



Activists and policy experts: Exploring think tank engagement with social movements

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Abstract

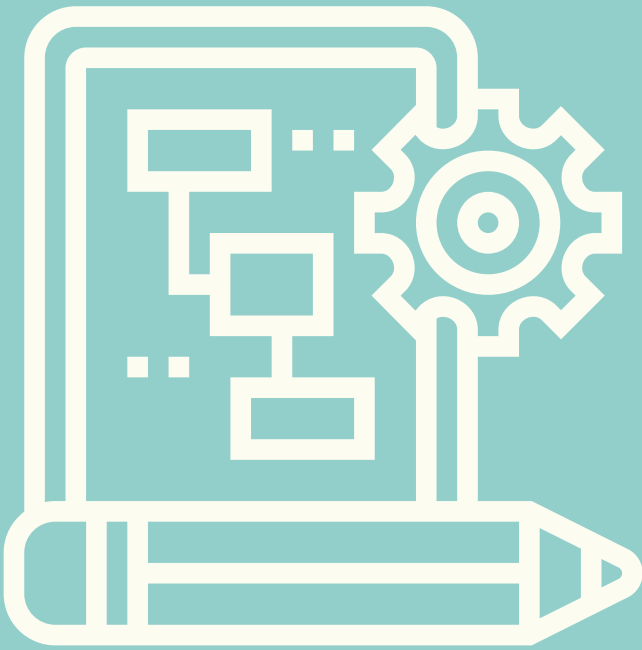
Collaborations between think tanks and social movements appear to be a positive partnership, as think tanks get to understand and engage with the lived experiences of the public and increase their impact, whilst social movements benefit from specialist knowledge and access to formal policy processes. Together they have the potential to achieve a right balance between democratic accountability and expert input. But do such collaborations exist? And if they do, what motivates partners to collaborate? What benefits do they gain from collaboration? How do relationships unfold and what do they achieve? What role do think tanks play in relation to social movements and vice versa? What difficulties do think tanks and social movements face in their relationships? How do they resolve them? And what role do funders play and what effects does this have on collaborations? This paper explores these questions through a literature review, 18 interviews over a four-month period, and two focused group discussions. It finds that think tanks and social movements do collaborate, and the main reason to do so is to acquire new knowledge and insight (albeit about different things) and to contribute to changes in themselves and in wider society. The paper discusses the findings along the questions outlined.

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Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ARD	Alliance for Rural Democracy
ASIES	Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales
AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
CEJIS	Centre for Legal Studies and Social Research
CHRI	Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
CODESRIA	Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa
CONTAG	National Confederation of Agricultural Workers
CORC	Community Organisation Resource Centre
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
COSYDEP	Coalition des Organisations en Synergie pour la Défense de l'Éducation Publique
CSEA	Centre for Study for Economies of Africa
CTFK	Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids
EC	European Commission
ERPI	Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative
ETG	Economic Trends Group
FEMNET	African Women's Development and Communication Network
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IBP	International Budget Project
INESC	Instituto de Estudos Socioeconômicos
IPAR	Initiative Prospective Agricole et Rurale
LATINDADD	Latinamerican Network for Economic and Social Justice
LSOs	Labour Service Organisations
NALEDI	National Labour and Economic Development Institute
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PLAAS	Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies
RfPs	Requests for Proposals
RTF	Right to Food
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TNCs	Transnational companies
UGM	University of Gajah Mada
US	United States of America



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1. Introduction

Background

Through human history, social movements (defined in Box 1) have been a way for people and groups to express their grievances and foster or halt change (Snow et al., 2004). Social movements have been concerned with many issues, including: material needs, democratic rights, issues of representation and the environmental effects of, and limits to, development processes. They have also been part of the process of deciding what nation states – and, increasingly, transnational companies (TNCs) – do, why they do it and whom they benefit. Social movements have changed the state's and capital's relations with different sub-sets of countries' populations, such as workers, women and farmers, helping to make the latter beneficiaries of development interventions and, more recently, active participants in them (Sinha, 2003).

Social movements have done this by resisting and opposing moves by states and businesses, mobilising citizens to pressure decisions makers and demanding changes in policy content, as well as suggesting changes in the practice of making and shaping policy (Sinha, 2003). However, social movements do not always have the specialist knowledge required to engage with elite policymakers through formal policy processes, or to propose actionable solutions to their demands, which might limit their impacts somewhat.¹

In parallel, through the last century, the expansion of the nation state, political and economic liberalisation and the availability of public and private funds nationally, especially in the US and Northern Europe, has seen the growth of think tanks or policy research organisations (defined in Box 1) across the world. They have been set up to provide policy options, legitimise policy choices, promote policy debate among stakeholders and facilitate the development of future policymakers – albeit informally (Mendizabal and Sample, 2009).

1. See Gamson (1990) and Rochon & Mazmanian (1993) for a discussion on forms of social movement success, and in particular accessing policy processes.

BOX 1: DEFINITIONS

Social movements are hard to define, and many typologies have been created based on their characteristics and outcomes (Earl, 2004). Ganz (2010) argues that they are a collective response to conditions and situations deemed intolerable and that they aim to ‘*change the rules of the game*’, but they have other characteristics as well. Snow et al. (2004) state that all definitions of social movements agree that they entail: collective action; goals or claims aimed at changes; a degree of non-institutionalised action; a certain level of organisation and some temporal continuity. Non-institutionalised action means that they are not in themselves an organisation,² but rather are composed of several organisations and individuals (who may or may not belong to other organisations).

The way that they organise can take many forms: they can be networked, single entities or coalitions, and they can also be loosely or tightly coupled. There are differences as to what this entails in their functioning, but the many forms they take in no way stop them from being social movements. Social movements are also usually outside (or on the margins) of the polity (they lack recognition as legitimate actors), and their collective and joint action mainly uses non-institutionalised means (boycotts and marches rather than lobbying). In summary, and borrowing from Snow et al. (2004) ‘social movements can be thought of as collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part’ (Snow et al. 2004, p. 11).

Think tanks are also difficult to define as the term applies to various organisations with different characteristics, development pathways and even different business models and structures. Organisations labelled think tanks include for-profit consultancies, university-based research centres, NGOs, public policy bodies, foundations, advocacy organisations and membership-based associations, to name a few. But despite their differences – and for the purpose of this research – we have defined think tanks as a diverse group of knowledge and engagement organisations that have as their (main) objective to use research to inform and/or influence policy and its outcomes. To do this, they perform a range of functions, some of which are: aiming to influence the public agenda, monitoring how specific policies are carried out, building capacities, suggesting or advocating for policy changes and so on. One of their key strategies has been to target politicians and bureaucrats by, for instance, sitting on government committees and writing policy briefings. Because of this, think tank experts tend to have a close relationship with bureaucrats (as well as funders), often changing places through the ‘revolving door’, and in many cases share personal and professional networks with them.

2. As the definition conveys, social movements are distinct from NGOs; they can be part of them, along with other actors, but one single NGOs is not a social movement. That being said, there are interesting discussions and accounts on this. This blog [Connecting Social Movements in East and Southern Africa](#) details an interesting discussion on the issue in a workshop held in Nairobi in 2019. Additionally, a report for the *Transparency and Accountability Initiative* by Joyce & Walker (2015) mentions that activists in Southeast Asia establish NGOs to be able to receive and use funds for social movements.

However, the 2008 global financial crisis, and more recently the growth of populist and anti-globalisation movements in several countries on both the political right and left, has called into question the claims and credibility of experts and the think tanks of which they are a part. As a result, in many countries, politicians and bureaucrats have been less keen to seek advice from them.³ So, some think tanks have had to turn their attention towards the public both as a stakeholder to engage with, and as a means to achieve impact. Partnerships between think tanks and social movements might, then, appear a marriage made in heaven, given that the latter are representative of subsets of the public. Think tanks get to understand and engage with the lived experiences of the public and increase their impact, while social movements benefit from specialist knowledge and access to formal policy processes. Together they can achieve a balance between democratic accountability and expert input. But do such collaborations exist?⁴ And if they do, how well do they really work and why? We intend to explore these questions in this paper.

Key questions

More specifically, we set out to answer the following questions:

- What motivates partners to collaborate? What benefits do they gain from collaboration?
- How do relationships unfold, what do partners do together and what do they achieve?
- What difficulties do think tanks and social movements face in their relationships? How do they resolve them?
- What role do funders play and what effects does this have on collaborations?

Inevitably, think tank-social movement collaborations affect and are affected by the national and international political context in which they operate. For instance, we describe collaborations in Brazil and South Africa, which have arisen through distinct political histories. Given time limitations as well as the diversity of cases (and nation states in which they are situated) we do not discuss contexts in detail (including how collaborations have been affected by hostile political environments and shrinking civil space). As we state in our conclusion, we suggest that this is a topic for further research. Moreover, we cannot draw generalised conclusions based on examples from these contexts. Nevertheless, we do intend to provide the reader with a ‘flavour’ of issues that may be of relevance and that are worth considering. Finally, we do not intend to explore the changes that social movements and think tanks working together have contributed to.



Photo: GovernmentZA, Creative Commons

3. See ‘Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove’. *Financial Times*.

4. Through the text we will use the word ‘collaboration’ to refer to any form of engagement, relationship or even partnership that these two parties have formed.

Methodology

We answered the questions above by taking the following steps:

1. Reviewing grey and academic articles, resulting in an annotated bibliography and a documentary analysis (which integrated issues across articles);⁵
2. Undertaking 18 interviews^{6,7} lasting between 30 and 70 minutes, with people involved in, or knowledgeable about, think tank–social movement collaborations, over a four-month period between mid–November 2018 and early March 2019;⁸
3. Presenting preliminary findings at the On Think Tanks academic session in Geneva on 4 February 2019, during which comments and feedback were noted; and
4. Undertaking two parallel focussed group discussions⁹ at the On Think Tanks Conference on 5 February 2019 to gather more information from think tankers with experience of working with or being part of a social movement.

