Toward the 2013 general election in Paraguay: The influence of think tanks in public debates

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**Abstract**

Public debate and large-scale civil society participation in political processes in Paraguay were uncommon, due in large part to the country’s authoritarian history. Recognizing the need for a change in political practices, CADEP and Instituto Desarrollo (ID) partnered to monitor the electoral process and advocate for a public debate as part of that process. The partners hosted a series of roundtable meetings with the technical staff of the major political candidates and monitored the candidates themselves to identify their proposals and themes; formulated the agenda for public debate in the media; and used an election information website and social media as popular communication channels. To facilitate high-level public debate, the partners used networks of NGOs and social movements to form an NGO consortium. Given the project’s success and influence, the consortium decided to collaborate beyond the election period and establish a permanent platform called “Paraguay Debate.”

**On The Matching Funds**

In 2011 the Think Tank Initiative established the Matching Funds program as another source of financial support. These funds support efforts by TTI-funded think tanks to achieve their long-term objectives, and also promote peer learning and collaboration.
COLLABORATING INSTITUTIONS

This project, initially aimed at influencing the 2012-2013 electoral debate, was the result of a partnership between the two TTI-grantee institutions in Paraguay: CADEP and ID. Together they created an NGO consortium called “Paraguay Debate” in which nearly ten organizations and associations are participating.

WHAT THEY DID AND WHY

The pre-election period is a key moment when citizens can influence the priorities of candidates running for office in the Executive and Legislative branches. It is thus an opportunity for citizens to play an active role in shaping future public policies. As such, CADEP and ID collaborated to implement “Toward the 2013 general election in Paraguay: The influence of think tanks in public debates.” Informed by the results of research conducted by both think tanks, the project sought to enhance the 2012-2013 pre-election debate in Paraguay by increasing the focus of discussions on issues that are critical to the country’s development.

Specifically, the project was aimed at:
- Influencing the platforms of the different political parties and candidates by disseminating targeted public policy notes and providing technical and discussion-related inputs.
- Raising awareness on the need to critically assess the content of candidate and party platforms.
- Encouraging electors to vote for candidates and parties whose platforms promise to address Paraguay’s most critical development challenges.

In a first instance, CADEP and ID prepared policy notes on eight topics they considered were the most important to have included in the election’s debates. Then, activities were geared towards raising awareness around these issues so they would get picked up by both candidates and voters. An NGO consortium called “Plataforma Paraguay Debate” was therefore established to help create high-level public debate around the identified issues. This consortium included a number of democracy-promoting organizations such as the Centro de Información y Recursos para el Desarrollo (CIRD), Desarrollo en Democracia (DENDE), Semillas para la Democracia, Decidamos and Gestión Ambiental (GeAm). Following a press conference where the consortium was formally launched, a number of other organizations requested to join, namely, the Frente para la Niñez (with the participation of UNICEF), Centro de Políticas Públicas de la Universidad Católica, Centro de Estudios Judiciales (CEJ) and Voto Informado, a program of the Centro de Documentación y Estudios (CDE).

Several activities were carried out to raise the level of debate. For instance, policy notes and other documents were made available to the general public through an online portal, Facebook and Twitter, and a magazine called Paraguay Debate, which was launched as part of the initiative. Radio spots of approximately 25 seconds were produced to explain to the public the issues discussed in the policy notes. Meetings were organized with the main candidates, and their political parties to discuss such issues as sustainable development, agrarian policy, environmental governance and inclusive economic growth. In addition, two televised presidential debates were hosted, a panel discussion on taxation was held, and a workshop on the challenges facing the Paraguayan education system was organized.

RESULTS

The project was very successful. It resulted in the establishment of a rewarding and influential inter-institutional consortium. The “Plataforma Paraguay Debate” proved to be an effective means by which to shift the focus of electoral debates away from personal or partisan issues and onto the most important policy issues facing Paraguay. The consortium’s efforts to disseminate its recommendations using a range of media outlets and platforms had a substantial impact on public opinion. Finally, the project was an opportunity for
CADEP and ID to take a leadership role amongst a consortium of heterogeneous NGOs, demonstrating the potential of think tanks to take on this mediating role within their countries.

The implementation of this project also showed that conditions are ripe in Paraguay for organizations to collaborate in more meaningful ways. This collaborative approach created new opportunities for consortium members to influence policies since political parties were more receptive to listening to a group of well-respected organizations working together towards a common goal, rather than being approached by these same institutions individually. The project has also made it clear that working with the media and disseminating project results has a greater impact on public opinion when it is done through a joint-platform with consistent messaging.

Given the success of the project, the consortium members felt that their work should not end on election night. They therefore decided to transition it into an ongoing platform from which to influence public policy debate in Paraguay. As such, the election platform was revamped and launched as a permanent website called “Paraguay Debate”: www.paraguaydebate.org.py

NEXT STEPS

General elections are a key moment in the policy-making cycle and TTI-supported institutions should seize this unique time to shape their country’s future policies. Through an initiative such as the one undertaken by CADEP and ID, think tanks have the potential to contribute to the platforms of political parties and candidates, enhance the quality of election debates, and therefore influence the policies of newly elected governments. This helps to address three weaknesses that are particularly salient in the Latin American context, namely the weak legitimacy of political parties; the antagonistic and personalized nature of political debate; and the lack of long-term planning on the part of the incumbent.

Establishing a consortium is an effective means of enhancing the quality of debate, however integrating so many organizations with divergent motivations and philosophies into a single platform is a complex process with potentially high transaction costs. It is important that any think tank considering leading such a process carry out a mapping exercise to determine the institutional context, orientation and interests of all potential partners to better identify who they can and should partner with. The roles of various academics, political parties and candidates, international agencies, civil society organizations, media outlets, journalists and opinion leaders as either allies or competitors must be explored.

Special attention must also be paid to the technical quality of papers that are produced, since these are the springboard for all communication and action. Having good-quality papers is a sine qua non condition for success, however, quality alone is not enough – they must also be relevant, down-to-earth and easy to read. In the case of many think tanks, research accounts for 80% of the cost producing a paper series, and dissemination accounts for the other 20%. In a project such as this one, the secret is to invert these ratios. Rather than produce new research, the papers should be based on synthesizing and updating knowledge the institutions have already produced.

Finally, the fundamental role played by the communications expert must not be overlooked. The policy papers must be “translated” into different formats for print, radio and television. Press conferences, interviews, panel discussions and other events must be organized, and it is important that research staff receive media training, particularly if they will appear in front of TV cameras.