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PEER REVIEWS FOR THINK TANKS

edited by Andrea Ordoñez

Peer review still is the most common, valuable and credible mechanism available for researchers to assess the quality of academic work. The principle is simple: other experts in the field are the best qualified individuals to judge the relevance, originality and rigour of a peer's work.

In this series:

"Peer review is highly connected to the "publish or perish" paradigm of modern science. Are the high expectations on publishing responsible for the growing manipulation of peer review processes? These high expectations on publishing are pushing the limits of the system."

ANDREA ORDOÑEZ
Editor, Peer Review for Think Tanks series at On Think Tanks

Peer Reviews for Think Tanks:

This series focuses on a peer review mechanism pilot for think tanks. It has been edited by Andrea Ordoñez based on a small project she carried out with the Think Tank Initiative: a pilot Peer Review System for the think tanks that are supported by the initiative in Latin America. Behind this pilot is the idea that peer review is fundamental for high quality research. However, not all think tanks have the capacity to manage these processes themselves nor have access to adequate peer reviewers in their countries. Can a network offer the solution?

ARTICLES IN THE SERIES:

THE SCENARIO

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"Think tanks, living in the complex settings of academia, practice and policy, often see peer review processes as the mechanism to assess the academic aspect of their work, and also a mechanism to gain credibility."

ANDREA ORDOÑEZ

THE OPPORTUNITY

⌄

"The idea was to provide an opportunity for think tanks to send documents for review without having to worry about finding reviewers and liaising with them."

ANTONIO ROMERO

WHAT TO DO

⌄

"Peer review processes are supposed to ensure that research papers are consistent: that an appropriate methodology is used, that conclusions presented are backed by the research undertaken, and that other relevant knowledge on the subject is correctly acknowledge (basically, a good literature review)."

ANDREA ORDOÑEZ

Peer review: experimenting with think tanks

BY ANDREA ORDOÑEZ

At the end of 2013, I started a small project with the Think Tank Initiative (TTI): a pilot Peer Review System for the think tanks that are supported by the initiative in Latin America. This idea, born originally at the first global meeting of the Initiative, came to life in the last months. Behind this pilot is a spirit of maximizing the value of being part of this community of institutions.

Peer review still is the most common, valuable and credible mechanism available for researchers to assess the quality of academic work. The principle is simple: other experts in the field are the best qualified individuals to judge the relevance, originality and rigour of a peer's work. The concept has attracted others, and there are those who suggest transferring it to other arenas, with initiatives now available for government officials to exchange reviews with other countries' colleagues (for example, the African Peer Review Mechanism).

Given the centrality of the peer review process in academia, there is much debate on how relevant it is, if it is really improving the research process, and if other ways of assessing research should be developed. Think tanks, living in the complex settings of academia, practice and policy, often see peer review processes as the mechanism to assess the academic aspect of their work, and also a mechanism to gain credibility.

What can think tanks learn about the peer review processes for their own work? What are the specific needs of think tanks when it comes to reviews? Are there special considerations to be taken into account? How do researchers and reviewers react to a peer review process? [Editor's note: CIPPEC has an internal peer review process that is worth looking at.]

This series, devoted to the implementation of the peer review options for think tanks, seeks to shed some light on these concerns. It is based on work with eleven think tanks in Latin America, who submitted eighteen products to be reviewed. The process involved carrying out a scoping study of what think tanks currently do to assess their work, the revision of their knowledge products, and the systematization of feedback from the

researchers and the reviewers on the system. This series is a work in process; the idea is to gain as much information as possible, along with comments from others who might be interested in peer review processes to enrich future interventions.

The series includes the following articles:

- **The donor perspective: why support a peer review system?** Antonio Romero, from the TTI in LA will share the ideas behind TTI's decision to support this pilot as well as their expectations of the process.

- **What is the role a peer review system plays in the think tank context?** This post will dissect the concept of peer review: What is it? How does it work? What are their advantages and shortcomings?