On point one above (literature review), we found very little documentation that engaged directly with think tank–social movement relations, thus most of this paper draws on insights generated from interviews.

On point two, we requested interviews by: reaching out to On Think Tanks' network of think tanks, policy engagement practitioners, funders and policymakers through direct emails and by making announcements on Twitter and LinkedIn. We also followed up with contacts provided by OSF and the authors' own personal networks. We received relatively few positive responses to our requests, possibly because people were reluctant to respond to 'cold calls', or maybe due to the sensitive nature of the questions we were asking. As such, we sought cases and examples of think tank–social movement collaborations from the past and from the present, on a variety of issues, at national, regional and global levels and in a variety of contexts including North America, Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Most key informants based their responses on their organisation's collaboration with one social movement or think tank, while others responded by drawing on several years of experience – sharing examples from a range of collaborations (and non-collaboration in one case). As a result, we generated in-depth knowledge about specific think tank–social movement collaborations as well as more generalised knowledge. We subsequently do not have the same sort of information for every case or example that is mentioned, making comparisons between cases difficult. Moreover, most key informants came from think tanks, which skews our data towards the experiences and perspective of think tank experts rather than the social movement side of the collaboration.

-
5. Most interviews were either by telephone or an internet-based calling platform, although a couple were done in person.
 6. Key informant interviews have been coded for traceability of the information but also to maintain the anonymity of informants. Quotes from interviewees I-1, I-2, I-4, I-7 and I-9 were originally in Spanish.
 7. We have made no distinction or analysis based on the type of think tank (staff size, turnover, location, age, affiliations etc) and therefore will not draw any conclusions based on these characteristics.
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 9. Twenty-three people joined the session and were separated into two groups.
-

To ensure that interviewees were as open and honest as possible, we assured them they would remain anonymous and that a detailed list of respondents would not be provided.

Organisation of the paper

The paper is organised as follows:

- The next section describes the types of think tank–social movement collaborations that we found during our research and the nature of the collaborations;
- The third section discusses why think tanks and social movements seek collaboration with one another, and the benefits that they have gained in doing so;
- Section four discusses how think tank–social movement relationships began and how they developed trust with one another;
- Section five describes the functions that think tanks and social movements have played in relation to each other;
- Section six discusses some of the difficulties that think tanks and social movements face in their collaboration, the causes and what is done to address these;
- Section seven looks into funding and the effects this has on think tank–social movement collaborations; and
- The eighth and final section concludes with implications for think tanks, social movements and funders as well as ideas for further research.



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2. Types and nature of collaboration

In this section we describe the type of collaborations we found during our research and look at what can be said about the ‘closeness’ of these collaborations.

Types of collaboration

Through our research, we found different forms of collaboration between think tanks and social movements, each stemming from a particular social and political context.^{10,11} Most collaborations involved think tanks, as organisations, collaborating with actors within a social movement. Relationships varied mainly along two lines: the strength and closeness of the connection, and the activities that both undertook. On the strength of the connection some were short, one-off affairs, while some involved more sustained engagement. Collaborations also varied in their degree of formality. The functions and activities that shaped the type of collaboration is an issue we return to in section five.

10. [Think Tanks and Social Movements](#)
11. [Think Tanks and Social Movements](#)

Here is a summary of the types of collaboration we found:

- Most commonly (in Nigeria, Senegal, Indonesia, Slovakia, Guatemala, Argentina, Brazil, Serbia and India) we found **policy research centres that took part in a movement made up of several organisations comprising NGOs as well as other research centres, activist groups and universities**.¹² Actors operated both formally and/or informally (meaning with or without formalised agreements), worked on a single issue and with different levels of closeness.

10. Think tanks, social movements and the collaborations they engage in are influenced by the particular social and political context in which they operate. As important as context is, the methodology, time frame and resources available for this research did not allow for an analysis and comparison of the context in which collaborations emerge. However, the authors do consider it to be an important aspect and suggest further research to address it.

11. The research has only addressed cases of social movements that were seeking reformist goals (e.g. policy changes that lead to increased rights, different living conditions etc). The research does not address any cases of social movements that had revolutionary goals.

12. Each example had a different set of actors involved in the social movement.

Relationships varied mainly along two lines: the strength and closeness of the connection, and the activities that both undertook. On the strength of the connection some were short, one-off affairs, while some involved more sustained engagement. Collaborations also varied in their degree of formality

- In South Africa, we found senior delegates within a large trade union federation seeking expertise on an ad hoc basis, then establishing **an arms-length, independent, permanent, labour-oriented policy institute within their structures** before it was side-lined and policy expertise brought in-house with the formation of a policy unit within its secretariat.
- In Senegal, we found **a policy research centre working with representatives of farmers and farmer groups** who sat on the former's board.
- In some cases (in Slovakia, Guatemala, Argentina and Serbia) **individual researchers (or think tank staff) engaged with a social movement and took part in their actions informally** using their own personal time and resources. These individuals did not hide these activities from their organisations but had a personal interest in participating in the movement and did it on their own account.¹³
- In one case we found that **activists from a movement were former think tank interns**.
- In South Africa and the US, we also found a **university faculty doing participatory action-research with communities and community-based organisations**.
- In Africa, we found an organised **continent-wide network with country chapters, with a well-funded secretariat that formally commissioned experts**.

The think tanks and social movements we found worked together on a range of issues, with political, social and economic elements. These included anti-apartheid, land rights, water and sanitation and HIV/AIDS treatment in South Africa; land and Indigenous people's rights in Brazil and Pakistan; access and rights to natural resources in India and Indonesia; Indigenous people's rights in Argentina; agricultural productivity and delivering the SDGs in Senegal; tobacco control in Nigeria and Senegal; electoral reform in Guatemala; housing, health and criminal justice in the US; gender and women's empowerment in Argentina (and Latin America more widely) and also across the African continent; fiscal justice in Latin America; security in Serbia; and state corruption in Slovakia.

Closeness and nature of collaboration

Here we discuss how close think tankers and social movement activists were in their collaboration, and explore the nature of the collaboration.

In many examples (and at different times during the collaboration), think tanks and social movements were close – resembling a genuine partnership, in which actors would undertake activities alongside, and learn from, each other – even if this was not formally mandated through written agreements. For instance, in Guatemala, the think tank ASIES engaged very closely with key actors of a social movement, even though they did not engage in a formal partnership. They advised, and worked with, organisations on actions to take, how to frame their demands and which to prioritise. They worked closely with

13. In all but one of these cases, their organisations were also supporting the movement, and some also participated in the organisation-backed activities.

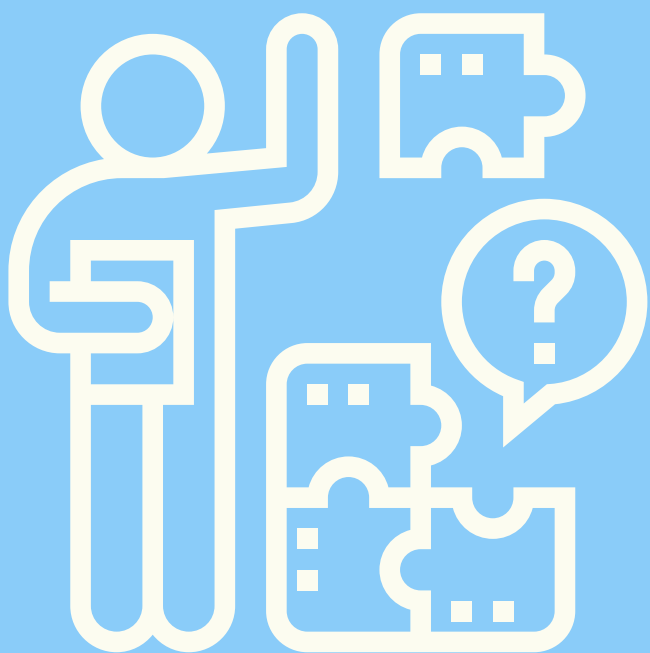
movement actors, in face-to-face meetings, by phone and using social media apps such as WhatsApp. ASIES also participated in civil demonstrations with activists and was involved in crafting placards, planning objectives and mapping out the route. One key informant emphasised the importance of in-person engagement, saying that “we mostly had meetings, face to face communication ... I think it’s easier sometimes to understand each other. Because you see their faces and you know what they mean when they are saying something, it’s easier to understand I think” (I-3).

Some think tankers emphasised working in support of social movements, letting them take a lead and not directing them or dominating them. In Brazil, for instance, staff from INESC helped their social movement partners to organise meetings and events to discuss policy but ensured that the latter were empowered to engage directly. However, in some cases and during certain moments, think tanks took on a more direct ‘hands-on’ role by, for instance, developing policy proposals and engaging directly with government officials. In others, think tanks trained and taught social movement counterparts, indicating a ‘sender-receiver’ mode of engagement/communication.

In some cases, think tanks valued their (perceived) independence highly and pursued a strategy of maintaining their independence and autonomy. In Serbia, a key think tank informant said that they did not ‘formally coordinate with [the social movement]’. But, for example, a number of the things we published or produced they would retweet or share to their social media. We didn’t do the same. We reported on them, but we would not take their imagery, their content, and share it because we kept a formal distance. This was not because we disagreed with them, but it was more that we wanted to show that we were doing this for principles, as part of our agenda, and not because we were supporting a particular group’ (I-5). One key informant, highlighting the risk of engaging too closely with a social movement, suggested that ‘if you closely engage with a movement, you risk becoming an advocacy organisation’ (I-4).

While a loose connection between think tanks and social movements would promote a greater sense of autonomy (a point we return to in section seven), such an arrangement could have its downsides. For instance, a loose connection between US think tanks and the Occupy movement meant that the frameworks for addressing inequality that were developed by think tanks in response to the Occupy Wall Street movement actually did not directly address the aims of the movement (Gaby and Caren, 2016).

In the next section we consider what motivates think tanks and social movements to work with each other.



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3. Why do think tanks and social movements collaborate with each other?

