tanks must create the right incentives for the authors to get involved as key players of the advocacy process all the way through the electoral campaign –and often afterwards.
- Such holistic initiatives can not be done alone. It is important to forge alliances with organisations with sectorial relevance, public legitimacy and/or advocacy capacity. This will increase the capacity of the initiative to dialogue with different stakeholders.
- The think tanks can opt for a more propositive approach (CIPPEC, FEDESARROLLO, CIES, FARO and CADEP) or instead focus on building proposals through dialogue with the actors of the political community (CIPPEC 2014). In the latter case, it is necessary to enrich the original documents with inputs that emerge from the dialogue with key politicians, academics and private entrepreneurs.
- The think tanks can bet on a intensive communication strategy to ensure a broad exposure on the media and high visibility of the project's activities, or instead it can choose a low profile strategy based on building bridges with candidates and their teams. In some cases, the closed nature of the meetings can inject confidence in the candidates or their campaign managers (CIES 2011).
- To increase the chances of achieving the presidential debate, a broad pro-debate coalition must be established, involving the media, CSOs, private entrepreneurs, unions and different forces across the political spectrum. The coalition should be apolitical and independent (as a way to increase the participation of political forces), and must be accompanied by a public awareness campaign (CADEP). It may or may not be part of the initiative to inform the electoral debate.
- In countries with strong regional powers, think tanks have chosen to bring the proposals and promote dialogue outside their capital cities (CIES, FEDESARROLLO and FARO). This is important to raise the profile of the initiative and gain momentum for national level debates.
- It is also important to build synergies with similar initiatives in the county and in other countries (CIES 2011).

## About the project management

- This type of initiatives present a unique opportunity for think tanks to gather the knowledge accumulated by their different research teams (CIPPEC 2011 and 2014).
- These exercises of influence on electoral processes mark a certain “seasonality” in the advocacy strategy of think tanks. That is, every 4 or 5 years, the think tank makes the decision to focus on certain issues of the public agenda. However, this effort involves the challenge of not failing to communicate the other issues that the institution works on and that even though they may not be part of the agenda, still remain relevant to the think tanks and the country.
- A tension could emerge between short-term projects (such as the electoral ones) and medium-term projects. It is therefore essential that what is achieved in the electoral projects (such as a closer relationship with political parties and the media) is capitalised for the institutional activities. In other words, think tanks can turn these ‘seasonal’ projects into long term ones.
- A frequent challenge is to ensure harmony between the project’s schedule and the electoral calendar.
- Generally, the electoral year leaves little space for policy dialogue, as all players are strongly focused on the campaign. Ideally, think tanks need to ensure their funding well in advance and that the policy documents are ready before political parties begin to define their manifestos. Paying attention to this timing will make the dialogue and proposals more meaningful to the public agenda.
- It is important to have a Board to oversee and guide the project activities. This space can involve the donors of the initiative, or be shaped by a broad range of actors with social representation to provide legitimacy to the project (CIPPEC 2014).
- Diversity is crucial to the success of these initiatives: at the level of proposals, allies, donors and political actors.
- The project coordinator is very important, and should have experience interacting with different types of actors, specially politicians.

## About communications

- These initiatives need to carefully balance the investment in research and in communication. The documents, rather than new research, are systematisation or updates developed by experts on each of the topics. An important portion of the efforts must go towards dissemination and promoting dialogue.
- While the production of documents can be delegated to different authors or organisations, it is important that communications remain broadly centralised.

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- Press officers are key parts of these initiatives. The edition of the original documents is very important, but even more is their “translation” into various formats such as for radio and television. Organising press conferences, interviews, brochures and various events is also important, as well as media training for the authors.
- If the demand for research by the media is to be encouraged, then it is important to have the resources and interest to meet those requirements (reciprocity).
- If the dissemination of documents is meant to respond to the demand by political parties and other actors in the policy community, a very heterogeneous level of communication documents between the technical teams should be favored. But there could be some policy issues that require a more active promotion to be perceived as necessary. Demand led is not always better.