- **Is Research from Think Tanks Really Different**? This post summarizes the findings of the scoping study: what are the types of knowledge products think tanks produce, and what type of peer review, if any, do they use? At the end of the day, how different are think tanks from universities?

- **Peer review and training of young researchers** – Horacio Vera, a junior researcher at INESADshares his perspectives on the peer review process and how to improve it.

- **(Re)Creating a culture of peer review** – Patricia Ames, research director at IEP shares the challenges of peer review processes for think tanks.

- **Perspectives on the peer review system** – This post summarises the key aspects of the evaluations by authors and reviewers.

- **Lessons from Peer Reviewing among Think Tanks**– the way forward.

I am really eager to hear what researchers at think tanks have to say about these findings. I hope that some of the questions we raise throughout the series inspire us to further discuss the nature of the work think tanks carry out and if a peer review process has a role to play in these settings.

This series was edited by Andrea Ordoñez as part of On Think Tanks' Guest Editor initiative. IIf you are interested in being a Guest Editor please get in touch.

Our expectation was that this mechanism would encourage think tanks to consider the potential benefits of establishing a formal peer review system for their institutions.

ANTONIO ROMERO

The donor perspective: why support a peer review system?

BY ANTONIO ROMERO

Antonio Romero is the Program Officer for Latin America in the Think Tank Initiative.

Sitting at the interface between research and policy, think tanks face the question of what makes excellent research. This is not an easy question to answer. As noted in a report on research excellence evaluation by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), there are various definitions for research excellence. There is also disagreement on the quality dimensions by which research should be evaluated. This makes it difficult to address a related question: how can think tanks enhance the quality of their research?

This is a question that the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) grapples with, as it seeks to promote research excellence among the institutions it funds. The TTI is a multi-donor program dedicated to strengthening the capacity of independent policy research organizations in the developing world. The Initiative currently provides 48 think tanks in 22 countries with core, non-earmarked funding. This support allows the institutions to attract, retain and build local talent, develop an independent research program, and invest in public outreach to ensure that research results inform and influence national and regional policy debates. This core funding is combined with dedicated capacity development in three broad areas: research methods and skills, policy engagement and communication, and general organizational effectiveness. The Initiative also supports peer-to-peer review, learning and exchange.

The peer-review challenge

In considering capacity development modalities aimed at enhancing research quality, peer review emerged as an interesting possibility. Simply put, peer review is a process through which research documents are reviewed by other researchers in order to provide authors with useful feedback. Conversations with some executive directors of TTI think tanks in Latin America suggested that peer review was considered a valuable tool for enhancing research quality. However, not everyone agreed that peer review was necessarily appropriate for think tanks. The main issues tend to be the difficulty in finding external reviewers and the time it takes for reviewers to provide feedback. The latter was

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particularly problematic for some executive directors. They argued that investing time in peer review was often incompatible with the urgency to publish results in line with policy timing.

Despite these challenges, Latin American grantee think tanks increasingly started to adopt different peer review arrangements:

- One think tank began to use peer review on a sub-set of its research production, and to pay external reviewers for their time. The executive director of this think tank argued that paying reviewers made it easier to enforce deadlines.

- Another institution formalized a peer review system through a research protocol that established mandatory internal peer reviews. In this case, reviewers were drawn from within the institution, with an aim to draw from external reviewers in the future. This institution developed official peer review guidelines which outlined the review process, assessment criteria, and expected outputs.

The solution

As these innovations began to take shape, TTI made available to its grantees a pilot peer review mechanism. The idea was to provide an opportunity for think tanks to send documents for review without having to worry about finding reviewers and liaising with them. An independent consultant –Andrea Ordoñez– was charged with implementing the peer-review mechanism. Her responsibilities included matching research documents to suitable reviewers, liaising with reviewers and researchers, and ensuring deadlines were met. Our expectation was that this mechanism would encourage think tanks to consider the potential benefits of establishing a formal peer review system for their institutions. The jury is still out on whether this activity will spur new peer review arrangements in participating think tanks. But the value of the reviews conducted through this exercise is reflected in participants´ feedback. The upcoming posts in this series will discuss in detail the design of this peer review mechanism and what participants had to say about it. If you want to learn more – stay tuned!