This section explores the initial motivations among think tanks and social movements for seeking collaboration with each other (i.e. why do think tanks and social movements decide to collaborate). It also describes the benefits received by each party as a result of their collaboration (i.e. are the reasons for collaborating borne out in practice). Given the significant overlap between the two questions, we combine them in this section. We frame motivations and benefits in terms of changes sought or gained by the think tank and social movement, as opposed to the functions and activities of the collaborator (which is the subject of section five).

We find that there are similarities between the motivations/benefits of social movements and think tanks. For instance, both social movements and think tanks partner with each other to acquire new knowledge and insight (albeit about different things); to engage with, be heard by and be seen as credible by specific audiences; and to connect with other organisations with shared objectives and values. The latter, in some contexts, might be driven by closing civic space and by a need to pool resources and seek ‘strength and safety in numbers’,¹⁴ because lately there has been ‘a heavy-handed mixture of stigmatisation and delegitimisation, selective application of rules and restrictions, and violence and impunity for violence against civic actors and groups, motivated by the concentration or consolidation of political power’ (Hossain et al., 2018).

Think tanks and social movements collaborate to seek change. Even if intended outcomes are not met, most interviewees believe they achieve more than what they could if they acted alone. By capitalising on their collective features, characteristics and expertise, they believe they are increasing their chances to achieve change.

14. For instance, in Indonesia, the government has passed cybercrime laws and other regulations that provide largely unfettered power to monitor and survey electronic communications (ICNL, 2018).

Additionally, both social movements and think tanks seek collaboration for a combination of instrumental and substantive reasons. By instrumental, we mean that doing so is seen as a *better way to achieve particular ends*, and by substantive we mean that collaboration is seen as a *way of achieving better ends*. For instance, seeking to be more legitimate and credible are instrumental reasons for collaborating, while connecting with likeminded organisations and acquiring knowledge and insight are substantive reasons for collaborating. Our research revealed that very few social movements and think tanks were motivated to collaborate with one another for normative reasons (which would suggest that collaboration is the right thing to do, as an end in itself).

Why do social movements collaborate with think tanks?¹⁵

Our research suggests that social movements choose to partner with think tanks because of their need to: acquire knowledge and insight; engage government officials; translate their demands into a language understood by policy elites; be seen as credible; and to connect with organisations with shared objectives and values.

Our research suggests that social movements choose to partner with think tanks because of their need to: acquire knowledge and insight; engage government officials; translate their demands into a language understood by policy elites; be seen as credible; and to connect with organisations with shared objectives and values. We discuss these below.

Acquire knowledge and insight

Most key informants suggested that social movements partner with think tanks for the knowledge and insights they gain, by virtue of think tanks' ability to generate relevant technical knowledge. For example, in studying the Right to Food campaign in India, Hertel (2015) describes how the campaign enlisted academic researchers to conduct surveys and ethnographic interviews to reveal the ineffectiveness of public feeding programmes and the extent of the crisis of under-nutrition in order to file public interest litigation. And in Brazil, in the context of a government elected in 2018 that announced several changes to Indigenous rights and the uncertainty this caused, some Indigenous people's movements sought clarity from INESC, a non-profit organisation, on what laws had been changed and how they were affected. In summary, social movements used the research produced by think tanks, and the insights they provided, to hold governments to account for the social issues they were concerned with and to make sense of the legal and political context in which they were situated.

Engage government officials, lawmakers and other elites

Social movements also value think tanks for the access they provide to government officials and formal policy processes, to have their concerns heard by those with formal power. Rochon and Mazmanian (1993) suggest that gaining access to the formal policy process is an effective path by which social movements can have an impact on policy outcomes. From our interviews we found that in Brazil, INESC, a not-for-profit organisation founded in 1979 by a renowned social movement activist during the last stages of a dictatorship, supported movements by helping them to engage with parliamentarians.

15. Due to our methodology and reliance on think tank informants, the findings presented in this section represent the benefits to and motivations of social movements as *identified by researchers and think tankers*.

Translate needs into the language of elites and lawmakers

Similarly, social movements partner with think tanks to translate the lived experiences of those affected by a social issue, or the experiential evidence of practitioners and their associated needs, into a language that policymakers can understand. Think tanks are also able to act on behalf of social movements to develop credible proposals, supported by evidence, that policymakers can consider. Two examples illustrate these points. In Guatemala, a key informant from ASIES suggested that they helped the social movement by translating their demands and concerns into evidence-backed proposals that the government could act on: ‘ASIES helped legitimise, filter and make actionable the demands of the social movement. We are intermediaries. The government does not have the capacity to respond to all the demands that social movements have, ASIES helps bridge that’. And in Slovakia, actors who were part of the broad anti-corruption social movement *For a Decent Slovakia*¹⁶ were keen to work with the *We Want to Believe initiative*¹⁷ as the latter were able to use their expertise, credibility and the research they had done to translate the movement’s demands into clear policy options that the government could take forward. As one key informant (think tanker member of the initiative) said: ‘for around 6–7 months we presented technical proposals (that included drafted articles) and that were thoroughly backed and based in research and data. We offered technical capacity to articulate the social demand translating it into concrete actions that could be taken to the political system’.

Be seen as credible

Some social movements have also sought collaboration with think tanks to appear more credible in the eyes of policymakers. As think tanks have a track record of engaging with government, speak the language of policymakers, share networks and connections with them, are seen to have technical expertise and tend to take a more conciliatory approach, they are subsequently seen as credible. Thus, by engaging with or being represented by think tanks, social movements, by association, are also seen as credible. For example Basset (2017) reported that during the late 1980s, COSATU in South Africa initially acquired policy expertise on an ad hoc basis, but soon officials came to believe that this would not be credible to parties involved in policy deliberation unless it was produced by an independent organisation according to widely recognised standards. This prompted them to set up NALEDI, which was organisationally independent with significant social distance between them and COSATU staff. And in Guatemala, a key think tank informant suggested that a social movement gained credibility among policymakers due to its collaboration with ASIES, a think tank. ASIES was highly regarded by government actors, especially in constitutional and electoral matters, because of their long trajectory in the subject.

Connect with organisations with shared objectives and values

Finally, in some instances, social movements are motivated to join forces with think tanks because of their shared objectives and values. This is the only normative motivation we have found in our research. The following examples illustrate this. In Serbia a think tanker suggested that a movement approached them for advice, ‘not just because of expertise but also because of our values ... they knew that we are dealing with security issues for the sake of democracy (as we were being quite vocal about it)’. (I-5). And in Brazil, INESC only partners with social movements that have the same values and principles. These examples show the pull and strength that shared values have: think tanks and social movements do not only collaborate with each other because it’s convenient, but also do so based on their values and objectives.

16. In Slovak they are called *Za slušne Slovensko*

17. The We Want to Believe initiative (*Chceme veriť in Slovak*) is an initiative composed of civil society organisations (think tanks and NGOs).

Why do think tanks collaborate with social movements?

Our research suggests that think tanks engage with social movements to: acquire knowledge and insight; engage with the public and communities; amplify key messages; have research findings used; connect with organisations that have shared values and interests; and to legitimate their policy influencing work.

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Acquire knowledge and insight

In many cases, think tanks receive valuable information about the lived experiences of those affected by an issue through their connections with social movements. For instance, working with Article 33 (a social movement) in Indonesia gave researchers from the University of Gajah Mada who ‘have no experience [of working] with communities’ the chance to work in the field and understand the lived experiences of communities. ‘The academics were shocked [at first] but they enjoyed it afterwards’ (key social movement informant). And in Nigeria, members of the tobacco control network provided experts from CSEA with contact information for people who could provide useful insights. CSEA also received updates from members of the network about political and policy developments within the sector and across the country.

Engage with the public and communities

Many think tanks are under increasing pressure to contribute to policy change. In some contexts, policy experts acknowledge that politicians and bureaucrats are more reluctant to seek advice from them. And many also acknowledge that policymaking happens in a more fragmented system with a larger number of policy participants, in which government may be in charge but not in control of outcomes. In this context, some key informants suggested that think tanks need to work with social movements as the latter are influential actors who are able to mobilise the public around an issue and help think tanks contribute to policy impact. Advising governments and businesses directly was necessary but not sufficient. For instance, in South Africa, PLAAS, a think tank, works with the ARD (a movement working on land issues), as it is ‘hard for policy [elites] to have any sort of influence ... relationships with grassroots movements is essential ... we don’t have much of a choice anymore’.

Amplify key messages through media and other stakeholders

In some cases, movements provide think tanks with channels through which they can engage and influence a broader audience. The motivation for think tanks is accessing the stakeholders and audiences of the social movement in order to amplify their messages. For instance, in Nigeria, members of the tobacco control network arranged for CSEA experts to be interviewed by media outlets and meet with government officials, while in Guatemala, ASIES worked with its social movement counterparts in part to ‘gain access to other audiences to amplify our voice’(1-5).

Have research findings put into practice by practitioners and activists

Some think tanks work with social movements as practitioners and activists can potentially put their research findings into practice. For instance, a social movement activist in Nigeria said ‘[CSEA, a think tank] need to do research and they need research used’, while in Senegal, IPAR works with civil society practitioners ‘to promote uptake and policy influence. You influence while working with policy actors ... it’s a way for us to bring policy actors to talk about results and act on it.’

Connect with organisations with shared objectives, ideas and values

Some think tanks choose to work with social movements as they share the same (or similar) objectives, ideas and values. As with social movement motivations, this was the only normative motivation found in the cases we encountered. For instance, one focus group participant said ‘[when] actors seek specific partnerships, there needs to be an alignment of ideologies [...]. Otherwise the relationship won’t work (or even would not be attractive). Organisations and movements tend to partner with likeminded organisations. Think tanks [are] not neutral observers, we all have our agendas and political angles ...’. In Slovakia, the We Want to Believe Initiative¹⁸ chose to ‘cooperate with the initiative For a Decent Slovakia¹⁹ as they shared the same interest – to achieve the decency in politics, we complemented each other’ (I-3).

