BACKGROUND PAPER

WHAT KIND OF DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTERS LATIN AMERICA NEEDS?

Research organisations and policy making in Latin America

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WORKSHOP
WHAT KIND OF DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTERS LATIN AMERICA NEEDS?

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1 Comments by Jose Fanelli (CEDES */Argentina, Red Mercosur) and Andrés Rius (IECON-UDELAR/Uruguay, Red Mercosur) are gratefully acknowledged.*

1. Introduction

Most Latin American (LA) countries count with relatively sophisticated but still fragmented research systems, which were shaped by a set of common factors. Within this background, this paper will focus on social sciences and make emphasis on development related research in those organisations, identifying capacities, roles, challenges, opportunities and key questions for debate.

Firstly, although there is a long tradition of good quality research on social sciences, particularly at public research organisations, universities and some research NGOS, the institution-building process has been eclectic as a consequence of various swings in policy regimes. In particular, institutions that emerged in response to import substitution policies during 1940s-1960s co-exist with more modern institutions devised during the period that goes from the 1970s, when the old paradigm began to decay, to the adoption of liberalisation policies in the 1990s. This mix sometimes implies a highly heterogeneous research agenda, mixed political values, scarce opportunities for dialogue across organisations, and as a consequence of all these, lack of consistency of policy guidelines.

Secondly, in many LA countries persistent macro instability and dramatic crises episodes (in the 1980s, 1990s and currently) have negatively affected the stream of funds to support research organisations (RO) with consequence in the long-term agenda setting and performance. Hence, an important portion of time and efforts of these organizations is often directed to sort out their funding needs. Moreover, science and technology (S&T) policy, in many countries has not been consistent over time and, consequently, the developmental role assigned to RO has not been systematically addressed.[2]

An important portion of time and efforts of social and development RO in LA is directed to sort out their more immediate funding needs (these efforts in their best scenario result in a set or research projects to 1-2 years maximum).

Third, the region is generally backward regarding some key pillars of sustainable long term growth, meaning that there are relevant and complex challenges ahead in areas such as productive and export diversification, technological upgrading, infrastructure, natural resources and environmental management, etc. However, the political systems in the region are often poorly prepared to deal with those issues, as political agents often have very few incentives to promote activities which rewards are seen in the long term. More generally, long-term developmental State policies are more the exception than the rule. This obviously affects not only the financing and strategies of S&T systems, but also hampers the potential contribution of those systems to the solution or alleviation of the above-mentioned challenges.

Fourth, the region is characterised by high income distribution inequality, which enhances power asymmetries undermining the possibility of building durable consensus on public policies issues. Without consensus, public policy is likely to be captured by those who could exert power (whose interests not always coincide with those of the majority).

In the scenario described above, it is not surprising to find that RO and LA governments have seldom established close and collaborative relations. Some authors even claim that topics investigated and activities carried out at RO were normally opposed to government interests and demands (Arocena and Sutz, 2005). This is especially the case of social research. There is a long-standing separation between social research and policy making in various LA countries, noticeably in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Colombia.

In countries such as Argentina or Uruguay, this outcome could have been the result of open persecutions by dictatorships, especially during the late 1970s, when social science research markedly reduced its

2 See G. Dutrénit *et al.*, 2010, A. López, 2007, L. Velho, 2005.

share in publicly funded research against other hard science and military technology such as research in the nuclear area. Moreover, in the 1990s there was an open underestimation by politicians to most of the research carried in house. Simultaneously, researchers do not face incentives to break this cultural and ideological barrier, since the institutions in which they work often reward them on the basis of their academic achievements (and sometimes on the basis of mere permanence) and not because their contributions to social and development goals.

It is worth noting that a more active involvement of social research in policy making involves a series of tensions (e.g. autonomy vs. applicability; excellence vs. relevance; democracy vs. technocracy; etc.); which need to be discussed and overcome. In other words, although social knowledge may transform the design of public policies, this is neither an automatic nor a conflict-free task. Both social scientists and policy makers face serious challenges. Yet, the former have the responsibility of making themselves visible and heard and the later have the responsibility of learning to absorb knowledge from different sources. This background paper discusses the extent to which this is feasible, enumerating the obstacles to be overcome, and highlighting specific actions to be taken to improve communication and dialogue between these actors that may redound in better policy making and better impact in peoples' life. To that end, the paper describes the characteristics of LA research systems (section 2), characterises the relation between RO and policy making (section 3), and finally presents some ideas to improve social relevance and political applicability of RO activities (section 4).

***Key questions*:**

Are policy research carried out in organisations of good quality to trust their outputs?

Are research activities by RO guided by long term developmental and social needs and goals?