I have seen various reactions to peer review process, so let´s start with the bright side: the positive reactions of those that found really good feedback and useful suggestions by reviewers. Indeed, having a second eye on one's work, and I should add an expert eye, is an exciting opportunity to get advice on how to strengthen the research output.

PATRICIA AMES
Author, (Re)Creating a culture of peer review

Peer review processes are supposed to ensure that research papers are consistent: that an appropriate methodology is used, that conclusions presented are backed by the research undertaken, and that other relevant knowledge on the subject is correctly acknowledge (basically, a good literature review).

ANDREA ORDOÑEZ

What are peer review systems?

BY ANDREA ORDOÑEZ

As shared in the introductory post, the principle of peer review is simple. Its implementation, however, is not at all that straightforward (Review an interesting timeline of the concept).

Objectives and limitations

The first critical question is why we carry out peer review processes. There is not one answer for this, so let's explore some of them.

Gatekeeping – By filtering and screening material, the peer review system is the way in which journals have traditionally decided on what to publish or what not to publish. The reviewers usually face the following recommendation choices:

- to unconditionally accept the manuscript or the proposal,
- to accept it in the event that its authors improve it in certain ways,
- to reject it, but encourage revision and invite re-submission,
- to reject it outright.

Peer reviews also have a place in grant making processes and academic conferences presentations. At the end of the day, the objective is to distribute limited space, time and resources: not everybody can get funding, get published or present at conferences.

Maintain reputation – It has been argued that peer review processes were popularized by the Royal Society to protect its reputation. Reputation is thus based on the quality of those involved in the review process, which is why being part of a journal editorial board is a highly regarded position among researchers. Furthermore, the decision of publishing or not is not only based on the editor's judgment, but includes that of others.

Quality control – Peer review processes are supposed to ensure that research papers are consistent: that an appropriate methodology is used, that conclusions presented are backed by the research undertaken, and that other relevant knowledge on the subject is correctly acknowledge (basically, a good literature review).

Capacity development – although this aspect is not the main concern of the world of publishing, I believe that receiving input about one's work is a valuable opportunity to

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improve one's work. This usually requires a capacity to interpret and critically analyse comments holistically. Many think tanks I know introduce peer review as a mechanism to support researchers, even when peer review is not used for the previous purposes.

Although the peer review process is a keystone in the academic world, it is not perfect. At the end of the day, the responsibility of the research paper is the authors'. Fraud and plagiarism cannot be detected by a reviewer. A peer review is no guarantee of the validity of the research presented; that responsibility lies with the authors. In fact, Springer recently retracted 120 papers that were actually computer-generated nonsense. Authors can act unethically, and reviewers may not have enough information to judge those actions.

Criticisms of the peer review processes

- Some have argued that peer review processes are biased. Researchers that cite the right authors, that maintain conservative views and follow traditional methods might get more published, some believe. It is hard to assess this, as the peer review documents are usually not public.

- Santiago Basabe recently wrote a great reflection on the bias on 'good data'. This particularly affects countries with deficient information systems. As a result, countries with better data are more studied than those with poor data. Although we want more knowledge of these countries, this bias reduces the interest of researchers, who see their chances of getting published diminished even if their work is methodologically sound with the information currently available.

- The way peer review processes are carried out now delays publication significantly. This, some argue, is detrimental to scientific inquiry and it may have an impact on the diffusion of such knowledge, as authors move quickly into new topics.

- Peer review is highly connected to the "publish or perish" paradigm of modern science. Are the high expectations on publishing responsible for the growing manipulation of peer review processes? These high expectations on publishing are pushing the limits of the system. Researchers are encouraged to create various papers out a research project and longer term processes are discouraged. As Peter Higgs argues, today he might not have the space to do the work that involved studying the Higgs boson in the sixties.

This brief overview of the peer review processes shows how this simple concept, in practice, gets quite complex. This is not meant to discourage researchers from participating in such endeavours but to do so with a critical perspective.