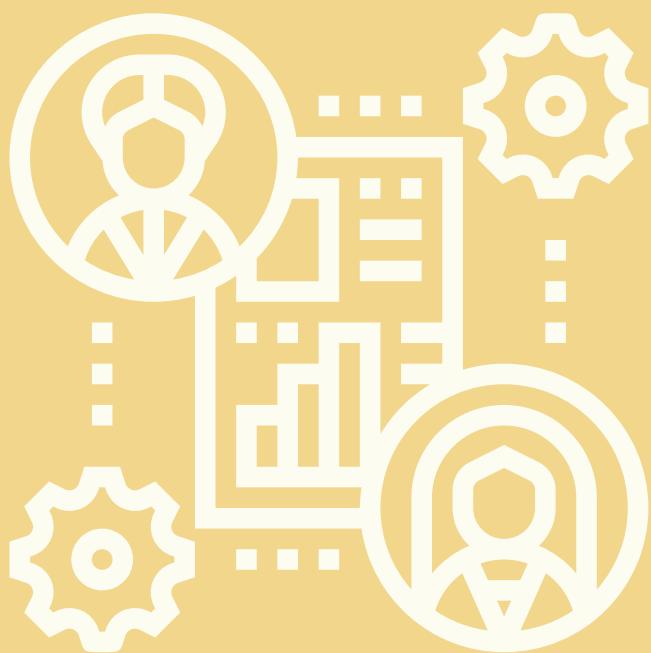
Legitimate policy influencing work

Some key informants suggested that think tanks work with social movements to legitimate their policy influencing work. Working with social movements gives think tanks’ suggestions and proposals some backing and makes them acceptable (at least in the eyes of policymakers). For instance, one key informant in Brazil suggested that social movements ‘are the main actors to change things [... as] they are the ones who are suffering locally ... they are indigenous people, rural workers, women, they are affected by the system that is producing injustice, they know what is happening, they are carriers’.

Having explored why think tanks and social movements choose to collaborate, we will now move on to describe how collaborations are established.

18. Composed of several civil society organisations (both NGOs and think tanks).

19. A grassroots movement led by students.



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4. How do think tanks and social movements establish a connection?

Here we describe how collaborations between think tanks and social movements unfold, highlighting how initial connections are made and how collaborators develop enough trust between them to work together.

Making initial connections

Initial connections between think tanks and social movements were made mainly through: people's own informal and personal networks; introductions from funders; introductions from intermediary organisations; through popular recognition; and finally a somewhat market-based approach. We discuss these below.

Individual's own networks

In many cases, think tank staff and members of social movements come from the same social, professional, university alumni and/or friendship networks, come from the same side of a 'political divide' and/or share an interest in collaborating with one another to address specific policy problems. In Indonesia, for instance, a researcher and an activist, who at the time of writing were working on anti-corruption issues in the natural resource management sector, had in the past collaborated to take direct action together to help bring down president Suharto (who had ruled the country for some 30 years). In Brazil, INESC's partnerships with social movements were primarily due to the connections the founder (an activist herself) had when she set up the organisation in the late 1970s.

In Guatemala, our informant summed it up thus: 'each researcher has personal networks that link their work with broader social interests [...] our personal networks are linked to social movements, civil society organisations, activist groups, media and government actors (these people attended university with us), and this gives us a close relationship with various actors that also seek social change' (I-1).

Introduced by funders

Funders can play a role in bringing think tank experts and activists together. In Nigeria, for example, the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids (CTFK), a US not-for-profit membership organisation that advocates for the reduction of tobacco consumption and funds initiatives across the world, invited a grantee, the Centre for the Study of Economies of Africa (CSEA) to a meeting of what was initially an informal coalition of organisations aiming to improve the health of Nigerians by reducing tobacco use in Nigeria. CTFK suggested that practitioners from the network could draw on CSEA's existing research, which simulated the change in government revenues if tobacco taxes were increased.

Introduced by intermediaries

In some cases, think tanks and social movements have been brought together by (non-funder) intermediaries. Think tanks and social movements feel less obliged to act on the suggestions of non-funder intermediaries than those of funders (given the power the latter have over them). For instance, the International Budget Project in South Africa was brought into contact with social movements through two large (NGO) intermediaries: the Community Organisation Resource Centre and Planact.

Popular recognition and visibility

Social movements have approached think tanks for support (and have done so without formal introduction from others), because the latter are recognised for their expertise on a thematic issue. For instance, in Serbia, a key informant suggested that 'the movement actors sought our advice because we are recognized as the organization with the biggest expertise ... they had issues with police in protest, and because we were recognized for our expertise they asked us for advice' (I-5)

Market based approach/mapping and selecting

In some instances, think tanks or social movements take a more 'systematic approach' to finding a collaborator, by, for instance, scanning the sector or policy environment for the most relevant/appropriate organisations or by using a market mechanism. We elaborate on these approaches further below.

FEMNET, a pan-African organisation that promotes women's development in Africa (and which we are calling a social movement), in seeking knowledge and insight drafted and sent Requests for Proposals to their country chapters as well as representatives of other organisations/networks such as CODESRIA and AWID. These organisations were then expected to circulate them within their own social and professional networks. Interested experts were invited to respond with a proposal demonstrating how they would meet the terms of reference. In some cases, specific individuals were approached (known for their expertise) and encouraged to respond (as we described above, under recognition and visibility). Final selections were made by staff from the FEMNET secretariat, who were often influenced by their desire to commission and showcase early career African (and often female) researchers.

The US-based Faith in Action (a social movement) suggested that research was a key resource in understanding and promoting change, and encouraged community activists to take a systematic approach to mapping think tanks and experts who could support them in their work. Once objectives were defined, community organisers were encouraged to scan the environment to ascertain who was doing research in the relevant area and set up meetings to discuss what experts and organisers could do together. In Latin America, LATINDADD identified other organisations and social movements to partner with as follows: 'by participating in different regional and international forums and seminars, as well as in the political militances of their members and allies, we identify which actors to start working with. Through participation the various political and social spaces, we see who we can build a (trusting) relationship with and vice versa, they also contact us to contribute to achieving common goals' (I-2).

After initial connections are made, some partnerships flourish while others do not. Trust is essential in facilitating partnerships.

After initial connections are made, some partnerships flourish while others do not. Trust is essential in facilitating partnerships. In some cases, social movements were only willing to work with think tanks/research organisations after they were sure they could be trusted. Trust (or the lack of it) arises for a variety of reasons (some of which we have discussed and some of which we will return to later in the paper) including: credibility and legitimacy issues, top-down approaches, past experiences with academics with extractive approaches, ivory tower perceptions, or being unsure if they have the same values and objectives. A key informant (from a Spanish social movement) suggested that ‘the movement has to trust [the think tank] and believe that the relationship that will be established is a proactive relationship, with the intention of improving and contributing to the movement’.

CORC, a key intermediary in South Africa with access to communities, was initially sceptical of IBP South Africa’s intentions. This was in a context where academics often took an extractive approach to collecting data from communities primarily for publishing purposes, and where politicians tended to engage with communities only during election times, while bearing gifts. One key informant said that ‘communities have been instrumentalised, during election time, politicians are there with sandwiches and t-shirts, [a prominent research institute] come with clipboards for one week and then they disappear ... for the poorest, that sort of thing is frowned upon’ (key informant interview, 2019).

IBP South Africa and CORC subsequently went through a ‘courting process’ that lasted about two years, before IPB were introduced to community representatives. During this time, IBP met with various managers at different levels within CORC, seeking guidance and careful not to apply pressure. CORC needed to ensure that IBP were net contributors and not extractors. IBP also showed they were credible by responding to a request from CORC staff before they went into a meeting with local government officials, to sit down with CORC staff and read key documents and learn together, rather than stepping into an expert role.

In another case, in Serbia, a group of activists (focused on gender equality) only began to trust a think tank that wanted to collaborate with them after they (the think tank) were blacklisted by the government. The think tank was blacklisted because they had stood up to the government and voiced their concerns about how they were setting up a consultation process. The activist group were then more optimistic about the think tank’s intentions

In some cases, where enough trust had not been built through a process of getting to know and understanding one another better, the collaboration could come to an end. For instance, in one case, a key informant suggested constructive dialogue between the think tank and social movement had failed because of ‘a lack of knowing the movement better, the perception of the people who will participate in the movement, what their motivations are, their feelings really’.

The next section discusses what think tanks and social movements did during their collaborative work.

20. We discuss developing trust from the perspective of the social movement towards organisations and think tanks.



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5. What do think tanks and social movements do together?

In section three we explored motivations for, and benefits received by, think tanks and social movements collaborating. This section now explores the things or activities that social movements and think tanks actually do during their collaboration, in order to realise those beneficial outcomes. During collaborations, the two actors do not necessarily always do the same thing at the same time – there is often a division of labour. In this section, we explore this division, initially describing the functions undertaken by think tanks (about which we have significant information) and then describing the functions undertaken by social movements (about which we have less information). We then explore the ‘closeness’ (and, conversely, the ‘distance’) between think tanks and social movements, and the extent to which the collaboration resembled an equal partnership.

Think tank roles

We found that think tanks undertook the following functions in collaboration with social movements: generating and sharing knowledge; teaching and training; brokering, convening, mediating and facilitating relationships/discussions with stakeholders, including work through/with the media; providing advice, identifying options and drafting proposals; engaging directly with stakeholders and representing concerns in policy processes; and finally providing social movements with resources.

Generate and share research knowledge

Most key informants emphasised think tanks’ knowledge generation function in their collaboration with social movements. The latter are able to use knowledge generated to inform and shape their influencing/engagement work. Often the research undertaken by think tanks is in response to the needs and requests of communities and/or practitioners. In other cases, think tanks invite activists/practitioners from coalitions or movements to workshops to learn about interesting research and to critique, give feedback and explore how it might be used to inform wider advocacy work.