Are their research outputs diffused widely and appropriately enough to become part of a policy or public debate agenda?

How could funding agencies support research at RO that is at the same time of good quality, socially relevant and politically applicable in the short to middle term?

2. Characteristics of research organisations in Latin America

2.1. A historical perspective

In general, public universities in LA were founded prior to the main public research institutes, and their missions were almost exclusively related to graduate education and the development of an emerging scientific activity. However, in Argentina, for instance, it could be highlighted early scientific productions in hard sciences at Buenos Aires University (founded in 1821) and La Plata University of La Plata (founded in 1897) in the first decades of the 20th century. Among the people carrying out those activities there was the Nobel Prize in Medicine to Houssay in 1947.

The public research institutes, instead, were born as a result of development policies and ideas based on the linear model of innovation that spread after the war, and some of them were created thanks to funds provided by international organisations such as the World Bank, USAID and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB).

In its origin, at the turn of the 20th century and especially since the 1950s, LA research was executed and funded by the National States, responding to a developmental agenda and the linear model of innovation. Two different types of public organisations emerged: public universities and public research institutes, which have different missions, activities, outputs and institutional constrains.

In Argentina, in the second half of the 1950s the National Atomic Energy Commission (CNEA), the National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA), the National Institute of Industrial Technology (INTI) and the National Research Council (CONICET), were created. In México, public research institutes were born as a consequence of the development of large public firms during the import substitution period. That is the case of the Mexican Petroleum Institute (IMP), the Electrical Research Institute (IIE), the Nuclear Energy Institute (ININ), and the National Public Health Institute (INSP). In Brazil, public research institutes were developed with a mission to meet local and social demands, especially in agriculture and public health. Suzigan and Albuquerque (2009) highlight several cases of very successful development of technologies by some of those public research institutes that had a great impact in public welfare and economic development[3]. However, there is a consensus that the institutions created under the umbrella of the linear model of innovation show some limitations in their contribution to the industrialization and modernization process observed during those years in the region (Bell).

Notwithstanding the differences between both kind universities and public research institutes, the fact is that during many decades research activities at LA were carried out by organisations whose operative costs were funded by national budget. The prevailing view in those years highlighted the key role of the State as provider of funds for training human resources and developing basic science -in universities- and also as a key actor to promote certain strategic sectors (e.g. agriculture, industry, health and, in some countries, nuclear technologies) –by public research institutes. In other words, both types of organisations (universities and public research institutes) were considered key for national development but their missions, activities, expected outputs and institutional constraints differed.

3 For example, Oswaldo Cruz Institute and the Institute Butatã in serums and vaccines; the Agronomic Institute of Campinas and EMBRAPA in Agriculture; and the Aviation Technology Center in aviation.

In the mid 1980s, in response to market liberalisations and questions to the linear model of innovation, there was a shift in LA system of RO, which were pushed to have a more prominent role in innovation. Many public RO stagnated while simultaneously new RO of different nature were created. This process resulted in the heterogeneous and fragmented system of RO of our time.

Firstly, universities focused their activities largely on research and training, while public research institutes focus more clearly on developing prototypes and in technology transfer.[4]

In turn, the scientific sector is assessed in terms of its academic performance, mainly publications that require original findings. This is notably the case of researchers working at universities, although many researchers at public research institutes are assessed by the same criteria (in Argentina, this is the case of researchers that belong to CONICET, for example). Instead, most of the researchers working at public research institutes are assessed based on goal attainments for their research projects (e.g. development and transfer goals).

Finally, also the institutional constraints are different between universities and public research institutes. Research conducted at universities normally is autonomous and responds to incentives emanated from the scientific system –which, as discussed later, not necessarily correspond to local problems but it is often associated to problems that are interesting for the international community, which validates research excellence through international publications. Instead, research at public research institutes is often driven by the institutional strategy designed by the management of those organizations; which would be more clearly aligned to public policy intentions.

Since the mid 1980s, with the spread of market liberalisation ideas, most public research organisations in LA have been encouraged to make a more direct contribution to industrial innovation. Science and technology policies targeting public research organisations have to some extent shifted from the promotion primarily of scientific developments, to strengthening the linkages to other key actors in the national system of innovation. This change also emerged from critical reflection on the adequacy of the linear model of innovation (Dasgupta and David, 1994, Nelson, 2004, Pavitt, 2001, Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). As a result, there was a clear change in the LA system of RO. On the one hand, many existent public research organisations stagnated due to lack of financial resources –either associated to the economic downturns of those years, or as a response to liberalisation ideas that promoted a reduction of public sector activities.