### **About organising the debate**

- Regarding the timing of the debate, it is important that it holds some distance from the end of the campaigns, since the candidates will have less interest to participate. However, think tanks must also take into account that the interest of candidates to participate in public events and the interest of the public opinion to listen to them will increase as the election date approaches.
- Organising a debate is a very arduous process involving numerous instances of negotiation with the candidates’ teams (CIES 2011 and CADEP). The think tanks may not have the political and technical capacity to do it alone. They should consider working in partnership.

### **About the expected impacts**

- The greatest strength of these initiatives lies in democratising the spaces for debate and drawing attention on key policy issues for the public agenda. There is no guarantee about specific policy impacts.
- It is an important way to strengthen future advocacy work with the elected government, for instance through monitoring promises made during the electoral campaign or providing the elected officials with advice.
- Assessing the achieved impact vis a vis what was previously planned, and documenting the effort’s findings (such as what CIPPEC has done) can help to improve the think tanks’ internal processes and generate long-term and valuable reflections that contribute to the institutional strengthening of these organisations.

### **About the post-elections work**

- It is important that all the work undertaken for the electoral campaign is consolidated in larger compilations, ideally as part of the publications plans of the organisations (CIES 2011 and FEDESARROLLO).
- Dialogue processes tend to be a little intangible in terms of impact. While dialogue has a value in itself, since it is supposed to improve the country’s political culture,

it is necessary to make the results a bit more tangible to favour future support from donors. (CIPPEC 2011).

## Contributions to strengthen an influence technology on elections

This series of articles and interviews, along with the previous document Promoting a national policy forum: CIPPEC's "Agenda for the President 2011-2015", are intended to help other think tanks to understand their potential role in electoral campaigns and provide guidance for the involvement of think tanks in this area. We foresee that this effort may present a key opportunity to empower civil society and promote a more effective role of think tanks in the political arena.

However, from the articles and interviews as well as from discussions with various think tanks' leaders, we have come to a set of actions that would be desirable to explore in order to strengthen these experiences and refine this influencing technology. These are ideas that can be addressed not only by think tanks that seek to promote these initiatives, but also by international and national donors interested in raising the quality of public debates in developing countries.

Some possible actions are listed below:

- Build a body of comparative studies that involve more national cases thus helping to identify patterns and help understand the differences among think tanks' influence strategies.
- Make visible what other countries are doing in the context of electoral campaigns. For this it is necessary to deepen the dialogue among regions.
- Develop specific workshops for think tanks' staff in which such initiatives could be studied. These workshops could decompose the technology to address each of its components separately: editorial strategy, governance, communication, funding, etc.
- Build alliances of regional networks to promote national initiatives adapted to the each country's characteristics.
- Set-up a website to gather information about all initiatives seeking to influence electoral processes: with links to cases and relevant documents, information from all participating organisations, and audiovisual materials related to projects in each of the countries.
- Develop audiovisual resources on the various initiatives, such as short videos in which the directors of each think tank explain the importance of such initiatives (in 2011 CIPPEC and GNet gathered some of these videos, in Spanish: CIPPEC, CIES, Fedesarrollo y Grupo FARO), or brief videos in which presidential candidates refer to the role of think tanks in these processes, or videos on presidential debates that have taken place in each country.

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THINK TANKS & ELECTIONS

**It is important to remember  
that democracy is not  
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LUISA SOLANO

# FUSADES and 2012 elections in El Salvador: electoral reforms and promotion of the exercise of suffrage

BY LUISA SOLANO

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## Context

The dynamics of the electoral system in El Salvador underwent significant transformations before the legislative and municipal elections in March 2012. The first change, established by the Constitutional Chamber in July 2010, dismissed closed and locked candidates' lists, which was the traditional way of voting and had been used for over 50 years. It replaced this with a system of closed but unlocked lists, what allowed the voter to order the list of candidates in one party by the so-called preferential vote.

The new normative was established 20 months before the election, but the parliamentary groups in the Legislative Assembly resisted to legislate it until two months before the election of new authorities, when the Legislature finally approved the legal framework that would apply in the elections of March 2012.