Facing the challenges of becoming a researcher that can impact society is complex. I recognise, for instance, that I still have some trouble choosing research topics that are relevant for policies being implemented or developed.

HORACIO VERA
Author, Peer review and training of young researchers

It does open questions regarding the types of products think tanks produce and how they really differentiate themselves from universities and other knowledge producers. Although I wanted to test new spheres for peer review, in practice, think tanks still value the peer review process in its most traditional form.

ANDREA ORDOÑEZ

Is research from think tanks really different?

BY ANDREA ORDOÑEZ

Before establishing a peer review system for think tanks, it is important to understand what types of knowledge products they prepare. After all, the goal of this project is to serve the specific needs of think tanks. The participating think tanks shared some information on their structure, products, current editorial rules and expectations of a peer review system. The twelve centres from the Think Tank Initiative in Latin America were invited to participate, out of which 11 filled out this survey. Here are the main findings of the survey and what they mean by a peer review system.

Key Findings

- In terms of the structure, most centres have both a Research Area and research protocols which include some sort of peer review. This means that – hopefully – a peer review process could strengthen not only the work of the author who participates but also inform the organizational processes in general.

- In relation to the peer review system that they use, the most common one is an open review system, where both the reviewer and the author know their identity. From my personal experience, this is not surprising: in settings with small local epistemic communities, keeping a double blinded process can be almost impossible.

- These think tanks produce – what I would call – traditional products, mainly: books, working papers and to a lesser extend policy briefs. When asked, for which products the peer review process is more relevant (on a Likert scale from 1 to 5), their scoring followed a similar trend.

- I also explored the idea of carrying out the peer review at three stages of the research process: at the proposal stage, when there is a manuscript ready for publication and after the publication has been finalized as an evaluation. All centres highly value the peer review at the manuscript stage. The proposal and final stage were less relevant.

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Scoring (Likert Scale 1–5)	
Proposal Stage	3.1
Manuscript	5.0
Final Evaluation	2.5

- Think tanks also highly valued that the peer review process takes into account the particularities of each type of output. This was agreed by many to be the most important aspect included in the review process.

So what…

Although this analysis was meant to capture the specificities of think tanks (in comparison to university and others), the results do not show many particularities. These think tanks prioritize producing working papers and books, and see the peer review process as most relevant for these types of products.

I was also testing whether they would be interested in having a peer review process in other stages, and not only the manuscript. In this sense, think tanks were also conservative, prioritizing the peer review process for manuscripts, a similar process to that of academic journals.

Interestingly, centres value having specific evaluation for different products. In this sense, they seem to see themselves as different from other knowledge producing actors and their outputs as needing specific criteria of evaluation. Isn't this contradictory to the fact that they produce 'traditional products'?

In practice

Based on these characteristics the peer review system carried out for think tanks followed these parameters:

- The selected mechanism was that of a **double blind process**. This process is considered by many as the golden standard of peer review. Although I am not personally convinced of this, it was chosen as a valuable addition to the processes that the centres already had in place since many had open processes.

- Each paper was **reviewed by two researchers**: an external reviewer and a reviewer from a TTI think tank in the region.

- The system was opened to **four types of products**: project proposals, book chapters, working papers and policy briefs. Each type of product had a different guideline for evaluation.

- We also accepted products that were **either manuscripts or final products for evaluation**. In the first case, the authors still had a chance to introduce changes to their documents. In the second case it was more about evaluating the final product and receiving inputs for the future.

Although we opened up all the possibilities, think tanks stick mainly to the usual suspects. We received mostly working papers (62%), book chapters (30%) and very few policy briefs (8%). We didn't receive proposals for review. Informal conversations with Executive Directors raised the concerns of sharing a proposal, and the possibility of the reviewer 'stealing' the idea, noting that time frames at the proposal stage are usually very short.

Thematically, most of the papers received were on social issues such as health, education, poverty and inequality. Economic and fiscal issues were the second most relevant with two outliers: one on environmental policy and one on judicial matters.