On the other hand, new RO of very heterogeneous nature emerged. These include: new public research organisations founded to be aligned to the new political and economic paradigm,[5] hybrid semi-private or semi-public organisations, proper private research firms and finally others coming from the third sector (such as foundations and non-governmental organisations (NGO))[6] (Echeverría, 1998). These changes contribute to shape the current system of RO in LA; which is fairly heterogeneous and fragmented.

In this scenario, many social research centers, think tanks and local/national NGOs (which today are between 25 and 50 years old) survived in the 1970s and 1980s thanks to international solidarity and development cooperation mostly from European and Canadian agencies/NGOs/groups. This local critical mass on social and development issues was the reservoir to democratic LA governments and societies in the 1990s and 2000s.

4 This difference is not clear-cut since many public research institutes also conduct applied research. Yet, the average trend is evident.
5 For example, in Mexico 27 new public research organisations sponsored by the government through the National Council for Science and Technology and the Ministry of Public Education were created between 1980 and 2000. In Argentina, we may mention the creation in 1997 of the National Agency for the Promotion of Science and Technology.
6 In relation to research foundations or NGO, Echeverria (1998) argue that their records are mixed in LA. He claimed that only those that enjoy some sort of local and national support or those that have accumulated endowments in the form of capital assets, prestige or other resources, are likely to become key players in R&D systems.

2.2. Heterogeneity of LA research organisations in social sciences and development

The diverse nature of LA RO implies also diversity in terms of agenda setting, thematic areas, research methodologies, types of research output, access to funding, degree of interaction with policy makers and with the international community, etc.

MercoNet is an example of this heterogeneity: it is an academic network of 12 institutions comprising independent research centers, think tanks, private and public universities from Mercosur countries, with fourteen years of collective knowledge production in economic research.

In terms of outputs, while universities, international RO, and research NGO tend to publish their findings, other public bodies do not. Moreover, those publications are not normally available online, with the exception of research done by international RO and research NGOs.

An analysis carried out by CEPAL (Villatoro, 2005) on supply and demand of digital information on poverty, social policies and equity based on the Directory of Social Institutions of Latin American and the Caribbean (DISALC)[7] highlighted the degree of heterogeneity of LA RO in social sciences, in terms of type of outputs and its accessibility. The sample comprised 44% of public bodies (ministries, sectoral and regional service agencies), 20% of international organisations, 13% of universities and 10% of NGOs.

Most of the organisations produced some sort of research articles or working papers. This is especially the case of those oriented to research and advisory tasks (international organisations, universities and research NGO) while the incidence is lower among organisations oriented to more practical functions (public bodies, ministries, sectoral and regional service agencies). Central America and the Caribbean organisations are the ones with lower production of this type of documents.

In the extremes, two main groups of RO can be identified:

i) the most prestigious academic oriented ones, which is linked to the international community and whose agenda setting is informed by career progress (i.e. to publish abroad) and
ii) the rest, which either focuses on solving local problems or more often tries to imitate the former.

In terms of online availability and publication, most organisations (45%) claim that a minority or none of these documents were available online, in contrast to 32% of those that said that most publications are available online. In turn, only 11% organisations claim that all research outputs are readily and freely available online. Thus, there is a digital gap across types of organisations. The absence of online availability is the most evident among public bodies (around 75% said that a minority of documents are published) and universities (70%), probably due to lack of incentive to publish online academic outputs that are meant to be published in publications with copyright at a later stage. In turn, most international organisations (81%) and the majority of research NGO (52%) said that almost everything is published online. In terms of regions, the most important gap in terms of online availability appears in Central American and Caribbean organisations.

Kreimer (2006) attempts to simplify such heterogeneity by classifying RO in two main groups. On the one hand, there are those RO; which are fairly integrated to the scientific international community by participating in international research projects and programs. These RO are also the most prestigious

7 It includes 766 institutions, from which the author analysed a sample of 256 of them.

locally and therefore the ones with higher incidence in both, participation in local policy debates/ recommendation/interventions and also in the research agenda setting. On the other hand, there are the remaining RO which are scarcely connected to the international research community and which either focus on solving local problems or more often try to imitate the agenda of the former.

The former group typically characterises most prestigious academic research, normally carried out at the best LA universities, academic-oriented public research institutes and some research NGO. Researchers within this group build up their research agenda informed by fairly autonomous motivations and guided by the need of career progress (i.e. publish or perish). Normally, there are no important incentives for this agenda to be connected to the developmental needs –actually the opposite may be true since the agenda is built so as to be easily articulated to the international community research interests where these successful researchers aim to publish. Moreover, since the best research outputs are normally published abroad, there neither is proper diffusion of those research outputs within the country of origin of academic researchers. In other words, among academic researchers there neither are incentives to produce research that responds to local needs nor to diffuse the research outputs within their own countries. The tricky issue is that this research is normally also the one methodologically more thorough and as a consequence the one with better chances to succeed in competition bidding schemes for funding.