The second element of change for the 2012 elections was the implementation of residential voting in 185 of the 262 municipalities, covering 48% of citizens allowed to vote. This tool was applied gradually in 2006 (7 municipalities) and 2009 (23 municipalities), but it was not until 2012 that it was significantly extended. One of the positive effects of residential voting is the segmentation of preferences of the electorate. In this sense, although it has not been proven that the residential vote has a direct correlation with the level of participation; it is considered as a tool that encourages citizens' approach to the polls.

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Given the situation described, and considering the short time in which the legal basis was adopted, a major challenge was to inform the elector on the new rules that would be applied during the elections of 2012.

In this sense, FUSADES had a decade of studies and proposals to strengthen the system of representation and to build a qualified institutional democracy. FUSADES has promoted a comprehensive political reform through research, debates in public forums with experts, and legal reform initiatives, which have helped to raise the level of discussion. With this background in the field, FUSADES' Department of Political Studies, designed and implemented a project of civic education and research of the impact of the reform in order to collaborate in the voting exercise, understand the new way of voting, and analyse the election results.

At the same time, FUSADES was convened by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to be part of a consortium of organisations aimed at empowering citizens with information. Thus, FUSADES worked on the design and implementation of the civic education campaign in partnership with two youth organisations of national prestige: CREO and TECHO.

## **Objectives of the initiative**

The objective of the education campaign was to “educate the public on the valid forms of vote with emphasis on youth and vulnerable communities.” The project also included a component of guidance on “where to vote”, considering the approach of the polls to the voters that the new reform implied. In particular, the campaign sought to facilitate the exercise of suffrage, promote citizen participation and transparency in the electoral process. This was promoted through internet broadcasting, universities and poor communities.

## **Design and implementation of the campaign**

Three spaces were created to implement the campaign:

1. A virtual platform, communicated through traditional media and social networks,
2. A direct approach to major universities in the country, in coordination with CREO, who spread the message through the youth network that supports the organization, and
3. A direct approach to vulnerable communities, in coordination with TECHO.

Specific activities were designed for each of these three areas of work.

1. A website was developed under the first component, which concentrated the information regarding the campaign (the same site was used for the civic



education campaign in 2015). The site also contains video tutorials on how and where to vote. To promote the site and the information it contained, radio spots were produced, along with messages in marquees and billboards in the streets, and social networks of participating organizations were actively used.

2. In order to work with universities, volunteers were recruited to join the project as replicators of knowledge, who were trained in a two-day workshop. Visits to universities were also scheduled in coordination with their authorities. The work methodology consisted on placing stands in common areas of the university, such as the bar or parking, and explain the valid forms of vote through educational materials, boards and leaflets. Twice it was possible to conduct a more formal exposure in university classrooms.
3. Regarding the visits to communities, meetings were held with leaders of each community to coordinate a schedule to conduct trainings, with the support of volunteers previously trained by TECHO. Participatory talks about the importance of voting were conducted at each visit, which aimed at informing on valid forms of voting and helping participants to clarify their doubts regarding the process. A mock vote with ballots was also performed. All this was accompanied by educational materials such as posters, brochures, descriptive material and boards, which were left in communal houses and shops of the community, or directly house by house.

## Results

Among the results achieved by the virtual platform component, the campaign placed 25 marquees and 6 billboards in the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador, 1759 radio spots in the major radio stations in the country, and constant appearances in the advertising space of Facebook. More than 3,800 views of explanatory videos were recorded, and they were shared over 200 times on Facebook and Twitter. As for the work in universities, 20 educational centers were visited, with the support of 32 volunteers. More than 1,900 students were directly reached. Finally, 12 communities were visited with the support of 36 volunteers, surpassing the number of municipalities originally anticipated. The campaign reached 375 Salvadoran families, training a total of 2,291 people in 7 departments.

Another important result was the further development of academic research on the impact of preferential voting and residential vote based on the results of the elections of 2012. The study included conducting focus groups with key stakeholders, an opinion poll to measure public perception of the electoral process and a quantitative and qualitative analysis based on official information from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal.