This is a very small sample of think tanks indeed. But it does open questions regarding the types of products think tanks produce and how they really differentiate themselves from universities and other knowledge producers. Although I wanted to test new spheres for peer review, in practice, think tanks still value the peer review process in its most traditional form.

Informal conversations with Executive Directors raised the concerns of sharing a proposal, and the possibility of the reviewer 'stealing' the idea, noting that time frames at the proposal stage are usually very short.

As a beginner you have an expectation of what your contribution in your field of study could be. Nevertheless, having an aspiration is not equivalent to knowing how to actually get there. In this regard, being part of a network that includes experienced researchers can reinforce ideas that can in fact be the source of your work ten years from now.

HORACIO VERA

Peer review and training of young researchers

BY HORACIO VERA

Horacio Vera is a young researcher at INESAD, who had his paper peer reviewed in the process. He reflects on how the process supported his research capacity.

Those college days when the greatest recognition you could achieve was a 10 in your research paper are gone. I am sure my colleagues starting their career as researchers in social topics have thought the same thing. Facing the challenges of becoming a researcher that can impact society is complex. I recognise, for instance, that I still have some trouble choosing research topics that are relevant for policies being implemented or developed. I think this portrays the weak relationship between policy making process and undergraduate studies curriculum in my home country, as it is surely the case in other places too. The promotion of evidence based policies is just in an initial phase in Bolivia, so it is difficult to understand the practical importance of research.

For that reason, I think that an early participation in peer review processes can bust the research skills gained during college and direct them to policy topics. Insights about the interests of policy makers as well as regional academic community are important towards the progress of one's research. I think these important aspects, as others mentioned in the following paragraphs, are necessary to raise curiosity in research among young professionals.

Last year I had the opportunity to participate in a pilot to implement a peer review system between researchers associated to the Think Tank Initiative. The feedback we received helped us to strengthen the contribution of our paper in the following aspects:

- It helped us to identify key contributions of the document and to discard some ideas that were not clear enough or did not have a strong argument. This is important in the early development of ideas since it prevents from fixating on stubborn arguments.

- It gave us observations related to the style of academic writing, made recommendations about the structure of the document and how the idea being developed could be clearer. I can tell including these changes has worked well

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since our latest presentations of the paper seem to have awakened much more interest on the topic than the first ones.

- We also received advice on the literature review. It is important to have advice on some topics like gender, empowerment, social exclusion, and others that are not exploited very often. So, this kind of advice is important to encourage researchers to explore new trends.

The contributions mentioned above encouraged us to continue with our research.

Nevertheless, peer review mechanisms do not do enough to help researchers participate in public debates on policy issues. Beyond the strictly academic contributions related to the strength of arguments or the clearness of the ideas being developed, I think a peer review system for think tanks should consider other aspects. Here, I identify some key points that could help us go further towards policy impact:

- The reviewers should be chosen from a very diverse pool both regional and professionally speaking. Due to the immense amount of information now available, it is very important that reviewers can support literature review and that can be only done by someone who counts with the experience of analysing a specific area of knowledge in a given context. In a more ambitious perspective, the vertical interaction between novices and experts can help to raise those big ideas that ride ambitious projects. As a beginner you have an expectation of what your contribution in your field of study could be. Nevertheless, having an aspiration is not equivalent to knowing how to actually get there. In this regard, being part of a network that includes experienced researchers can reinforce ideas that can in fact be the source of your work ten years from now.

- It is important to understand the work of think tanks in developing countries as a process that goes from the selection of the research problem to the implementation of policy advice. For this reason, peer review has to take care of every stage. Between the centres that were part the peer review pilot, it has been shown that peer review is most demanded for working papers, book chapters and policy briefs. Nevertheless, the ways in which people consume information are much more miscellaneous. You cannot expect people to read 200 hundred pages of your work; but it is more likely that they take a look at infographics that summarize the main points. In fact, the dissimilarity of experience in communication and positioning strategies among think tanks could be used as an asset in this network. The more knowledgeable centres can give valuable advice to the less so that the process reinforces not only quality but reach as well.

