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## 2013 Latin America Summit Report

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# 2013 Latin America Summit Report

## **Disciplines**

Latin American Studies

## **Comments**

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THINK TANK SUMMIT REPORT



THINK TANKS & CIVIL SOCIETIES PROGRAM

The Lauder Institute  
The University of Pennsylvania



# LATIN AMERICA SUMMIT

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JULY 10-12, 2013

# Think Tanks & Civil Societies Program

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Sustaining, strengthening, and building capacity for think tanks around the world...

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# 2013 LATIN AMERICA SUMMIT REPORT

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

July 10-12, 2013

# Introduction

## Overview of Latin America

Latin America is a dynamic region with complex political and economic environments, spanning 33 countries of which the majority gained independence in the nineteenth century. The region shares linguistic and cultural similarities which date back to its colonial past. The vast majority of Latin Americans are Christian and tend to maintain socially conservative attitudes. The region is comprised of developing countries which struggle with poverty and inequality despite periods of economic growth, and most of which are largely dependent on outside powers, especially the US. Moreover, development is unequal not only among countries, but also within; for example, indigenous peoples, which are often marginalized from the political process, represent nearly 10 percent of the region's population, the largest numbers residing in Guatemala, Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, adding to social and economic disparities within states. More importantly, a long history of government instability and political conflict has plagued the region, greatly contributing to social and economic inequalities.

Several decades ago, periods of democratization, economic liberalization, state repression, as well as state strength and weakness altered government structures in Latin America, creating a space for civic engagement, and bringing to the forefront a vast array of policy issues. The rise in think tanks during this period, namely in the 1980s and 1990s, is often attributed to the dramatic political and socioeconomic transitions caused by the region's democratization and liberalization. For example, democratization efforts beginning in the 1980s allowed more actors to assert influence in the political process, while decentralization placed new burdens on the local authorities, creating a space for think tanks to offer their expertise. Market liberalization increased the need for new economic policies since the state no longer controlled all market activity. State repression and university politicization particularly effected university professors who were viewed as subversive by authoritarian regimes, and thus were either pushed out of their politically affiliated universities or voluntarily joined the private or nonprofit sector. Lastly, state weakness led to the loss of public trust in the government, allowing think tanks to fill the vacuum by providing policy relevant research and legitimizing political agendas.

Think tanks served as epicenters of political change, openness and democratization in the Latin American region. Some scholars suggest that think tanks function as dissemination environments, policy legitimizers, knowledge networks, and supporters of political activities. As dissemination environments, think tanks create favorable settings for a variety of public actors to discuss and analyze new approaches or lines of action related to public policies. As policy legitimizers, think tanks help in developing policy proposals by providing relevant, well-researched information to policymakers. Think tanks serve as knowledge networks by providing actors with a "network of contacts" through which researchers and policymakers are able to exchange ideas. Lastly, think tanks can offer support for political activities by creating and

revising policy proposals of any political sector or providing resources for the support of political actors through various foundations.

The rise and development of think tanks in Latin America has served as a catalyst for social mobilization, movement organization and ideological validation throughout the region. With the rise of think tanks came the growth and engagement of civil societies, while policymakers recognized the importance of policy-oriented research and the role of the public in articulating policy agenda. Thus, in the backdrop of political instability and persistent social and economic inequalities, it is important to ask: what is the role of think tanks in contemporary Latin America?

## Regional Variations

Argentina is a home to the largest number of think tanks in Latin America. Argentina's first think tanks, founded after World War II, focused on domestic and international economic issues and were predominantly government and university affiliated. A trend starting in the 90's and continuing into the present day shows that "nonprofit private research centers have largely displaced public universities and achieved leadership sometimes bordering on monopoly in social research". Research areas tackled by Argentine think tanks tend to focus on economic policy, democratization and human rights.

Brazil is the main regional power in Latin America given its population, territory, GDP, and military power. Membership in MERCOSUR and IBSA reinforce Brazil's influence in the region and prominence across the globe. Unlike think tanks in lesser-developed Latin American countries, Brazil's think tanks are diverse in their areas of research, reflecting Brazil's rise as a geopolitical force in both the regional and international arenas. Even though Brazil is the only Latin American country to see an increase in the growth rate of think tanks this past decade, it still has a comparatively small number of think tanks—just eighty-one. The two biggest areas of research are economics and politics, followed by social development and the environment.

Cuba, a communist state, is the largest and most populous island nation in the Caribbean and the first socialist country in the Americas. Cuba's think tanks are mostly controlled by the state and focus exclusively on issues that are sanctioned by the government. The majority of Cuban think tanks focus on the environment, followed by social policy, economics and science and technology.