The following example from Nigeria illustrates think tanks’ knowledge generation function. The tobacco control network valued the think tank CSEA’s work to generate knowledge in a context in which activists had limited access to relevant data. One civil society campaigner said ‘data was a problem’ with regards

Think tanks undertook the following functions in collaboration with social movements: generating and sharing knowledge; teaching and training; brokering, convening, mediating and facilitating relationships/discussions with stakeholders, including work through/with the media; providing advice, identifying options and drafting proposals; engaging directly with stakeholders and representing concerns in policy processes; and finally providing social movements with resources.

to tobacco control and ‘not many organisations like [CSEA] work with tobacco control groups, so it’s hard to put out credible facts that have legitimacy ... some years back getting statistics about numbers of people dying from tobacco related diseases and the amount of money government is spending on healthcare was a real challenge ... it’s still a major issue ... so it’s hard to go to government and say how many people are dying from and are being treated for tobacco related diseases ... we often have to rely on data from outside sources’. Moreover, when the government announced proposals to increase taxation on tobacco, tobacco firms argued this would have a detrimental impact on the economy. Members of Tobacco Control Nigeria then asked CSEA to do an analysis of the impact of taxation on the economy. Members of the tobacco control network met to critique the report that was produced. Ultimately, the findings of the report countered the arguments made by tobacco firms about the impact on the economy.

Teach and train

Think tanks play a role in teaching or training social movement counterparts on thematic issues as well as on formal political and policy processes. In some cases, this has been in response to requests from social movements. In others the suggestion to teach and train has come from the think tank as a means of raising awareness and influencing. For example, in South Africa the Alliance for Rural Development, a land-based social movement, invited PLAAS, a research institute, to provide training on policy analysis and the political economy of land issues. Meanwhile, INESC provides capacity building opportunities for their social movement partners (such as CONTAG, APIB and the Quilombolas) that stem more from their programmatic work on a range of issues including government budgeting processes, other policy processes and policy engagement/advocacy approaches.

Broker, convene, mediate and facilitate

Our research found that think tanks brokered, convened, mediated and facilitated relationships and discussions between social movements and other stakeholders at the national and international level. As a focus group participant said, ‘people like me are the connectors, we are part of think tanks, connected to grass roots movements [and] to government. We enable connections to happen’. Think tanks have organised multi-stakeholder events, spoken on behalf of social movements, engaged in formal policy processes, and have ‘injected’ messages from social movements into public discourse by producing content for media outlets, providing discursive frames of social issues or producing research outputs that have attracted media attention. Think tanks can do this, because they occupy several spaces and have connections with different actors involved in policy processes. An informant confirmed this by saying: ‘within civil society we are perceived as someone who has integrity, who has knowledge, and who can bring different groups to talk ... we took it as our role because we knew the language of all actors, and we knew that these feminist organizations will not be heard unless there is someone who could be an intermediary’ (I-5).

Provide advice, options and proposals

In many cases, think tanks (informed by their expertise and knowledge of the policy process) provide advice, present policy options for activists to choose from and draft detailed policy proposals. For example, a key think tank informant in Guatemala suggested that actors in social movements tend to present ‘laundry lists that are difficult to articulate’ and that the think tank is able to ‘translate the demand, needs and feelings of the public into actionable changes ... for around 6–7 months we presented technical proposals (that included drafted articles) that were thoroughly backed and based in research and data’ (I-1). Similarly, a think tanker describing a collaboration with social movement counterparts in Slovakia said: ‘[the social movement] didn’t want [to] talk just about problems, they wanted to point out the solutions. So, we tried to help them to formulate solutions to the problems they saw’ (I-3). But think tanks also advise social movements in more general terms about how to engage with other actors; for example, our informant in Slovakia mentioned that they ‘gave [the social movement] advice in what could go wrong, and what to do then’ (I-3).

Engage directly with stakeholders

Think tanks engage directly with stakeholders (including media outlets) on issues that are of interest to both them and their social movement collaborators. In some cases, they engage as members of the movement whilst in others they voice the concerns of the movement but as separate entities. Engagement with stakeholders includes representation of key issues in elite policy processes. For instance, in Guatemala, a think tanker stated that they ‘advocated their own proposals. We were a sensible voice in the discourse, which others saw as key to back up and join forces’. They ‘identified key government actors to engage with. We identified which actor would be the most important one to engage with so that the changes would be implemented.’ And they ‘spoke to political parties to make the proposals viable. These discussions were not open to all organisations. [The think tank] had a way in into them and used this avenue for impact.’ Finally, in some cases, they also advise other actors on how to proceed with the demands of the social movement: ‘We also helped and advised the magistrate on how to take the demands forward’ (I-1).



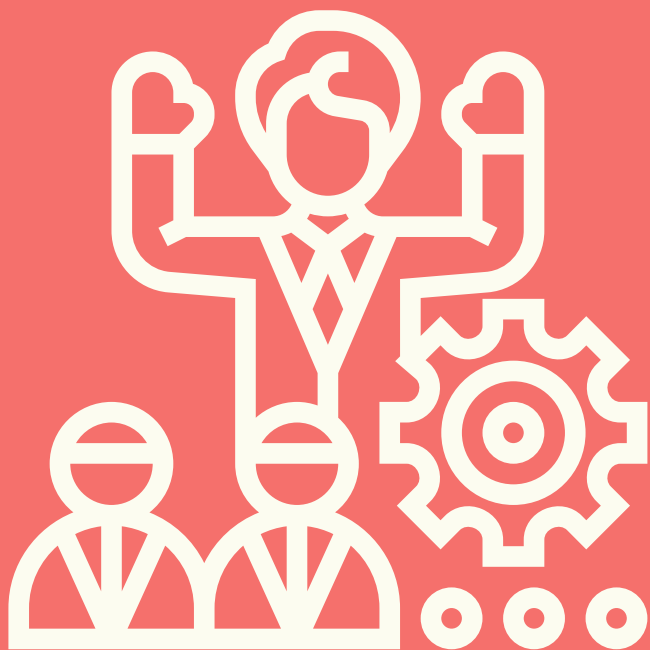
Provide resources

As reported by think tankers, some social movements either find it difficult, choose not, or do not know how to secure funds directly from funding agencies. And, in some of these cases, support is channelled through think tanks (often in-kind and through activities they do for the movement). Think tanks, which are usually formally registered and constituted, tend to appear more ‘professional’ and aligned/in-synch with the practices and requirements of the funding agency. For instance, some social movements in Brazil have received support from INESC (which had funding from other agencies), while the ARD in South Africa have received funding from the Land Accountability Research Centre (LARC). We discuss the impact of funding on the think tank–social movement collaborations in section eight.

Social movement roles

We gathered less data on exactly what role social movements play in their relationship with think tanks.²¹ We nonetheless found that they: mobilised the public through direct action; gave notoriety and visibility to the issues; and provided insight and knowledge of people’s lived experiences and needs. For instance, in Guatemala, a key informant reported that social movement actors ‘did their part in positioning the theme in the public agenda, in the media, generate[d] opinions, fostered public gatherings and demonstrations etc. And they had the concrete action they were calling for, which could be easily traceable to see if it had been responded to or not.’ In Slovakia, the movement organised demonstrations, which generated visibility and led to the government contacting the think tank collaborator. And the interest and visibility created by the Occupy Wall Street movement led to the number of think tank articles on inequality published in newspapers doubling (Gaby and Caren, 2016).

21. As our informants came almost exclusively from the think tank side of the collaboration, it was easier for them to reflect on what they did rather than on what the social movement did.



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6. Difficulties, and approaches to resolving them

As we have noted in the introduction and throughout the paper, social movements and think tanks differ in many ways: in terms of their constitution, strategies, composition, roles, functions and relationships with other actors (to name a few). These differences in some respects create the opportunity to collaborate and work together. However, these differences can also lead to difficulties. In this section, we explore these difficulties as well as their causes. We then discuss what approaches think tanks and social movement actors can take to address or even resolve these difficulties.

Difficulties and their causes

Our research has found that difficulties arise primarily due to differences in: how collaborators engage with each other; organisational priorities; aims and approaches; engagement in policy processes; perceptions about legitimacy; and perceptions of the nature of knowledge and the quality of research input/output. We discuss these points below.

Engagement with each other

In some cases, think tanks and social movements take different approaches to engaging with one another, or do not appreciate how their collaborator is engaging with them, creating tensions. For instance, some key informants and focus group discussion participants suggested that think tanks are not always willing to be completely open to what might emerge in discussions between them and their movement counterparts. In other words, think tanks can in some cases dominate discussions – occasionally talking at their social movement counterparts rather than talking with them. A think tanker suggested that policy experts need to be careful when approaching movement actors with proposals or plans (I-9).

One key informant suggested this was the case in relation to work between experts from the Center for Budget, and organisers affiliated with Faith in Action on extending a policy to cover all children with healthcare across the US, with experts not demonstrating sufficient humility. In another example,

NALEDI in South Africa did not stick to its advisory role, with COSATU's general secretary considering it too activist (Bassett, 2017), while a social movement informant from Spain suggested their team did 'not want anyone to come and tell us what was our problem: we were experiencing it' (I-9).

Collaboration requires negotiation and consensus. However, several key informants suggested that reaching consensus on an issue is not always easy and straightforward. In Indonesia, one key informant mentioned that despite having worked with her counterparts in the past, working in the same policy area and knowing each other well, 'it's hard to make one conclusion ...' Negotiations can be emotionally intensive, with the word frustrating being used often by key informants. Differences ultimately have the potential to fracture what in some cases are fragile relationships.

There is also a broader issue of one side or another not seeing their collaborator as 'fully human' or as an equal. This is particularly pronounced in the US, where one key informant suggested that there is an inherent distrust among think tanks of community organisers working to build a constituency, with a built-in bias in the engagement process against people with certain identities: 'some of it is gender, race, but most of it is class'. Related to this, key informants in the US as well as South Africa mentioned the risk of middle-class arrogance, where people of colour and people who are poor are less likely to be trusted by think tank experts. On the other hand, in South Africa, one key informant suggested that during discussions 'some people might feel certain voices are too privileged', and that one 'couldn't take politics out of these issues'. He went on to say differences and tensions around ideology (as well as potentially other issues we discuss below) are often a reflection of other divisions in society such as race, class and gender.