- One of these stages, that I find urgently useful, is advice on communication. Technical language can make ideas simpler and clearer for people with some sort of knowledge even though it is not so helpful increasing their popularity. That is why, it is important the opinion of communication professionals in the review process, so that handier products can be introduced to both public opinion leaders and policy makers.

I would like to conclude by stressing that the most of the part of engaging in policy driven research certainly needs more than it is already written in books. I think it can be compared with learning how to manage a firm. There are personal relationships to be taken into account, technologic specificities of the process, and other know-how intensive activities that probably one does not have the slightest idea about.

That is why I encourage young researchers like me to begin as soon as they can in this practice. The more ideas we share, the more ideas we can get.

The promotion of evidence based policies is just in an initial phase in Bolivia, so it is difficult to understand the practical importance of research.

As a key lesson it is necessary I think that for policy papers the challenge is bigger, as policy contexts are varied and detailed knowledge of each one is necessary to assess the relevance, and not only the rigor, of the output. (…) However, if reviewers are well-chosen, and these issues are kept in mind, policy papers may benefit as much as research papers from reviews.

PATRICIA AMES

(Re)Creating a culture of peer review

BY PATRICIA AMES

Patricia Ames is an anthropologist and a principal researcher at the Institute of Peruvian Studies.

Peer review processes in its current form had been popularized by academic journals in recent years but the underlying ideas that fuel them are in place for a longer time. Indeed, review and critique by other colleagues is part of the process of creating knowledge in the social sciences. Perhaps in the past such processes were more informal than now but they were in place nonetheless.

The experience of my own institution points in that direction: the Institute of Peruvian Studies (Instituto de Estudios Peruanos – IEP) had from its birth 50 years ago, several mechanisms to fuel discussion of ideas, research approaches and results. The best known mechanism was the mesa verde (green table, because of the color of the tablecloth). It was a space that gathered researchers, policy makers, practitioners and activists – depending on the topic – to discuss different types of products: research proposals, research papers, books, policy papers (even public policies!). This oral exchange allowed the researcher to improve his or her final product. Other mechanisms, more similar to current process of peer review were also in place: researchers asked their colleagues at the Institute to read a paper or work in progress and provide opinions, suggestion and even guidance in the case of junior scholars.

With the growth in size of the Institute, although these mechanisms have not disappeared at all, more formal ways of peer review have been introduced at various stages. Thus for internal research competitions we carry out a review process of proposals to determine the winners and to provide feedback. We have gradually moved from internal to external peer review of finalized research products. Sometimes we combine both, as each one has its strengths and weaknesses.

In the last year we have been using double blinded peer review aimed to increase the quality of our main outputs. The opportunity to be part of the TTI pilot on peer review allowed this process to be more international in scope. Although I would focus in this last experience, the wider peer review processes I regularly manage at IEP is inevitable part of my reflections.

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It is helpful!

I have seen various reactions to peer review process, so let´s start with the bright side: the positive reactions of those that found really good feedback and useful suggestions by reviewers. Indeed, having a second eye on one's work, and I should add an ***expert*** eye, is an exciting opportunity to get advice on how to strength the research output.

Some researchers acknowledge that the weaknesses identified by the review were indeed the same they themselves were aware of (but constrains of time did not allow them to work more on this, for example). Also some strength was pointed out by reviewers that authors were not always aware of. The possibility to have international readers also makes this exercise interesting in what can be share beyond borders. Think tanks' credibility depends to a great extent on the academic rigor of the research that backs up its policy recommendations, thus having stronger research outputs helps to maintain and increase think thank' reputation.

It is time-consuming: putting some time aside

Think tanks usually work in a tighter schedule than universities or other research centres. Reports need to be ready sooner rather than later and one of the difficulties with the peer review process is it takes its time: time for the reviewer to read and comment, time for the author to introduce such comments, and them time for making the final product available to the general or specific public.