Chile is one of the most prosperous Latin American states with a high GDP and a stable government; it is the only Latin American country included in OECD. Since 1990, Chile has transitioned smoothly to a democracy, and currently has trade agreements with many countries throughout the world. The vast majority of think tanks consider themselves independent and autonomous, a sharp contrast from countries like Mexico, where many think tanks are affiliated with the government. The main area of research interest among Chile's think tanks is domestic economy, followed by social policy.

Mexico is the most populous Spanish-speaking country in the world, and the fifth largest country in the Western Hemisphere. It followed the region's trend of democratization after 71-year-long

one-party rule. In comparison to other Latin American states, however, the growth and development of think tanks in the country has lagged behind. Think tanks in Mexico concentrate on two main areas of research: democracy and domestic economy. Mexico's think tanks use their research to increase political participation.

Venezuela is an oil rich country and is one of the founding members of OPEC. Its dependence on resource wealth has led to growing income inequalities. Venezuela adopted socialist policies, including universal education and healthcare; however, poverty and violent crime remain, leading to political unrest. Think tanks in Venezuela work to influence public policy and political participation. Some of the most prominent think tanks in the country focus on topics such as the development of private enterprise, free-market principles, and participation of the private sector in the political process.

### **Summit Agenda**

Several areas of interest have been discussed among the participants of the summit, including: economics and politics; regional integration and cooperation; foreign policy; the impact of think tanks in the region; fight against poverty; and the future of think tanks in Latin America.

# Institutional Challenges

## Economic and Political Concerns

Political party structures have been the region's most effective systems of organization and representation of popular demands. As such, they have been instrumental not only in the formulation and communication but also the implementation of policy. Without informal or formal access to policymakers, researchers at think tanks are likely to be shut out of the policymaking process.

Mass social movements, which have lost trust in the government, tend to support populist leaders, as has been the case with "Chavismo" in Venezuela. These movements have gained power at the expense of political parties, which in a healthy democracy help place a check on the power of the executive and provide spaces for debate and creation of a variety of policy options.

Social inclusion is an important concern throughout the region and is imperative in addressing social, political, and economic inequalities. Additionally, crime and violence are major issues throughout Latin America, especially in poor areas, and can be attributed to staggering poverty, lack of economic opportunities and state weakness.

Industrialization as well as engagement in regional and global markets is also considered important for regional development both within socialist and less regulated democratic states. Strong US presence in the region, ties with the EU markets and extended trade with China provide new areas of economic policy in which think tanks can provide expertise.

## Integration or Cooperation?

Regional integration and cooperation is seen as a form of comparative advantage. Through membership in MERCOSUR and UNASUR, Latin American states are taking action towards tackling regional problems without the influence of outside powers, namely the US, and focusing on issues such as the creation of a single market, economic development, free movement of people, common infrastructure and common defense.

Growth and competition as well as simplified immigration laws are at the forefront of development, thus local and regional competitiveness has the potential to improve the quality of goods and increase the standard of living. Investment in technological and scientific advancements is equally important for Latin America to assert itself as a serious global competitor.

In addition to economic cooperation through open and free markets, Latin America looks to military cooperation as a form of regional defense. The states intend to employ multilateralism to settle controversies but continue bilateral relations in other matters. Diplomacy is especially

important in preserving bilateral relations while navigating the complex multilateral environment.

As the states are taking steps towards closer regional cooperation, think tanks are looking for their place in this process. Since many think tanks, especially in the less developed states, tend to focus on domestic issues, additional focus on international cooperation can insure think tank relevance in the changing environment.

## **Foreign Policy in Latin America**

Calls for military cooperation among some Latin American states are a recent phenomenon that aims to ensure regional peace. In other policy areas, many states continue balancing domestic challenges with multiple foreign policy demands. In poverty stricken areas or regions engulfed in violent crime, for example, foreign policy is not at the forefront, unless it directly affects social policies; thus, internal policy challenges tend to affect foreign policy. However, numerous domestic issues are tied to foreign demands—i.e. exploitation of natural resources, drug wars, and dependence on foreign aid.

As a region, Latin America focuses on hemispheric cooperation, human security, human rights, trade and the environment. Dependence on natural resource exports poses an issue for several states given its impact on the environment—in many instances resulting in displacement of indigenous people as well as contributing to climate change, overreliance on nonrenewable resources, and lack of economic diversification.