Organisational priorities

Again, due to their different strategies, constitution and roles (to name a few), think tanks and social movements often have different priorities and are not always able to engage regularly or advance at the same pace. Also, as they are working on multiple issues, organisations do not necessarily attach the same level of importance to a given issue. For instance, in Senegal, farmer groups on the board of the think tank IPAR expected the think tank to produce research that focussed on agriculture. However, IPAR's priorities had shifted beyond agriculture towards issues such as the delivery of the SDGs, among others.

In these cases, research policy centres increasingly focus on specific policy issues, while grassroots movements tend to focus on mobilising community members, building groups and improving their ability to influence (on a range of different issues, as they emerge). As such, in the aforementioned cases, think tanks tend to have shorter time horizons,²² focussing on, for instance, legislative processes over the coming year, 'winning' change and attributing success to their work, while grassroots movements tend to take a longer-term approach, with a focus on building power and influence among constituencies.

Collaborators had different views on whether to work on one or more issues at any one time. For example, in South Africa, one key think tank informant suggested that social movement actors tend to take on too much, wanting to tackle issues such as water, electricity and access to land simultaneously. He suggested movements were 'far better off focussing on one issue, for two reasons: once you get results, you get momentum, you can see its working, and by going through the process once, it builds agency, and eventually they apply this stuff without us' (key think tank informant from South Africa).

22. Contrary to other cases in which think tanks tend to have a longer-term perspective of policy influence.

Goals and approaches

In some cases, think tanks and social movements disagree on what kind of change to promote or what approach to take. In an example from Guatemala, movement actors presented policy solutions that a think tank did not agree with, as they were not backed by research and analysis. In South Africa, representatives of COSATU, the trade union federation, sometimes backed proposals from think tank experts that contradicted mandated positions. By doing so, senior delegates from COSATU risked alienating the union's membership and gave the impression that they were helping to advance the interests of capital (Bassett, 2017). Furthermore, (think tank) key informants suggested that social movements were more likely to go for ambitious changes, while think tanks preferred to target incremental change.

In terms of strategies, social movement actors tend to take a more 'outside track' approach, which tends to be confrontational. One key think tank informant in Senegal said 'CSOs say what they need to say – even if it hurts', while another informant from Indonesia (and a former activist herself) suggested that 'it's hard to change government if you are confrontational'. Other key informants suggested that think tanks are, on the other hand, more comfortable with taking an 'inside track approach', articulating more nuanced positions, being careful with the language they use and staying away from accusatory and potentially polarising discourse.

For instance, in Switzerland, in a collaboration between Foraus, a think tank on Swiss foreign policy, and Operation Libero, a liberal trans-partisan political movement in Switzerland, Foraus tends to work behind the scenes through the exchange of knowledge and good practices, avoiding too much visibility, while Operation Libero is more vocal and visible. Nonetheless, this difference is not universal.

Differences also manifest in the types of (other) actors that partners are willing to engage with in discussions. For instance, in Brazil, the think tank INESC works with rural labour unions who are reluctant to talk to businesses, whereas INESC believes that businesses have the power to make markets work in the interests of labourers.

Further, one key informant mentioned that the timing and pace of change can create tensions between activists and policy experts, suggesting that many people (affiliated to, say, social movements made up of younger people) are used to living life at a faster pace and do not understand the long periods of time required for policy negotiations. Having said that, one key informant from Brazil said her experience illustrated that social movements preferred a 'slowly, slowly' approach.

In some cases, think tanks are uncomfortable with being identified as partisan, or are expected by social movements to support particular ideological positions, which generates tensions between actors. For instance, in Brazil, a coalition that the think tank INESC was part of included a powerful union, Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), who wanted the coalition to actively support the Workers' Party – a political party. INESC engaged in intensive discussions with CUT to persuade them this was not in the best interests of the platform.

Engagement in policy processes

Think tanks are often faced with the choice of supporting movement actors to participate directly in the process, engaging in the process on an equal footing, or representing and speaking on behalf of the social movement, bearing in mind that the actor(s) sitting at the table with officials ultimately have control over what perspectives were presented.

In Brazil, INESC have a policy of never representing movement actors in policy processes. ‘They [the movements] have their own voice ... They never talk on behalf of the movement ... they are always invited to talk on their own’ (key think tank informant). However, as our key informant went on to say, ‘it’s a delicate issue, as sometimes we disagree [about issues or approach]’. In cases where movement actors were invited to participate in international meetings conducted in English or French, staff from INESC would have in-depth briefings with movement participants before their attendance. Similarly, IBP in South Africa rarely go into meetings with government officials, instead supporting both the intermediary (such as CORC) and community leadership to prepare to engage directly.

In the Right to Food movement in India, think tanks mediated on behalf of movements, preventing movement actors from directly confronting and navigating different perspectives with other actors, and thus effectively depoliticising the process (Hertel, 2015). Moreover, during apartheid in South Africa, NALEDI, a think tank within COSATU’s structures, was directed not to participate directly in policy discussions. However, on one occasion, a NALEDI staff member took over as chief labour negotiator during policy deliberations, citing that COSATU’s own labour delegates lacked experience and authority and were committed to too many roles to be effective. NALEDI’s managers and its board were, nevertheless, sharply rebuked for having failed to enforce appropriate boundaries for NALEDI staff (Bassett, 2017).

Perceptions about legitimacy

Representation is challenging where think tanks are not seen as legitimate representatives. For instance, in the US, one key informant felt that campaigns are often led by think tankers who do not have direct experience of some of the problems they are talking about. In Brazil, the team at INESC were white, while 50 per cent of the population was black. Social movements representing largely black people claimed that INESC was a ‘white organisation’ that accessed funding for a black cause – and this created tensions (although this was not enough to break down the relationship). And in South Africa, NALEDI employed people with very different backgrounds to those they were serving – staff were university-educated researchers, with most staff recruited from outside the labour movement, which meant that they were unfamiliar with the organisational culture of trade unions.

The nature of knowledge and the quality of research input/output

Social movements and think tanks might have different ideas about the kind of knowledge that might be most helpful (Bassett, 2017).

The nature of knowledge or evidence is something that can be contested during think tank–social movement collaborations. Bassett (2017) suggests that social movements and think tanks might have different ideas about the kind of knowledge that might be most helpful. She describes how NALEDI, an arms-length think tank set up within COSATU’s structures, did not provide the kind of knowledge the labour movement needed to engage in policy processes. Labour delegates preferred longer-term strategic policy research, while NALEDI prioritised short-term policy support. NALEDI responded to feedback by developing a long-term research agenda, but this reflected the interests and abilities of NALEDI staff rather than those of COSATU delegates. But COSATU delegates still needed access to policy research to support their policy positions, and NALEDI was unable to respond quickly enough. As a result, material produced was not relevant and presented in a format that was not useful to affiliates: ‘no-one was even reading the documents, much less planning to use them’ (Bassett, 2017).

In some cases, especially where academics are asked by movement actors to write a paper, language is a sticking point. For instance, papers written by academics and received by a member of one movement are, on occasion, too long and comprise long sentences and too much jargon, lacking ‘killer facts’ and making them hard to digest. Similarly, a member of the tobacco control network in Nigeria suggested that CSEA’s first draft of its report on the impacts of tobacco taxation ‘was very rigid which the average person would not understand’. CSEA researchers subsequently wrote shorter policy briefs and newspaper articles, which were appreciated. However, a researcher from CSEA cautioned against what she suggested was ‘oversimplification’, for fear of losing substance and meaning. Finally, the discussion in one of our focus groups suggested that think tank experts do not necessarily see the accounts and lived realities of individuals as robust enough evidence to inform their research.

Strategies for negotiating difference

We found that collaborators have sought to negotiate their differences by: demonstrating humility and reflexivity; taking a long-term approach; ensuring an open process; working with intermediaries; and making knowledge accessible. We discuss these below.

Demonstrating humility and reflexivity

Several key informants mentioned the importance of partners exercising certain human qualities in their engagement with each other. Among these was the need for a degree of humility and reflexivity. One key informant in South Africa suggested that ‘lawyers and researchers have to be careful – they have to watch themselves – there’s been a critique of middle-class arrogance, they have to be very clear – it’s a democratic process and an ordinary person’s voice counts as much as researcher’. Mark Swilling (2014), commenting on the co-production of urban dwellings among university academics and communities in South Africa, suggests that engagement will always come at a price and the key to balancing the cost is how reflexive researchers are in analysing their own practices and mistakes as they navigate complex power dynamics.

Key informants also mentioned the need to ‘give respect’ to each other, to local/experiential knowledge and to people’s differences. They also mentioned the need to listen deeply, ‘take into account what they [the social movement] are saying, and how they are suffering’ and having ‘good will’ and ‘openness’. In addition, partners need space to change their mind about an issue. And as one Brazil-based key informant said, if you’re arrogant, ‘you’re dead’. In South Africa, one key informant from a think tank said he demonstrated humility by listening deeply to his social movement counterparts at meetings and was driven by their needs (albeit constrained by what he could feasibly offer).



Often the choice of leader or manager of a specific initiative can create tension. A focus group participant suggested that ‘one of the ways we decide who takes the lead is the level of maturity of the conversation and the stage of the influence process. When public awareness needs to be generated, [social movements] are more active. When ministers want to discuss policy proposals, we and other experts step in. It is a system/network that operates towards the same goal. We are just a piece of the puzzle. We do not want to be the stars’ (focus group participant, February 2019).

Taking a long-term approach

Key informants suggested that strong relations between think tanks and social movements had benefited from the former taking a long-term approach to engagement. For instance, in Brazil, INESC staff were working with movements that the organisation had been supporting since the late 1970s, building up a huge stock of trust and shared experiences of working with one another. In South Africa, a key informant suggested that harnessing improvements in public services would take at least five years and during that time, it was important to ‘keep showing up, and not to disappear’.