## Lessons and new challenges

The project's success was based on the synergy achieved between the civil society organizations. Informing and educating citizens about the electoral event of 2012 was a

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unifying element that allowed to achieve the goals, despite the difficulties experienced during the campaign, such as limited runtime.

A challenge ahead concerns the sustainability of such alliances in order to promote the adoption of pending reforms, such as the separation of functions of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, the implementation of effective controls that increase the transparency of political parties' funding, the discussion of a possible transition to the system of electoral districts, and the strengthening of mechanisms to access public information, among others.

It should be clarified that for recent legislative elections in March 2015, open lists and cross-voting were implemented, also established by the Constitutional Chamber, which forces a post-election analysis on the impact of the reform, disadvantages of counting and processing of results, and the amendments to be made to overcome the identified weaknesses.

Finally, it is important to remember that democracy is not confined to elections. While these are the basis of the system of democratic representation, participation of the population should be reflected not only in their right to vote. The figure of controllers can also be an instrument to involve the citizenship in the demand for timely information to monitor the exercise of power, transparency of government institutions and effectiveness of public administration.

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Researchers now have the means to inform the public about what we know – and don't know. It's an opportunity to get off the sidelines – so that politicians or journalists don't get away with iffy promises or sound-bites.

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JONATHAN BRECKON

From his article: **Social scientists have a real opportunity to influence what politicians say in the run-up to the General Election**

By working with other think tanks as part of a network, think tanks could ensure that their proposals cover all aspects of government. They could ensure that their work and ideas would reach a broader audience than if they did it all along. By including organisations with different skills they could combine research, communications, logistics and even politics without having to spend an extra penny.

# Think tanks and electoral processes: an opportunity that should not be missed

BY ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL



In the winter of 2007, Carlos Eduardo Aramburú (CEA), joined a group of LSE students at a table at the back of a pub in Holborn. He'd just been involved in the organisation of the 2006 presidential debates in Peru and in which CIES, the organisation he led, had played a key role in staging. Anyone who has ever listened to CEA tell a story will be able to picture the scene in that rainy and dark afternoon in London. All our attention was on him and on his tales from the underbelly of Peruvian politics. The pints remained untouched for as long as he spoke.

The debate was the cherry on top of a new project that CIES had launched earlier in the year: Elecciones Perú 2006. The project sought to improve the quality of the electoral campaign and use the electoral process as a way of influencing the future government. It was a true innovation and went against everything that we'd heard about elections and think tanks in the past.

I was one of the few at the table who knew about it because CIES had been working with the RAPID Programme, where I worked, to share its experience with Grupo Faro in Ecuador.

Elections, think tanks are often quick to say, are not the best time to attempt to influence. Although elections in developed countries appear to be the perfect moment to showcase think tanks' research to a political class keen on new ideas to present to the electorate, few think tanks in developing countries see it that way. For them, elections are a period of uncertainty that is better to tread carefully. This is not a time to rock the boat, they say. It is better to focus on research than on communications. Better to build relationships in private and maybe even inquire about possible future jobs in government; but not to challenge and get on the wrong side of possibly future leaders.

This is understandable. Elections in many developing countries, where one is unlikely to find mature political parties, competent and well-informed journalists, and a decent political debate, can be a mine-field for think tanks that, on a regular year, struggle to remain neutral or, at least, at the margins of an ever worsening political system. In Peru, a study by Martin Tanaka and others found that the relationship between political parties

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and think tanks was so strained after a long-term process of weakening of the institutions of the political system that no respectable researcher would want to be seen to be too close to a party. Connections, when they existed, were purely informal.

It is also dangerous, in some cases, to use elections as a platform for think tanks visibility. In countries where authoritarian political leaders frown upon the participation of others in the political space, think tanks could be easily and quickly undermined. And given that many think tanks receive foreign funds or depend on public funding this could play out in many different ways –but always against them.

By and large, think tanks have little or no influence on politics and, in electoral years, they cannot expect things to be much better. They can, however, expect them to get much worse. All of this conspires to make think tanks particularly risk adverse during elections.