Since the best research outputs are often published abroad, in many LA countries there neither is proper diffusion of those research outputs within the country of origin of academic researchers, although in some LA a relatively strong domestic academic environment in social sciences and development (e.g. Brazil or Mexico).

Among academic researchers there neither are incentives to produce research that responds to local needs nor to diffuse the research outputs within their own countries beyond academic channels/audiences.

2.3. Access to funding

With the spread of such an array of RO it became more salient the separation between research execution and funding, which is different to what had occurred during the developmental period of the 1950s and 1960s. A wider range of funding sources turned up, such as competitive bidding schemes from international or foreign government agencies, public sector block grants and competitive funds, government subsidies to RO, funds provided by donors at research foundations, research funds provided by firms or producer associations, royalties on research products subject to intellectual property mechanisms, etc.

There is still the challenge on how to use the funding available to meet developmental goals, and this introduces the broader debate on the growing demands from funders to "show research impact". Showing impact in the short term (e.g. projects' timing versus social or policy timing) is not always an easy task and poses challenges when social or development processes are complex and in the mid or long term run. In many LA countries access to funding for social and development research is still very limited.

Funding sources for RO are diverse and their role in driving research to sustainable development is not clear.

Competitive bidding schemes may be good to upgrade RO capabilities and to guide their research agenda to certain priorities. But i) when these mechanisms are implemented by international development agencies, priorities may not meet national needs (risk of lack of ownership and alignment), and ii) after completion,

in many cases, results are not normally assessed by their social impact.

When large share of RO operative costs are funded by unique sources that do not respect principles such as ownership and alignment (Paris Declaration principles - 2005), independence, quality and social relevance of research, may be at risk.

In theory, competition-bidding scheme is a good instrument to promote improvements in RO research capacity (i.e. competition is meant to create incentives for capability upgrading), to guide research in the direction set by certain priorities and to strengthen linkages with national and international organisations (Echeverría, 1998). To some extent, these instruments would work better for those RO whose main budget is built based on projects, such as most research NGOs. In contrast, RO which have their main budget covered by other sources and/or whose research agenda is constrained by their institutional priorities (e.g. most universities and public RO) may not bother to compete for these resources. Since RO that succeed in these competitions are normally among the most prestigious ones and since they manage to increase their resources and their internationally links, the system may be reproduced by the very dynamics implied in the participation in those research schemes: e.g. new scientists are trained within the new research project and do internships in associated international RO.

Most LA funding agencies have criteria of social and economic relevance –although, normally defined very broadly- when creating competition bidding schemes. However, it is often the case that after completion the projects are evaluated based on the (academic) outputs or self-defined goal achievements, without really assessing the social usefulness of knowledge produced (Kreimer, 2006).

Some authors have highlighted the risks that RO from emerging countries became subordinated to international priorities when funders of these competitive schemes are international funding agencies whose research interest are not necessarily properly informed by developing countries social needs (Herdt, 2012, Kreimer, 2006, Miller, 2007). Moreover, since international agencies tend to favor research projects organised in consortium of countries the parts of research assigned to LA RO may only cover partial aspects of broader conceptual problems (Kreimer, 2006). Normally, RO from emerging countries have limited capabilities to negotiate on the contents or orientations of their research activities when participating on those consortiums.[8]

Moreover, the competitive bidding schemes leave unattended the need to generate a minimum budget to keep operations –in terms of maintaining certain base level of physical and human resource infrastructures- since competitive grants usually fund only project-related operating costs. Thus, alternative funding to RO besides research projects is crucial, especially to those RO that are not covered by public budgets and/or are non-profit organizations.

Furthermore, other challenges in relation to funding turn up when they could create a conflict of interest between the funder aims or wishes and independent research outputs. This is typically the case when the operation budget of RO is largely funded by unique sources, especially private actors or political partisan with vested interest. In such a case, the integrity and quality of research come under threat. This risk has been shown to be fairly prominent in the area of clinical research, where interactions with private actors may induce researchers to hide research outputs that conflict with the interests of private funders (Blumenthal *et al.*, 2006, Campbell and Blumenthal, 1999, Parkinson and Langley, 2009).