Ensuring an open process

Several key informants mentioned the need for an open process to ensure that differences can be expressed in a safe environment, without fear of judgement or repercussion. This means bringing people together to build relationships and engaging each other in regular discussions. For instance, COSATU in South Africa, by side-lining NALEDI – an arm’s length body – and establishing its own policy research teams, allowed policy experts to regularly interact with senior COSATU staff and their work, such as member education, campaigning and communications, to be integrated into secretariat activities (Bassett, 2017). One key informant discussing the agenda-setting process in the run up to Agenda 2030 in 2015 emphasised the importance of regular discussion through the establishment and management of steering groups, which help to address conflict.

Wald (2014) discusses the potential for anarchistic partnerships as a means of exploring the possibilities of privileged groups to meaningfully engage with marginalised communities. Under this approach the former do not take the role of experts or leaders in an authoritative or hierarchical sense. Instead, leadership is linked to individuals’ chosen functions within the relationship. With the example of a collaboration between a peasant movement and NGOs in Argentina, Wald suggests that an anarchistic partnership could produce a genuine process of empowerment through participation and the renegotiation of power by accommodating for multiple knowledges. As a result, think tanks and social movements can potentially overcome the challenges that emerge when attempting to collaborate with a diverse range of actors by creating space for different voices to be fully integrated into the work of these partnerships to influence policy. In other words, participation should be used to confront the differences of those within think tanks and social movements to form coherent objectives that are informed by the concerns of both groups.

Working with intermediaries

Some key informants suggested that intermediaries play a facilitating relationship between think tanks and social movements. In Brazil, INESC hired people from local communities to mobilise leaders and members within movements and to use language and approaches that are more accessible. And in South Africa, intermediaries such as CORC and Planact gave think tank IBP access to several communities. They played an important role in initiating these relationships, ensuring that communities trusted IBP staff (crucial, given racial dynamics) and helping communities to, for example, prioritise policy issues to work on. ‘Intermediaries have facilitated and organised and over time, they’ve become more

conversant with what we bring ... universally communities have become keener than intermediaries to engage as time has passed' (key South African think tank informant, January 2019). However, CORC and Planact went beyond merely the role of an intermediary and became more like legitimate actors – while IBP's limited number of staff meant they could not engage directly with community leaders even if they wanted to. As such, IBP generally worked on keeping CORC and Planact at the centre of proceedings.

Making knowledge accessible

Some think tank experts tailor their communications to be able to engage with social movements. For instance, IBP in South Africa developed tools that help them engage directly with communities. FEMNET, a pan-African women's movement have negotiated with academics they commission to ensure that findings are relevant, presented in appropriate formats such as policy briefs, and use simple language. They also have a communication team to translate complex findings into key messages and infographics. Other think tanks do this not to communicate with their social movement counterparts, but to communicate to their audiences and help mobilise the public.

We now discuss funding and its effects.



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7. Funding and its effects

Collaborative work between social movements and think tanks costs. One key informant from a think tank stated that, ‘every part of accountability and governance work costs money, courts cost money, the human rights commission, parliament costs money, every part of democracy costs money’. In this section we discuss how collaborative activities are funded, the role that funders (where they exist) have and what impact this has on the collaboration.

Funding for collaborative work

We found that collaborations were supported by: think tanks who volunteered their time to support social movements; think tanks who provided financial resources; and external funders. We describe these below.

Voluntary work

In some of the cases we surveyed, think tank experts engage in collaborative work with social movements on a voluntary basis (in addition to their usual workload). This is done out of individuals’ own convictions, or because they see it as part of their work. For example, a key think tank informant from Slovakia explained that they worked for free with the movement *For a Decent Slovakia* and as members of the *We want to Believe* initiative: ‘we didn’t have any grants for this, but we thought at the time that it was important to work together because it’s important to react to the events that happened in Slovakia’. They went on to say, however, that the ‘lack of funds may have accounted for the “loss of steam” and we (the initiative) are not so active as before’ (I-3). In South Africa, another think tanker suggested that engaging with grassroots movements was a part of their job, rather than an ‘add-on’. And our informant from Serbia said that they, a think tank, engaged with movement counterparts ‘without money [but] having it just enables us to, you know, focus more consistently on it’ (I-5).

Use of institutional funds

In some cases, collaborative work is funded by core or institutional funds from either the think tank or the social movement. For instance, COSATU, the labour federation in South Africa, provided long-term core funding to NALEDI, its arm’s length policy research unit, amounting to half of NALEDI’s operating budget (although this was put into practice ten years after COSATU agreed to do so in 1997) (Bassett, 2017).

External funding

In some cases, collaborative work was supported by external funders, with resources usually channelled through the think tank. For instance in Senegal, IPAR's work with a group of civil society organisations was funded by the European Commission (EC). In South Africa, PLAAS receives grants from the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) to fund low-cost activities such as workshops and meetings with the ARD.

In one case, a think tank in Serbia only secured funding after persuading a donor to support what was considered an unusual activity (i.e. collaborative work between a think tank and a social movement), with a key informant stating that 'we have had to persuade funders ... it was a huge effort in educating and explaining. Sometimes you need to educate the donor so that they understand that they should support something [which is] out of the box ...' (I-5)

Funder practices and their effects

Funders encourage think tanks and social movements to work together. If a collaboration is formally funded, it is effectively 'projectised', which can be positive, as it encourages both parties to determine objectives, activities, roles and responsibilities.

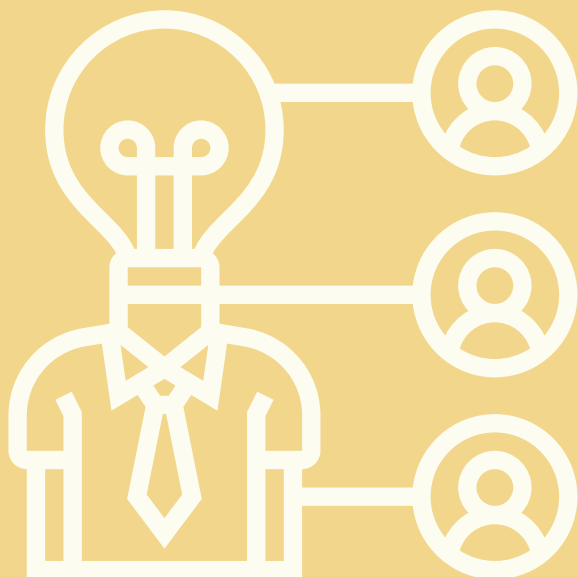
In some instances, funders encourage think tanks and social movements to work together. If a collaboration is formally funded, it is effectively 'projectised', which can be positive, as it encourages both parties to determine objectives, activities, roles and responsibilities. However, the best plans often get pulled apart by brute reality. Think tanks (who often managed the funds, a point we return to below) felt in some cases that the funders they worked with enabled them to manage grants flexibly and that funders were willing to, for instance, agree to changes in specific actions during the lifetime of the grant. In Argentina, for instance, the funding that think tank received 'allowed us the flexibility to respond to windows of opportunity and take action' (I-7). Another key informant suggested that she had had 'no problems with donors, it's always a negotiation, what we can do, what we cannot do', while another said she could 'push back' on requests from funders.

However, some funder practices did have undesirable effects on collaborations. For instance, changes in funder priorities limited organisations' abilities to work together in the long term. In Indonesia, 'the donor changed the priority because of the presidential and legislative election ... they don't want to pay attention to corruption issues ... but we will still have the same priority on corruption issue'. Moreover, the shift from institutional grants to issue-based funding hurt social movements, who, as we noted earlier, tended to prioritise grassroots movement building over winning specific legal changes.

In some cases, funders engage with think tanks, who then cover the costs of collaborative work rather than passing on funds. One key informant suggested that this was because social movements (at least in her experience) did not have the means to account for funds in a manner that funders would wish – i.e. they were not sufficiently 'professionalised'. But by favouring think tanks – and taking an issue-based approach – funders effectively give control over resources and strengthen their hand (as well as their voice), which can potentially undermine the collaboration and/or lead to poor outcomes. As Levine (2019), formerly of the Hewlett Foundation, argues 'Private funders, including both individuals and private foundations like ours, make choices that effectively pick winners and losers. With funding choices, we make it possible for some of the groups working within a movement to prevail while others falter'.

A community organiser from the US shared an example of this: ‘OSF provided funding, and put funding into the hands of lawyers, a policy organisation and a legal think tank, which controlled resources. They had a theory about how to win, had a campaign and doled out money to grassroots organisations. In Ohio, they ran a similar campaign. But it failed. One of the reasons it failed, was because it was out of touch with voters. There was lots of frustration amongst the organising world, they wanted control over resources, they wanted to build movements, not just win issues, but think tanks are issue based not people based’. This suggests that social movements are absent from funders’ theories of change.

The increased focus on accountability in the aid sector and its negative effects are well documented. Think tank–social movement collaborations are not exempt from such effects. One think tanker from Brazil put it starkly: ‘it is contradictory. Donors want results, but we have 15 donors, I have to write 30 reports every year, two reports per donor. I am an expensive human resource, and I lose all this time writing reports, but they want results ...’. And given accounting practices, ‘to pay the water bill I need to make five cheques’. In addition, the results they need to get are difficult to achieve; for instance, ‘when we train, the indicator is not the number of people trained, but the number of people trained who have gone on to do advocacy work. So, we have to push them to do advocacy, but the context isn’t right for that [given the change in government]’. Nevertheless, INESC ‘shielded’ movement actors from such accountability requirements. And in another example, the think tank did their best to ensure that funding issues did not shape their collaborative work by, for instance, ensuring that the movement sent financial and narrative reports not to them but directly to the funder, and by not ‘chasing’ them to send reports.



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8. Conclusion

In this, the final section, we summarise our findings, identify lessons and implications and suggest recommendations.

Summary

We began this paper asking if there were examples of social movements and think tanks (broadly defined) working together. The answer is a resounding yes! But think tanks and social movements take many forms, so it is not surprising that **think tank–social movement collaborations also take many forms** – from groups of activists engaging with groups of policy experts, to groups of activists sitting on a think tank’s board, to think tanks being part of a broader political movement, and many more.