CIES and other think tanks in Latin America, however, appear to have found a way to turn the tables on politics and gain some control over the process and the political space.

They have created a small and temporary oasis of technocratic certainty from which they can launch a strategic ‘attack’ on the enemies of good politics. And this approach appears to be working.

## **The idea**

The idea is quite simple. It makes me think a bit of the UK shadow cabinet model. But I think it also has elements of a cross-party commission. Basically, think tanks (on their own or working as part of a network of organisations) turn their attention away from sector specific policy influence to develop and promote a whole-of-government manifesto: they set out the challenges and policy solutions that the next government (whoever wins) should address.

This manifesto, that in all cases, involves a series of papers (some more academic than others, depending on the think tank and the context) produced by a range of authors and experts, provides a technocratic basis (although I will be the first one to argue that there is no such a thing as purely technocratic) for the project.

The real work begins when the think tanks take this policy portfolio to the parties, the media and the public. Unsurprisingly, during a year in which they are all open to listen to ideas, demand for this kind of input is particularly high. After all, whether they want to accept it or not, electoral years are a time when they definitely need new policy ideas. In some cases, incumbents, especially if they are popular, might not be interested in the more public engagements that the project proposes but they will still be willing to listen.

The projects described in this series all seek to communicate their ideas through various channels to make sure that they reach all the important players in the political system

-and who will be responsible for outlining the future policy agenda. They work with academic networks to reach technocrats, with parties to reach politicians, with the media to reach all the former as well as the general public.

In the process they must address a number of possible mine-fields:

- By talking with everyone they avoid being labeled as partisan. Sure, they are working with political parties but with all of them. And they try to do as much as possible in public -the meetings with the parties may be private but the advice they provide is published.
- They try to avoid technical debates only by reaching out to the general media and not just one favourite journalist.
- They try to tackle the most important issues facing the country, making sure that they have to work in partnership with other organisations.

In the process, these initiatives help the think tanks to become not only sources of ideas but, for the manner in which they work, a new public space capable of promoting and sometimes hosting technical and political debates. CEA's story was as much about the politics of the negotiations between the parties as about the fact that all the parties decided to place their trust on a group of research centres. In the manner in which they had conducted themselves until then (in the way they had chosen the policy issues to study, how they commissioned and produced the reports, and how they communicated their findings), they had demonstrated to be neutral to the interests of the parties and their leaders.

## Replicability

In the pre-RCT world, ideas did not need to be scientifically tested to be replicated (if that was even ever possible). It did not take much for this new idea (which CIES had not invented itself) to spread across the region. Each think tank that took it on decided to adapt it to fit its own context. And even then, they have learned a few things during their implementation, that will surely help them in the future.

This idea would work well in other countries and in other regions. It gives think tanks control over a process they often have none. It provides them with an opportunity to learn from repetition (electoral processes can be broken down into small 'games': policy papers, events, debates, etc. that can help them learn faster). This idea gives think tanks an opportunity to shine in years when they would have otherwise not expected to get a mention in the media; or shine in a way that shields them from undesirable consequences. They may even become national institutions if they manage to position themselves as the promoters of presidential debates.

The idea is not expensive to deliver. These initiatives can be undertaken with think tanks own funds and simply by re-focusing the think tanks' attention away from unrelated and

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uncoordinated project based communication towards the elections themselves. Think tanks could, for example, re-brand their publications during an electoral year so that they would become associated with the initiative; Policy Briefs, for instance, could become Electoral Briefs.

Communications during the electoral year could prioritise communications with political parties, the media and the public in a manner that focused the attention on the electoral process.

They could even seek to produce new research in preparation for the elections.

CIPPEC's model is particularly interesting in this respect. While CIES sought to commission new studies on key (yet board) sectoral issues (even if they were systematisation), CIPPEC focused its attention on a number of policy challenges and used existing evidence and knowledge to address them.

By working with other think tanks as part of a network, think tanks could ensure that their proposals cover all aspects of government. They could ensure that their work and ideas would reach a broader audience than if they did it all along. By including organisations with different skills they could combine research, communications, logistics and even politics without having to spend an extra penny.

