
A NATIONAL DIALOGUE ON ESTABLISHING A THINK TANK: THE CASE OF HONDURAS

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Think tanks can be created from watershed events in a nation's history or spawned by urgent national issues that drive the search for better policy solutions, and, in many cases, they are "the brainchild" of an individual or a small group of visionaries, says Amy Coughenour Betancourt, Adjunct Fellow of the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. In Honduras, she says, the notion was to plant the seed with a broad range of national opinion leaders taking part in a workshop and to allow natural leadership to emerge.

When invited earlier this year to conduct a seminar with Honduran national opinion leaders on "how to establish a strategic think tank," I considered a series of issues about how to guide a country through this process. While experts on think tanks have examined a wide range of issues, including the history of these institutions and why they were founded, few, if any, have outlined practical guidelines for those interested in establishing such an institution. Furthermore, the whole concept of a "think tank" in the Honduran context needed to be examined. As a former staff member and current adjunct fellow of the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, I am familiar with the inner workings of a U.S.-style think tank operating as an independent, non-profit organization that produces research and analysis with the goal of shaping public policy. However this was not necessarily a relevant model for Honduras, given the financial limitations and lack of tradition for such institutions in that country. The approach that I ultimately selected addressed the following four key questions:

- Where would the leadership for such an establishment come from and who would its constituents be?
- What are the characteristics of think tanks, their role and function, and why do they emerge?

- What is the general context of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Latin America in which these kinds of institutions exist, and specifically, are there any institutions in Honduras now that have characteristics similar to those of a think tank?
- What kinds of resources are available for public policy institutions?

Finally, the heart of the workshop, which was sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in Honduras, focused on a "visioning" exercise to identify policy issues and gaps in the Honduran context that could provide an impetus for the creation of a public policy research effort.

The purpose of organizing a workshop on think tanks in Honduras was two-fold: first, there was a perceived need for a national institution that produced high-quality research on national and international issues, particularly ones related to foreign policy. No single institution stood out as an autonomous leader in this area. Second, there was no institution that could provide a ready pool of recognized experts on national and international issues upon which national opinion leaders, the government, Congress, the foreign diplomatic corps, and others could draw for policy analysis, data, speakers, and other products and services that a think tank typically provides. What followed out of these

identified needs was an interesting “brainstorming” session about what role public policy institutions serve in political life, how and why they develop, how national policy issues are identified and prioritized, and, ultimately, how to identify the leadership to implement the establishment of such an institution in a developing country.

LEADERSHIP AND CONSTITUENTS

Identifying the players in a national discussion about establishing a new national think tank — or alternatively, strengthening existing public policy organizations — is a challenging task because it can predetermine the views and issues brought to the fore. In the case of Honduras, the diplomatic academy of the Honduran Ministry of Foreign Relations took the lead in identifying key institutions and participants to include in the planning session. Groups represented included government officials, defense college officials, the media, NGOs, international consulting firms, business and trade groups, the legal research center of the university, and the Congressional Research Center. Other potentially important players who were not at the workshop, but who could be valuable in such an effort, include stronger representation from the National University and other academic institutions, congressional members or staff, a broader range of civil society organizations, state government officials, mayors or other local government representatives, and individuals with particular expertise or scholarship in public policy.

Not only do these groups have a stake in public policy research, but they also could potentially provide some of the required intellectual leadership, financial support, or organizational components for future endeavors.

The dilemma is that, ideally, a broad range of viewpoints should be included in a national dialogue on the establishment of an institution intended to have national impact, but historically, think tanks are often formed by persons or groups with a particular agenda, set of goals, or policy imperative. They are rarely formed by a disparate group of institutions or individuals with varying missions and functions coming together by consensus.

Think tanks are often formed out of watershed events in a nation’s history or urgent national policy issues that drive the search for better policy solutions, and they are often the brainchild of one person’s vision or a small group of visionaries. For example, the Council on Foreign Relations, one of the oldest public policy institutions in the United States, was originally founded in 1921 by businessmen, bankers, and lawyers determined to keep the United States engaged in the world. This followed in the wake of World War I when many U.S. policy voices were promoting a more insular view of American policy. And in the early 1980s, several conservative think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation, were formed out of an ideological break with the legacy of then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies.¹ In Honduras, however, the idea was to plant the seed with a range of groups and allow natural leadership to emerge.

ROLE AND RATIONALE OF THINK TANKS

Once the players were at the table in Tegucigalpa, the first goal was to develop a common understanding of “think tanks,” or public policy research centers, and to examine typical functions, roles, and activities of such organizations. Questions about the mission, focus, autonomy, size, budget, ideology, and other characteristics were posed and discussed using a sampling of U.S. think tanks as a backdrop for small group analysis and discussion, and later drawing upon a sampling of Latin American institutions. The U.S. institutions included CSIS, the Center for International Policy, the Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation, and the Council on Foreign Relations. Latin American institutions included groups like El Colegio de Mexico, Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES), Center for the Study of the State and Society (CEDES) in Argentina, Institute for Liberty and Democracy (ILD) in Peru, and the Getulio Vargas Foundation in Brazil.