Think tanks can focus their research on the impact of foreign policies, such as free trade, on local growth and development, as such filling the void between uninterested population and busy policymakers. Additionally, think tanks can provide valuable information on foreign direct investment, economic diversification, and regional integration within Latin America.

## **Social Policies: The Fight against Poverty**

Poverty is one of the biggest problems facing Latin America. There are several issues that contribute to poverty in the region: vulnerability, territorial inequality, social exclusion and discrimination, and poor sustainability.

In some countries up to fifty percent of population live below the poverty line, which means that they depend on foreign aid, predominantly from the US. Dependence on international aid suggests that domestic economic development efforts are weak. Moreover, in such regions think tanks are also dependent on foreign funding and are subject to financial insecurities, further diminishing development progress.

Implementation of effective social and economic policies is necessary for poverty reduction, which is especially difficult to achieve in weak states. However, social inclusion of diverse groups is one of the steps towards reducing social and economic inequalities throughout the region. Think tanks can be instrumental in providing relevant research to policymakers who are tackling staggering poverty issues.

## Think Tank World

Think Tanks in Latin America have yet to reach their full potential in the political sphere as they continue to maintain limited influence on policy, given that governments are unwilling to relinquish administrative power of key policy areas. Moreover, think tanks face competence and resource challenges among themselves. Think tanks must consider the benefits and cost of specializing in particular research areas or generalizing in order to reach the widest amount of audiences—these considerations carry financial and political consequences.

Financial as well as political resources have an impact on think tanks' competence and reach, as poorly funded think tanks are less likely to have an effective impact. Additionally, many Latin American think tanks receive outside funding, which allows them to remain politically independent, but puts in question disinterestedness and affiliation with foreign interests.

Think tanks also work in polarized environments, and thus must remain committed to open debate on various policy issues, engaging policymakers from diverse political backgrounds while keeping the decision-making process open to the public. Creating and upholding credibility is one of the most important challenges for think tanks and require objective work, creative, proactive solutions, and productive interactions with policymakers.

Engagement with new technologies is becoming increasingly important for think tanks worldwide. As dissemination environments, think tanks gain the widest reach through internet and social media by making the information available globally. Think tanks must recognize their audience and tailor language and medium of communication to gain the best results. Reaching out to civil societies, young people, as well as policymakers requires diversification of social and political networks, and the engagement of multiple media outlets.

## Think Tank Impact

Growing number of scholars and donors agree that measuring and defining the influence of think tanks on the policy process is difficult. While some scholars only qualify the direct impact of think tanks on specific policy as a means to measure influence, others analyze more indirect variables such as the degree of media coverage a think tank generates or the number of instances in which its members are invited to testify before a government body. These numbers may allow us to adequately measure public perception of think tank credibility and identity, but none of these factors alone are good determinants of influence. Formal channels of communication or interaction between policymakers and think tanks may be nonexistent, but if their work is well regarded and respected within the society, it is impossible to deny the permeation of ideas, so long as the proper mechanisms for the spread and publishing of their research are already in place, a variable largely affected by the type of regime in place within a country.

The influence of the think tank can be measured by the type of work they do, and cannot always be generalized. For example, highly specialized institutions may influence specific policies, i.e. education or free trade, whereas more comprehensive institutions may reach out to and help mobilize civil society and thus influence social change. Capacity building, consensus promotion

as well as and the use of various media and technology can contribute to think tank outreach, thus maintaining a visible presence and influencing larger audiences, especially since think tanks are as powerful at the audiences they reach.

Moreover, to exert the most influence, think tanks must remain relevant and effective which means adopting to the demands of a changing environment, such as the growing push for regional cooperation. Since think tanks have the unique capacity to provide well informed policy recommendations, they should attract young academics who will build long lasting networks with policymakers as well as the civil society, in addition to bringing innovative solutions. Anticipating future areas of interest will keep think tanks on the cutting edge of policymaking.

# Conclusion

## Conclusions:

The general processes of democratization, economic liberalization and decentralization throughout Latin America influenced think tank growth in the 1980s and 1990s; by 2000s this trend slowed down, leading to a decline of newly established think tanks among strengthening economies and democracies in the region. The decrease in think tank growth throughout Latin America does not indicate a weakening civil society, and the inability to directly address policymakers does not signify that a think tank is incapable of influencing policy. The decrease in think tank growth and the inability to directly address policymakers simply indicates the need to strengthen active think tanks by increasing funding and creating direct pathways between researchers and policymakers. Additionally, the need for financial resources can hinder think tanks' influence and independence, thus, increased funding would result in greater independence for research and agenda setting.