In Mexico, it was recently denounced that a private research institute of high relevance in LA research agenda in health issues has purposively hidden findings on tobacco-related diseases due to the importance of tobacco producers among their funders (Burch *et al.*, 2010). Similarly, in Argentina, a group of social scientists from Buenos Aires University aimed at obtaining collaboration by geologists

8 See for example European funding bodies, which changed the way they promoted R&D activities by leaving aside project based schemes towards the promotion of more concentrated networks of RO. These new funding schemes have further restricted the range of manoeuvre of LA RO, since they need to adapt their agenda to the needs of the consortiums, normally covering fragmented lines of research, mostly the most routine parts, of the consortium agenda. Thus, there is the risk that LA RO may become just subcontractors of the Consortium. (P. Kreimer, 2006)

and mining engineers from the same university to work on the drafting of a new national mining law. This Law would improve national benefits associated with the mining activity but it would simultaneously affect negatively the economic interests of the mining companies. Since the entire department of geology at the Buenos Aires University received funds from mining companies, there was no interest by researchers from that department to contribute to the debate about a new mining law.[9]

Public funding to regional or multi-country research is very limited. Regional networks and regional research centers are highly dependent on international development cooperation or regional development banks. Regional integration processes (such and the Andean Community or Mercosur) do not fund social or development research to RO directly but only through donors funding/processes. For example, MercoNet did research background papers to the Macroeconomic Coordination Group of Mercosur in 2010-2011 under a European Commission project, and was selected by a competition bidding mechanism.

The private sector contribution to social and development studies broadly is still very reduced; with the exemption of productive areas where some big companies – transnational and national companies, including public companies in some cases such as Petrobras in Brazil – have clear interest to support research and some think tanks. In many countries private sector contributions to development and donations do not benefit from any tax exemption, inhibiting further engagement in this sense. In addition, corporate social responsibility in the region is more oriented to small projects that have a direct involvement of the community – usually located in the company neighborhood (building local social capital or networks attending direct demands or providing social assistance through small projects- but not only.

Regional or multi-country research on social and development issues is not easily attractive to the private sector in LA if research is not oriented to key productive/ sectors directly relevant to companies.

In addition RO (particularly NGOs but not only) do not always trust private companies or the private sector (lack of mutual knowledge and common work in the past). In many cases they prefer to reduce budget than fundraise with the private sector (arguing that private interests will undermine independency and research quality).

New research centers, thinks tanks, NGOs and networks producing social and development research were created in the 1990s and 2000s. By then official development cooperation was declining for many LA countries and INGOs were reducing dramatically their presence in the region. Many of these organizations are funded through regional banks or international organizations (development agencies, INGOs and international financial institutions) projects. Program funding from international cooperation in LA (e.g. European Commission programs for 4-5 years) has been dramatically reduced, and thus many of those RO organized their budget and structure based on projects' demands. This flexibility is a strength in terms of budget control, but a weakness in order to build and maintain stable teams, and to organize an independent core research agenda not be attached to funders' priorities or projects' timing.

Last, membership funding contribution in LA RO is still very weak. Nowadays, NGOs or think tanks cannot rely on their members' contributions. Probably this source as well as the private sector contribution, are opportunities for alternative funding in the future, but it they are not substantive funders to RO in the short term.

9 See interview with Abraham Gak, honorary professor at the UBA in La Vaca, 2008. See also Revista Mu, 2008.

3. The relation between RO and policy makers

There are a variety of incentives and reasons why policy makers may be interested in consulting RO. For example, RO may help to elucidate causal effects and provide advice on various courses of action; RO may disentangle complexity, identifying inter-linkages between several important issues; they may help to design policies -although in many occasions policy makers turn to social scientists to get information to justify policy decisions already taken-; etc. Moreover, it is not rare that prominent RO, which aggressive attitude towards knowledge diffusion for the wide public (e.g. by intervening in the media), also manage to succeed in imposing their views –especially in politically less contested areas. Thus, RO may also play an important role in putting in the agenda alternative policy options. However, as it has been said in the introduction, the relation is not easily and automatic; many obstacles may come about.

The way a policy problem is formulated (values, openness and opportunities for dialogue) may or may not invite interventions by RO. Policy makers will normally hear recommendations when mutual trust prevails. This concerns a small number of RO. Some commentators say that unsettled political situations push policy makers to seek support by a wider range of RO so as to be technically validated to the electorate.

3.1. Main obstacles

There normally are different obstacles that restrict the possibility of social research outputs to be seriously taken into consideration in policy making. Carrizo (2004) highlights the following ones:

- Tactical obstacles: recommendations by social research might lie outside the acceptability area of the electoral base.
- Temporal obstacles: the need to offer solution to urgent needs may not articulate properly with the scientific culture which needs more time to process recommendation and to reach academic standards.
- Communicational obstacles: the scientific jargon is often too specialised, which inhibited its communicational potential and the eventual use by policy makers.
- Epistemic obstacles: the need to simplified realities to proceed to decision-making does not articulate easily with the complexity of social research.
- Political/historical obstacles: under conditions of high centrality of political parties the logic of techno-scientist logic is not always well accepted in decision making.
- Philosophic logic: political actors are concerned that technocratic elitism will not contribute to democracy building.