Within the context of the role and function of think tanks, the group also discussed the reasons that think tanks emerge — an important element in understanding the political, social, cultural, and economic catalysts for creating such institutions. Comparative studies on think tanks by leading

experts in the field facilitated discussion by providing some practical input on the proliferation of public policy research institutions worldwide. The studies also provided valuable insights for understanding how a country's political structures and policy interactions translate into unique public policy research institutions.²

THE “THIRD SECTOR” AND THINK TANKS IN LATIN AMERICA

One of the critical steps in the workshop was to view the emergence of public policy research centers within the context of the explosion of NGOs and other civil society groups in Latin America over the last several decades. As many scholars have observed, these burgeoning “third sector” groups — which are neither a part of the public sector (the state) nor the private, for-profit sector (the market) — have emerged from the increasingly blurring nexus of government, markets, and civil society. A growing body of literature on civil society, democracy, and changing power structures has begun to clarify the varying types of civil society organizations, their relationship to both the state and the markets, and the increasing power they wield in major societal debates in Latin America as in other parts of the world.³

A subset of NGOs are institutions devoted to policy debate, public policy research and impact, and, in some cases, advocacy for affecting social change. In Latin America, these institutions — for example, Center of Research for Development (CIDAC) and the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE) in Mexico, the Center for Public Studies (CEP) in Chile, and the Institute of Peruvian Studies (IEP) in Peru — not only exist, they have been proliferating rapidly over several decades, and in some cases, are thriving. Yet, with a few notable exceptions, they are little understood in terms of the scarce research dedicated to them. While not as large and well known as those in the United States and other countries, many Latin American public policy institutes have been successful in attracting top intellectual and research talent and in playing important roles in shaping national policy debates.⁴

THE HONDURAN CONTEXT

The workshop participants then turned to the history and current state of public policy institutions inside Honduras. How Honduran institutions were categorized in terms of whether or not they are engaged in independent, non-partisan public policy research activities was driven partly by their comparison to the U.S. think tank model. Most did not fit the U.S. model, but upon closer inspection, Honduras had an interesting history of think tank-like functions being performed by a number of institutions. Mapping these institutions, how they emerged, their funding sources, and the types of activities they undertook was key to determining any future steps toward strengthening public policy institutions and activities.⁵

Most of these organizations have produced national-level research on particular issues, and have held policy fora and other events. However, none of these institutions — for various reasons, including lack of autonomy, limited funding, a business sector focus, and a failure to have policy impact — would likely be considered a “classical” think tank. Yet, each had valuable expertise to contribute on a wide variety of relevant policy questions, and many had creatively built research and policy activities into their portfolios when funding was available for such pursuits.

RESOURCES AND FUNDING

The question of funding is the determining factor in any discussion of institution-building. A broad range of funding mechanisms was discussed at this workshop, including foreign development funds, foundations, private sector contributions, state funds, tuition from graduate education, membership, contract research, sale of publications and services, and conference fees. Particularly evident in Latin American institutions is the need to diversify funding sources and avoid over-dependence on any one source. When the single source — in many cases, foreign aid funding — dries up or a donor's priorities change, institutions are left with little or no funding, and are therefore severely weakened, often causing them to close their doors or severely cut their budgets.

FINDINGS

The heart of the workshop was the participants' "visioning" process to identify specific policy issues important to Hondurans, uncover policy gaps, and point to opportunities to shape policy and impact an agenda for change. They thought through the requisite policy issues and the relevant players, as well as the role that a think tank could play in the Honduran context.

Although the participants expressed very positive feelings about the outcomes of the workshop, it remains to be seen how Honduras will ultimately fare in strengthening the quality and impact of its public policy research. Consensus was achieved regarding the key priority policy issues for Honduras as well as where opportunities exist to influence these policies.⁶ The group also agreed to form a steering committee to meet and develop a concept paper, funding strategy, and an action plan.

To date, two meetings have taken place under the leadership of the Foreign Ministry's diplomatic academy. But plans to create a "center for documentation and research" within the academy — however useful for the professionalization of the Honduran Foreign Service — will not ultimately serve the need for an autonomous, non-partisan, credible, policy-focused institution to strengthen

public policy debate in the country. The impetus for an independent think tank in Honduras — or in almost any country — that is not directly tied to business, government, the military, or other special interests, will ultimately be determined by the perceived urgency for reform, strong value placed on independent thinking in public policy debate, and a group of leaders and benefactors with a vision for shaping the future of the country through solid policy solutions. ●

1. Smith, James. 1991. *Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite*. New York: Free Press.

2. See Stone, Diane, Andrew Denham and Mark Garnett, eds. 1998. *Think Tanks Across Nations: A Comparative Approach*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

3. See Meyer, Carrie. 1999. *The Economics and Politics of NGOs in Latin America*. Westport: Praeger.

4. For an excellent survey of Latin American public policy centers, see Levy, Daniel, 1996. *Building the Third Sector: Latin America's Private Research Centers and Nonprofit Development*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

5. Several group members shared their knowledge of these institutions, which included the Foundation for Investment and Development of Exports (FIDE); the National Defense College; Institute for Juridical Research at the National Autonomous University; Honduran Council for Private Enterprise (COHEP); and Citizens' Forum (Foro Ciudadano), to name a few. Thanks to John Sanbrailo, Executive Director of the Pan American Development Foundation, for his insights on Honduran public policy institutions.

6. Security and corruption were the top two policy issues, followed by poverty alleviation, sustainable development, education, and the economy.