With more funds, however, think tanks could seek to develop a more complicated initiative. They could work on the electoral process 'on-top' of their day to day work.

This kind of effort would work well in countries in Africa or Asia. It would work well even in countries where democratic institutions are less developed than in Latin America and could, if done correctly (that is, not exploding them but working with them), strengthen them in the process.

## **My preferred design**

If I had a choice (and in this blog it is fun to pretend that I do), I would consider the following characteristics:

- **Funding:** a combination of own funds and pooled funding from multiple (mostly domestic) sources. Keep funders invalid but do not let them choose the agenda nor have a say in the analysis and recommendations. You'll have to make sure they know you well before they agree to support you.
- **Choice of issues:** keep it manageable first, but make it coherent. That means that it is better to cover a few related topics than a lot of unrelated ones. But you should never leave out economic policy issues. It is, after all, the economy, stupid.
- **Combination of channels and tools:** the policy papers are an important output for this kind of project but they cannot be the only one. These projects demand that



communications be given a lot more attention than think tanks tend to. A head of communications should be as important as the head of research of the project.

- **Partners:** work with others but not just think tanks. It works best if the coalitions include organisations that can contribute in logistics, communications and fund-raising as well as research.
- **Compete:** if other think tanks or networks are organising their own initiative in the same country then engage with them early on and organise debates with them. What better way to lead than by example?
- **Not a one-off:** these projects can be planned as long-term initiatives to include national and local elections over a period covering 2 or 3 mandates (presidential or parliamentary). In the long run, new efforts will benefit from the previous iterations of the project. Also, think tanks can raise funds to monitor new governments' implementation of their recommendations as well as to revise them year on year.
- **International learning:** I would include advice from the think tanks that have done it already and seek to report on what was done with the growing community of think tanks that are working on similar initiatives.

## Impact

Funders will want to know what impact they could expect for their investment. Surely, we cannot expect that all the proposals made by the think tanks would make it to the new government's plans. Impact can come in many shapes and forms:

- **Quality of the debate:** above all, I think that one of the best possible outcomes of these efforts can be seen in the quality of the political debate. We often assume that politicians and the media do not care about information and knowledge. Or that they cannot use it even if they have access to it. I do not think this is true. Given the chance, they are more likely than not to be willing to use it. The reasons why this approach works is that for once, researchers are thinking about the politics of policy right from the beginning. This is not an after-thought at the end of a research project. This is 'politics first, research latter'. And this means that for a change researchers are able to communicate with politicians and journalists on issues that matter to them and in a way that makes sense and is useful.
- **Ideas:** not facts, not findings, not research papers but ideas and arguments. These processes have the capacity to generate policy ideas and arguments that are more likely to survive the trauma of elections. And they are far more likely to make it into the plans and the policies of future governments than the facts and findings in research papers that think tanks often try to peddle.
- **People in government:** the exercise of thinking about politics, of doing research for the challenges of government, communicating with politicians and the public, defending one's ideas and recommendations in public and private meetings, and

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the sheer intensity and length of the process inevitably leads to the influence of those who are to take on posts in government. But more interestingly, the process also provides an opportunity for political parties to find new possible policymakers from among the researchers and experts involved in the project.

- **People in think tanks:** the process, of course, also influences the researchers and experts in the think tanks. Never before and never again could they gain greater access to the private spaces of politics as during these periods and thanks to these projects. The new knowledge they gain about the politics of policy will prove to be invaluable in their daily work.
- **Continuity:** in countries where politics follow the winner takes all model, or where oppositions focus on scandals rather than ideas, think tanks provide one of the few options for political stability. They are they only to take care of the ideas that will one day save the nation. They are like genetic or seed banks: meme-banks. These kind of projects provide a huge boost in their deposits.
- **Democratic institutions:** by working with political parties and the media to develop their capacity to understand and use their ideas (this is not just about crude influencing) think tanks can help to build the kind of democratic institutions that will eventually make their work much easier and much more valuable in the future.

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