These obstacles vary depending on each country reality, but need to be considered in order to understand existing difficulties to strengthen RO public policy influence in LA.

Social research may collaborate with policy making in a variety of ways (e.g. by identifying causal effects and disentangling complexity). Moreover, it could also be more aggressive in promoting alternative policy options when backed by civil society. However, in many LA countries civil society pressure is still weak (different contexts explain this situation: in some countries it is based on polarization, in other some agendas are very weak and there is no strong organization to promote them e.g. environmental issues, etc.).

Ideally civil society would be one of the main audiences/target for research evidence on social and development, and use it to build their own statements, demands to advocacy and public awareness actions. RO face challenges to articulate their findings with clear policy demands (maybe with the exception of research NGOs and think tanks), and tend to produce reports that are not the best way to influence policy-makers.
Politicians and social scientist belong to different cultures and need to overcome several obstacles to achieve fluent communication, understanding and willingness of collaboration (e.g. tactical, temporal and communicational obstacles).

In LA technocratic public careers paths' are not as structured as they are in other regions, thus academics are a reservoir to policy making, particularly but no only in social, economic and development arenas. Thus, many researchers transit from academy to policy-making, or combine both activities without major conflicts. Usually they occupy advisory positions, but also directions and ministerial positions.

RO continue to be a reservoir for LA democracies, providing high level analysts an candidates to high level public positions with academic background that value evidence-based decision-making.

In this sense, MercoNet has a rich experience, were many members occupy high level positions in this transit in and out from academy to policy-making (2 finance ministers, current vice-president of the Brazilian development bank – BNDES -, many ministerial advisors and ministerial general directors – Finance, Trade, Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration -, several members of national S&T commissions or councils, etc.).

3.2. Political and institutional contexts that makes interaction easier

In general, the way policy-makers define policy problems (values, openness, and opportunities for dialogue), defines the extent to which research in social science and development would intervene in decision-making. The climate that may favor the dialogue between researchers and policy makers will depend on their perceptions and mutual trust, which is normally achieved by a discrete number of RO.

However, Haas (1992), who coordinated a special issue that analysed the role of 'epistemic communities' in policy formulation, claimed that politically unsettled situations, characterised by complexity and uncertainty, facilitate interaction between a wider range of RO and policy makers, because the latter realises that they need either expert technical support or a wider technical basis to validate their decisions to the electorate.

There are political times when policy-making is not permeable to recommendations by most RO (e.g. due to political closeness or to irreconcilable values). However, quality social research may still be socially relevant either to build support while waiting for more receptive political times or to gain consensus that eventually turns into a new political cycle. In either case it is key that RO devote efforts locally to outreach and dissemination activities for a wide audience.

In polarized contexts, existing in some LA democratic regimes today, independent RO that challenge official social or development discourse or data, face problems to access to public funding and risk to be banned from competitive bidding mechanisms.

In those cases, international development agencies become crucial to maintain independent research quality and capacities in those RO that don't have access to public funding.

Firstly, under complex situations that limit understanding, policymakers risk making choices that do not take into consideration the inter-linkages with other issues. This may have negative repercussion in future performance, which policy makers may want to avoid and therefore the help of experts may be welcome. However, policy makers do not normally accept that their understanding is limited. It may be necessary to arrive to a situation of crisis and shocks that overcomes the institutional inertia and pushes policy makers to consult RO in specific fields. Sometimes, the very information provided by RO, when widely diffused (e.g. through the media) may create such shock that turns policy makers to consult them.
Secondly, in a context of uncertainty, established operating procedures may break down and policy makers may need to seek for advice to replace them. Moreover, as under uncertainty policy power becomes questioned and under threat, political leaders may seek the support of a wider range of technically validated constituencies.

3.3. Political cycles and research relevance

Political cycles in values, ideological orientation and openness imply that sometimes policy makers are more or less receptive to recommendation coming from outside their partisan community or certain type of RO that act as mediators between interest groups aligned to the government and policy making. For example, according to Camou (1998) in the 1980s and 1990s groups of specialists in the creation and distribution of knowledge to policy, called "symbolic analysts" or "techno-politicians" began to play a strategic role in LA societies.[10] In Argentina, this occurred at the same time that most RO on social science were undermined or neglected. When the interaction between RO and policy making is bound to some close group, the influence of RO on policy-making may have negative consequence in terms of the political values of democracy and participation, since a group of elite specialists limits the incidence/power of wider groups' views.