We found that both social movements and think tanks collaborate with each other to acquire new knowledge and insight (albeit about different things); to engage with, be heard by and be seen as credible by specific non-traditional audiences; and to connect with other organisations with shared objectives and values. Ultimately both think tanks and social movements collaborate with one another to **contribute to changes in themselves and in wider society**.

Initial connections between think tanks and social movements are made mainly through: people’s own personal and professional networks; introductions from funders; introductions from intermediary NGOs; through a history of working together or in a similar field; through popular recognition and finally a somewhat market-based approach. Social movements are unwilling to work with think tanks until they are sure **they can be trusted**. In some cases, where sufficient trust has not been developed through a process of getting to know and understand one another better, the collaboration may become stuck.

During collaborations with social movements, we found that think tanks undertake the following **activities**: generating and sharing knowledge; teaching and training their counterparts; brokering, convening, mediating and facilitating relationships and discussions with stakeholders; providing advice, identifying options and drafting proposals; engaging directly with stakeholders and representing their concerns in policy processes and, finally, providing resources to support the collaboration. Conversely, we found that social movements played an important role in mobilising the public through direct action and providing insight and knowledge of people’s lived experiences and needs.

To manage differences between think tanks and social movements, we found it is important for collaborators (especially think tankers) to: demonstrate humility and be reflexive, take a long-term approach (which fosters trust), ensure an open process to engagement (with each other), make any technical knowledge that is produced accessible and encourage internal engagement (especially within the social movement, which may have many members who are not part of deliberations within the collaboration).

Social movements and think tanks differ, and in some ways their differences (in for example, their functions) create the opportunity to collaborate, with collaborators benefiting in ways we describe above. However, these **differences also create difficulties**. These differences include: the way in which think tanks and social movements engage with each other (with think tank experts often seen as ‘looking down’ on their social movement counterparts); organisational priorities; goals and approaches to policy engagement; views on who should engage in formal policy processes and the nature of knowledge that is produced.

To **manage differences** between think tanks and social movements, we found it is important for collaborators (especially think tankers) to: demonstrate humility and be reflexive, take a long-term approach (which fosters trust), ensure an open process to engagement (with each other), make any technical knowledge that is produced accessible and encourage internal engagement (especially within the social movement, which may have many members who are not part of deliberations within the collaboration). In some cases, an intermediary plays a key role in managing and mediating differences. In order to manage their differences (and protect their credibility), think tanks often ‘keep their distance’ from social movements to protect their independence.

Collaborative work is intensive and often requires **financial support**. In many cases, think tank experts engage in collaborative work with social movements on a voluntary basis (in addition to their usual workload), which in some cases proves challenging. In other cases, collaborative work is funded by core or institutional funds from either the think tank or social movement, while in yet others collaborative work is funded by external funders.

The **practices of funders** has both positive and negative consequences on collaborations. In some cases, funders urge think tanks and social movements to work together. The ‘projectisation’ of a collaboration encourages both parties to consider jointly their objectives and approaches (during which differences could come to light), while some funders enable collaborators to change and adapt the parameters of their projects.

Nevertheless, in some cases, changes in funding priorities prevent parties from taking a long-term approach to collaboration. Funders tend to focus on issues and favour think tanks (given that they often mirror funders in their set up). Social movements are often absent from or obscure in funders’ ‘theories of change’. This gives think tanks control over resources and power in the collaboration. And finally, increasingly stringent accountability requirements create significant administrative work for think tanks, from which, in many cases, they shield their social movement counterparts.

Lessons and implications

Here we identify lessons and implications for 1) the collaborators (both think tanks and social movements) and 2) funders.

For think tanks and social movements involved in, or seeking, collaboration

Differences between think tanks and social movements create opportunities for collaboration but can create conflict. Working together can subsequently be hard work, time consuming and emotionally demanding. So, an **ability to get on with other people** with potentially different educational backgrounds, experiences and identities (gender, race, class) is crucial.

Moreover, it is important for people from think tanks and social movements to **come together regularly**, ideally in person to get to know each other, build trust and work jointly on tasks. It is also important for the same people to periodically **reflect on how it is they are working together**, paying attention to people's experiences and relationships. This can help collaborators decide how to manage the relationship and navigate potentially complex power dynamics. For instance, those who are in a more privileged position can learn how to empower others with less power through, for instance, listening, learning, 'handing over the stick' and asking questions (see Chambers, 2012). Meeting regularly can also bring to the surface how difficult collaborative work is and be therapeutic – helping to overcome challenges and **keep the collaboration moving forward**.

In working together, think tankers and social movement actors should **decide together what function they each play during the collaboration**, and review this regularly as it is likely to change over time. Collaborators should also discuss how much they want to **prioritise each other's growth (i.e. capacity development) versus how much they want to achieve results**. This will have implications on the nature of the collaboration. For instance, prioritising both results and growth might see both collaborators working in a genuine partnership on every task where they work alongside and learn from each other, while prioritising only results might see collaborators undertaking a division of labour, and working unilaterally on 'their' particular function.

In some cases, **intermediaries can play a useful role** in convening, brokering, mediating and facilitating relationships. Intermediaries might be NGOs (like CORC and Planact in South Africa), or they might be local people who understand the local dialect, customs and political context who can act as a bridge between think tank experts and activists or community members.

In cases where think tanks and social movements cannot secure external funding, or fear external funding influencing the goals and approach of their work together, they should **consider each making a contribution to their collaborative work either in cash or in kind**. Doing so can support the collaborators to take greater ownership over, and responsibility for, the work they do together.

For funders

We suggest that funders **consider a more complex story of how change happens**, acknowledging that while think tanks can and have used their knowledge to influence formal policy processes, social movements, representing sub-sets of populations and their lived experiences, can and do play an equally important role. As such, funders should consider encouraging collaborative work between social movements and think tanks by, for instance, creating spaces and places where think tank experts and social movement activists or practitioners can come together informally to network and engage in conversation.

Given the high level of interest among funders, practitioners and academics in think tank–social movement collaborations, funders could establish and support **communities of practice** to enable both online and offline discussions. This would help improve collaborative practices, but also increase what is known about such practices. Funders could also support **sensitisation workshops and seminars** for think tanks and social movements about how they might work together and what support they could access.

We also suggest funders commission **in-depth case studies** to improve our understanding of think tank–social movement collaborations, drawing on a range of methods including auto-ethnography. These studies could explore in more detail the significance of say, nodal or bridging individuals and relationships, how think tanks and social movements respond to critical junctures and windows of opportunity, the tensions created by the different types of knowledge social movements and think tanks value, what types of think tank and social movements collaborations tend to be more successful, the role of university research centres in particular (as a form of think tank) and the impact of collaborative work on policy. These case studies could be shared with aforementioned communities of practice.

Collaborative work costs. Workshops, meetings, the generation of policy proposals, travel to take part in protests and demonstrations all require at least some resource. But rather than fund such work through projects (which focus on specific issues), we suggest funders **support this through people and organisations** (both think tanks and social movements) over the medium to long term. Although funders have pulled back from providing institutional support to organisations in recent years, we strongly suggest they reconsider this stance.

Projects focus on pre-determined results in a specific policy area, the strategies and mechanisms for delivering them, and evaluation but do not lend themselves to **developing relationships, trust building, facilitation and brokering**, which are central to collaborative work between think tanks and social movements. Individual and institutional support could be used to develop capacity (individual and organisational) to support both parties to engage in collaborative work with one another. If not, funders need to reconcile their desire for detailed project plans with clearly defined activities, outputs and outcomes with the need of collaborative processes for openness and creativity.

Funders may well be reluctant to provide funds to some social movements. But they need to acknowledge that who, they give money and – subsequently control of the money – to, will likely shape power dynamics in any collaborative work. To avoid giving money to one party or another, funders could consider funding **a local intermediary or ‘enabling’ organisation**, which has a good understanding of the local context and channels funds and support to both the think tank and social movement. Its core features would include the ability to recruit local or locally experienced staff on long-term contracts; strong facilitating or networking capabilities, subject to flexible forms of performance monitoring that reward learning and adjustment; and answerability to their think tank and social movement collaborators, not just the funder.

Failing this, funders should consider **moving closer to where the action** is so they can identify and support strong collaborations that have made solid contributions to change processes, and serve the needs of both the policy elite and those of communities/public and engage in shared decision making (or have the potential to do so). They should also consider providing small grants at short notice, with limited accountability requirements for social movements and think tanks to do collaborative work, especially during or after a critical juncture.

Further research

This initial study has answered many questions regarding think tank and social movement relationships, but it has also left us with many more, and further studies should be done. Both qualitative and quantitative studies are needed to further our understanding. For example, in-depth case studies in which different voices from within the relationship are included will provide a better picture of the functions, motivations, difficulties and benefits that each actor perceives. A deeper look into how the political context affects, hinders or promotes think tank and social movement relationships is also crucial; this study could not address in depth how shrinking social spaces affect think tank–social movement relationships, but it is nevertheless an important aspect to address.

Additionally, the interplay of the different networks and actors in the relationships is important to unravel, as think tanks and social movements operate within a bigger ecosystem that has formal and organisational as well as informal and personal connections between actors (as seen in the section on how collaborations are established). Understanding how these networks intersect in the wider ecosystem can help make the system clearer, explain why relationships flourish or flounder, and even elucidate the successes or failures of social movements.

A quantitative study identifying the different functions that think tanks and social movements fulfil will also be helpful to understand how best to support the relationship. Comparative studies could also help reveal whether the size, age, turnover or ideology of the think tank plays a role in the relationship, and also when in the lifecycle of the social movement think tanks tend to join.

In summary, this research has helped identify that relationships between think tanks and social movements do exist, that they, in general, seem to be positive for both, and that they have specific motivations behind them, as well as specific functions that each actor fulfils; nonetheless more research is needed to unravel how this take place and how to continue fostering them.

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