Most of the projects and consultancies formally end once the final report is handed. Thus, making the extra time for improving manuscripts is not always easy since researchers may be embarked in a new project. One way out of this dilema is to start including time for such processes in our research designs, whilst at the same time finding mechanisms to speed review processes. This is particularly important in bigger institutions, where a centralized system may be too slow but a decentralized alternative may be encouraged (i.e. each project look for internal and/or external readers and feedback).

Not all comments welcome: how to handle bad reviews

Reviews come in many forms: some positive, some negative, some with detailed and useful suggestion on how to solve problems, others with harsh evaluations and little advice on how to proceed. Reactions to such reviews are thus varied, some find reviews helpful, and others find them not helpful at all and deeply disagree with the comments received. I think this is all more intense in think tanks as political issues and positions are at stake. When this happens we encourage authors to express and argument their disagreements. In the process some methodological and theoretical gains appear, and thus the research output still benefits beyond the controversies.

I think that for policy papers the challenge is bigger, as policy contexts are varied and detailed knowledge of each one is necessary to assess the relevance, and not only the

rigor, of the output. Perhaps this is one reason think tanks are more conservative in putting such type of outputs through the peer review process. However, if reviewers are well-chosen, and these issues are kept in mind, policy papers may benefit as much as research papers from reviews.

Creating and recreating cultures of peer review

There is not only one way to discuss and improve research outputs. Current peer review practices are not the first ones, and surely won't be the last. But as they get more spread perhaps it is necessary for think tanks to try and use them, recognizing that other forms of peer review may have flaws, may be too close or bland and thus external views can help and improve our own, ongoing understanding of complex realities. This challenge involves, without a doubt, contesting previous cultures of peer review and the need to recreate the ways we approach knowledge production.

Having stronger research outputs helps to maintain and increase think thank' reputation.

Perspectives on the peer review pilot

BY ANDREA ORDOÑEZ

In the previous two posts by Horacio Vera and Patricia Ames in this series we have learned from the participants in the process what it meant for their personal and institutional capacities. These first hand reflections on the matter complement the evaluation process whereby authors and reviewers assessed the pilot. We had questions that were substantive as well as more logistical. Here are some of the main points gathered from the participants:

- **The process is useful** – Most authors found that the reviews they received were clear and useful and they included the suggested changes. Probably, in many cases this process complements the processes that think tanks carry out internally. But we all know how think tanks day-to-day life goes and how getting involved with our colleagues' work is something we sometimes just do not have time to do. The system is schematic, with comments on: literature review, relevance and the constancy of the arguments, and this might have helped reviewers to provide meaningful comments.

- **More knowledge does not always translate into better comments** – One interesting thing we did was ask the authors to grade the revisions that they received. Each had two revisions. Authors were asked how knowledgeable in their field each reviewer was and how useful their comments were. Interesting, the reviewers that were regarded as highly knowledgeable were not necessarily the ones with the most useful comments. In many cases, the authors significantly valued the comments of someone who was, according to their opinion, not as 'expert'. This is a valuable lesson on how to match reviewers with authors. Experts can have incredibly useful insights on the specificities of the work carried out, of course. But there might also be a valuable space for more 'generalists' that can review a paper within a wider context of development or policy debate, assessing consistency of the argument and other broader concerns.

- **Reviewers need a good amount of time** – As one can imagine, getting reviewers to commit their time is not simple. In our pilot, reviewers had two weeks to carry out the revision. In the evaluation, reviewers were asked to consider how much time they should have. Although the responses varied, it is safe to say that 30 days, twice as long as our original pilot is a better time frame to fulfil the expectations of most reviewers. This is a very important point to keep in mind for pieces of research that are time sensitive, which is the case for various think tank products.