Key challenges for RO and funding agencies are:

i) to identify social needs that can be fulfilled with knowledge production;
ii) to guide research to satisfy those needs without sacrificing research quality and international visibility;
iii) to improve public policy quality and challenge mainstream visions through alternative and long term thinking based on evidence;
iv) to promote further recognition of the value of evidence based research by policy-makers and politicians;
v) to improve applicability of research outputs by facilitating intervention in the policy agenda; and to
vi) strengthen public policies and research impact on development and social goals improving people's life in the short, medium and long-term.

In any case, the fact that social research cannot respond to political demands at certain time -either because of political closeness or because most social RO and policy makers profess irreconcilable values- does not mean that RO research activities are not socially relevant. Actually, the opposite may be true. During those times, RO could attempt to endure consensus on certain topics within the civil society. On the one hand, this may help to create the basis for policy changes in a different political period. On the other hand, this may even create the opportunities for reaching new consensus that

10 For example, in 1988 the main opposition party (Partido Justicialista) formed an Economic Commission with leading role of the newly created center Social and Economic Analyses (CASE). This Commission strongly influenced the design of President Menem's economic policies, whose cornerstones were those of the Washington Consensus. Actors from that RO (technicians and economists) were a kind of mediator between the governing party's political views and interests, officials of multilateral agencies, private firms, unions, financial operators, etc

eventually enables the upsurge of a new political cycle. In either case, it is of paramount importance that RO devote energy to locally-based knowledge diffusion strategies.

In other words, it is worth highlighting that quality research carried out at RO could always find its policy relevance in a future period, when political power becomes more permeable or the mismatch in the agenda of policy makers and that of social scientists is overcome. For example, in the 1990s there was an open disregard of research and particularly social research in Argentina by top politicians. Consequently it was difficult that during that time the research agenda of social science could easily reach the policy demands, and normally, the academic agenda of most RO did not respond to any sort of policy demand. However, some of the research outputs were taken into consideration at a later period, once they had been fairly well accepted by the civil society and in a context of a new political cycle. For example, during that decade some RO (e.g. Center for Legal and Social Studies - CELS -) studied issues related to immigration suggesting an approach based on human rights which was radically different to the dominant one in policy making at the time (i.e. to close up boundaries and to criminalise immigrants). The line of research, therefore, clashed with the political ideologies and values at the time. However, it formed the basis for a new Immigration Law enacted in 2004. [11]

11 As the he Director of Defense Litigation at CELS said "This Law restores all the years of discussion and work of organizations like the CELS, IOM [International Organisation for Migration], UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] and the Catholic Pastoral have been stressing about the need to update our view of the migrant. It is established that the right to migrate is a human right and very strong prescriptions are listed. The interesting thing is that the Law is not only directed to Immigration Office but also to those who could guarantee the rights such as Directors or Managers of Schools and Hospitals." (La Nación, 2011).

4. Conclusions: How to improve the social relevance of research carried out at RO

The fragmentation and heterogeneity of LA RO system, which produces knowledge under different incentive schemes, for different type of constituencies, supplying research outputs of different kind and quality and whose interest in diffusing knowledge locally and/or responding to local demand is not guaranteed by funding schemes, makes it difficult to visualise:

i) How to identify developmental and social needs that could be fulfilled with the production of knowledge -especially when those needs are not internalized or favored by those who have the institutional and market capabilities to influence the policy agenda.

ii) How to guide RO to produce research that respond effectively to those needs without sacrificing international visibility based on competence and excellence in knowledge production.

In turn, even when those difficult barriers of social knowledge production could be sort out, the challenge still remains on how to bridge the cultural and political gap between the community of researchers and that of politicians to make quality research outputs recognised as valuable inputs for policy making.

These concluding remarks present three ideas for discussion about what needs to be changed/stressed at RO –and the extent to which funding agencies could help- to make their research outputs socially more relevant and to facilitate its intervention in policy making.

Ideas for debate:

To promote internal discussions at RO to define values, strategies and methodologies to improve social relevance and political applicability of social research. When development and social problems required alternative solutions and analysis, multi and trans-disciplinarity can strengthen RO capacities to do so.

To improve the interaction between RO and civil society to better understand social needs and to make research outputs more visible and thus politically desirable. This implies direct interaction with civil society groups but also higher efforts in capacity building, dissemination and outreach activities (e.g. participating in forums and publishing in the media). RO may play a role supporting civil society organizations' capacities to engage with scientific knowledge, and to understand better different policy alternatives recognizing their different philosophic and normative approach.