Moreover, Latin America has a dynamic political environment as well as persistent social, economic, and development issues, which present vast opportunities for think tanks to make meaningful policy recommendations. The main areas of research in Latin American think tanks are economics and social policy. However, the concentration is likely to shift if Latin American countries continue to strengthen their governments and economies and play a larger role in the international scene. Increased development creates more research niches, such as education and health policy, and as more of the domestic problems are addressed, greater attention is likely to shift to international policies. Since think tanks are institutions anchored between the academic and political worlds, they have the unique ability to produce quality research on emerging areas of interest and subsequently inform policymakers on the best policy choices.

## Recommendations:

1. Looking forward, think tanks should maintain the quality of research, and with it credibility, despite increasing demands for expert sound-bites and engagement in nonacademic channels of communication.
2. Setting independent, long-term research agendas will ensure the quality of research as well as financial commitment from donors.
3. Fostering informed public debates and engaging with civil society is important in providing relevant, effective policy recommendations.
4. Dissemination of information should be at the top of think tank activity, and think tanks should put innovation at core of their strategy, embracing new technologies for production and diffusion of research.
5. Developing formal channels of communication between think tanks and policymakers is essential for building credibility and creating meaningful policy changes.

6. International cooperation among think tanks through participation in regional and global think tank summits can provide invaluable opportunities for exchange of ideas and best practices, innovative solutions to persistent problems, as well as the creation of professional networks.
7. Taking into account specific factors, rather than general processes, that influence regional variations in social, political, and economic structures can provide a better picture of the differences in think tanks between Latin American countries, given that the main research areas of think tanks and their methods of operation are affected by these variations.
8. Logistically, funding problems as well as the lack of communications infrastructure and personnel are additional factors that influence the quality and reach of scholarly research.
9. Remaining relevant is key to think tank success, and this can be achieved by producing quality, long-term research, engaging social media and various media sources, inviting young scholars, creating global networks, and providing effective policy recommendations.

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# About TTCSP

## THINK TANKS AND CIVIL SOCIETIES PROGRAM

The Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) of the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania conducts research on the role policy institutes play in governments and civil societies around the world. Often referred to as the “think tanks’ think tank,” TTCSP examines the evolving role and character of public policy research organizations. Over the last 25 years, the TTCSP has developed and led a series of global initiatives that have helped bridge the gap between knowledge and policy in critical policy areas such as international peace and security, globalization and governance, international economics, environmental issues, information and society, poverty alleviation, and healthcare and global health. These international collaborative efforts are designed to establish regional and international networks of policy institutes and communities that improve policy making while strengthening democratic institutions and civil societies around the world.

The TTCSP works with leading scholars and practitioners from think tanks and universities in a variety of collaborative efforts and programs, and produces the annual Global Go To Think Tank Index that ranks the world’s leading think tanks in a variety of categories. This is achieved with the help of a panel of over 1,900 peer institutions and experts from the print and electronic media, academia, public and private donor institutions, and governments around the world. We have strong relationships with leading think tanks around the world, and our annual Think Tank Index is used by academics, journalists, donors and the public to locate and connect with the leading centers of public policy research around the world. Our goal is to increase the profile and performance of think tanks and raise the public awareness of the important role think tanks play in governments and civil societies around the globe.

Since its inception in 1989, the TTCSP has focused on collecting data and conducting research on think tank trends and the role think tanks play as civil society actors in the policymaking process. In 2007, the TTCSP developed and launched the global index of think tanks, which is designed to identify and recognize centers of excellence in all the major areas of public policy research and in every region of the world. To date TTCSP has provided technical assistance and capacity building programs in 81 countries. We are now working to create regional and global networks of think tanks in an effort to facilitate collaboration and the production of a modest yet achievable set of global public goods. Our goal is to create lasting institutional and state-level partnerships by engaging and mobilizing think tanks that have demonstrated their ability to produce high quality policy research and shape popular and elite opinion and actions for public good.

## THE LAUDER INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

The Lauder Institute of Management and International Studies offers an MA in international studies, and conducts fundamental and policy-oriented research on current economic, political, and business issues. It organizes an annual conference that brings academics, practitioners and policy makers together to examine global challenges such as financial risks, sustainability, inequality, and the future of the state.

## THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

The University of Pennsylvania (Penn) is an Ivy League school with highly selective admissions and a history of innovation in interdisciplinary education and scholarship. A world-class research institution, Penn boasts a picturesque campus in the middle of a dynamic city. Founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1740 and recognized as America's first university, Penn remains today a world-renowned center for the creation and dissemination of knowledge. It serves as a model for research colleges and universities throughout the world.