To improve interaction between RO and policy makers by seeking political mediation by social movements or mass media or by attempts to become more institutionalised within the political community. A better understanding of informal influence mechanisms existing in LA may provide additional information on how influence work in this context.

4.1. Promoting internal discussions within RO and funding agencies about values and means to achieve them

RO must assume their responsibility not only in terms of contents of research and its social relevance, but also in terms of how that knowledge can be effectively used and translated into policy-making. This may require a deep questioning and internal discussion by RO and funding bodies about what values they would follow and defend, which may be more easily attained at research NGO given their scale and their looser institutional constraints. However, it would be interesting to be promoted more widely, especially at universities; which have a key role in training new scientists. In fact, ideally these discussions should be articulated thoroghout the RO system by public bodies to improve articulation and integration and they should inform funding schemes.

In terms of contents and research methodology it is important to consider multi and trans-disciplinarity more seriously. This will provide the tools to improve the dialogue -by recognising multiplies forms of knowledge- with wider groups in the society, including policy makers.

4.2. Improving the interaction between RO and the civil society

The civil society, and especially marginalised groups within it, hardly ever turn to RO spontaneously. In turn, as said above, there are not clear incentives for RO to be concerned about the developmental and social needs, and more generally, RO do not tend interact or communicate with a wider audience outside the research community. This may be due to one or more of the following reasons: researchers respond to scientific elites, they are underfinanced and need to seek fresh funds (from international donors, public agencies, private firms, etc.), evaluation schemes do not honour these types of activitie; they tend to do research independently of its uses, they face institutional or cultural constraints to relate to external groups, etc. As a result, interactions between RO and the civil society are usually sporadic, isolated and rely on the personal commitment of researchers or individuals within the civel society.. Similarly, dissemination and outreach activities by RO to make research ouputs better and widely known in the local context depend on individual commitment. As shown above, even the simple tasks of publishing research outputs online is carried out by a minory to RO. Let alone making the communicational effort of publishing results in the press.

However, a close relation with the civil society is of key importance not only to get to know the most relevant social needs, but also to make research outputs widely known which may help to build new consensus for alternative policy making. In other works, social actors may be relevant in the process of knowledge making. As discussed below, they could act as translators between the scientific logic and the political logic by putting pressure on governments. Therefore, one important issue to be solved is to widen the evaluation schemes, both in the academia but also in competitive project-based bidding schemes, so as to include activities of direct interaction with the civil society and also local dissemination and outreach activities in online forums, media, etc.

Key questions for debate:

How to understand better the connections between research on social and economic issues and development outcomes? Policy influence is one way, public awareness is another one. How to build partnerships with a variety of key development actors in doing so?

What are the incentives to promote further engagement between researchers and the broader civil society actors?

How to promote better dissemination and outreach activities by RO to make research ouputs better and widely known in the local context and accessible to broader non academic the public (friendly language)?

How to strengthen researchers and journalists' links?

How to improve researchers engagement in new social media, and what are the best strategies/lessons learned in ongoing experiences with social networks?

4.3. Improving the interaction between RO and policy makers: political mediation and institutionalisation

Policy-making is based to a large extent on non-technical issues around the idea of "who is to get what in society and at what cost" (Haas, 1992). In other words, policy choices remain highly political. Especially contested issues tend to be resolved based on political merit rather than on technical merit.

Therefore, some sort of political mediation is needed not only to capture social needs that do not translate into market or institutional demands but more important to make them openly visible and thus politically desirable. The role of social movements and other organizations of the civil society in RO's agenda setting should be enhanced and intervention in the mass media should be encouraged.

Alternatively, RO may aim at becoming themselves part of the political community. As discussed above, politicians tend to favor recommendations when mutual trust exists. Thus, as condition for a broader acceptance of their beliefs and ideas, it could be advisable that RO attempt some sort of political infiltration into governing institutions. This may go from becoming brokers for transmitting new ideas into decision-making circles (e.g. think tanks), to consolidating bureaucratic power within national administration. There are some options in between, for example, researchers at RO may also aim at occupying niches in advisory and regulatory bodies, or even occupying high level decision-making positions (e.g. Economy – Finance or Social Ministries -). However, this strategy is somehow opposed the need to promote political values of democracy and participation.

Key questions for debate:

- How to build bridges when policy-makers focus on short term demands, and research findings/outputs provide long-term analysis?

- How to provoke policy-makers interest to evidence-based analysis in general?

- How to make research finding on social and development issues more accessible and friendly to policy-makers needs/language/timing?

- What are the most successful products/formats to influence policy-making?

- How to improve researchers and policy-makers communication capacities and channels?

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