- **Monetary incentives are good, but not enough**. I knew that having reviewers participate was not going to be easy. We wanted to test two options: voluntary participation and paid participation. Therefore, we included a monetary incentive for external reviewers but asked for voluntary participation for reviewers of the participating think tanks. In the case of external reviewers, the monetary incentive was not enough to attract various researchers who declined our invitation. Although many were interested, they just did not have the time. It seems to me that monetary incentives are good in terms of efficiency: once reviewers accepted the invitation, they were, for the most part, timely with their work (there is, however, research suggesting that monetary incentives have a negative effect on reviewers). But it is not enough: recognition, and the opportunity to be part of a 'community' are some of the incentives that reviewers would have liked to see. In the case of internal reviewers, their participation was much more volatile, they took longer to accept the invitation, and once they accepted, most took longer than the agreed upon time. Furthermore, it was harder to match the expertise between reviewers and papers. In some cases we had researchers who volunteered to review but whose expertise did not match any papers in the process. At the same time, for some topics we were not able to find reviewers within the network of think tanks. Given how time-consuming this process became, I suggest not repeating it.

With all these inputs on the process, the following post will summarise some of the most significant aspects to keep in mind for think tanks interested in peer review processes.

Recognition, and the opportunity to be part of a 'community' are some of the incentives that reviewers would have liked to see.

The concept of peer review is based on the concept of peers – researchers with similar competences to those of the authors. However, identifying them in an increasingly complex academic ecosystem is a challenge.

ANDREA ORDOÑEZ

Lessons from peer reviewing among think tanks

BY ANDREA ORDOÑEZ

The peer review pilot was a space to learn about these processes; as with all exploratory tasks, I was left with many questions and also some ideas of things to do in the future. I have no recipes for making a peer review process for think tanks, but I do have some questions that should be answered before establishing the process, whether within a think tank or among various institutions. Also, in the process, other ideas on strengthening think tanks' research capacity have emerged, which are also shared here.

Define the objectives of a peer review system

As has been discussed in a previous post, peer review processes are carried out for a variety of reasons. In this initial pilot we did not have a clear objective for the peer review process. The objective was, indeed, to test a peer review system. But in terms of the objectives of the reviews themselves, these were not clearly stated beforehand. There were conceptions I brought to the design which are worth noting:

- I had an underlying interest in capacity development. Being that this pilot was not aimed at sanctioning research papers, the most important goal for me was to make reviews relevant for researchers and think tanks.

- For some of the outcomes (especially the policy briefs), I also wanted to include policy influence potential among the aspects to be evaluated.

These, of course, are my own perspectives of a peer review process. But if a peer review process is established, either at a think tank level, or among think tanks, these concepts should be more clearly and broadly debated among those involved. If a think tank wants to include a peer review process, I suggest having some clarity on these key points:

- **Objective** – What is the objective of having a peer review process? Be clear about what a peer review process is, and what it is not. Check out some options here. After that, keep questioning your choice: Will the peer review determine what gets publish or not? Will reviews be considered in researchers' appraisals as a component of their performance? Will reviews be used to determining a capacity building strategy within the organization? A peer review process should be alive and evolve with the organization.

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- **Research Quality** – It is also critical to make sure there is some sort of consensus about what will be rated as 'good research quality'. There are many assumptions about what this is in academia, and I think there are even more in the context of think tanks. The Think Tank Initiative's External Evaluation summarizes the assumptions within the program's stakeholders and might be a useful resource for reflecting where you stand on this debate. If anything, start by having this debate among researchers.

- **Impact** – Traditional peer review processes do not consider the dimensions of impact or relevance for policy debates, or the quality of the recommendations. It does not have to be the case that they do assess impact in this manner, but if it is, make it clear from the beginning as reviewers might not be used to this dimension. Let them know before hand that this is an important criteria.

- **Types of research outputs** – In this pilot we tried to categorize research outputs: working papers, policy briefs, book chapters, etc. After all, it is the final product which is evaluated, not the research process as a whole. These categories, however, were not as useful when it came to understanding the purpose and nature of the products. Traditional categories might not really underpin the purpose of a given output. Furthermore, the understanding of what a 'working paper' or a 'policy brief' is might differ substantially between the authors and the reviewers. In these cases, the authors could feel that the reviewer did not understand the nature of their work. It might be necessary to explore new categories of research outputs that really explain their purposes.

Explore who the 'peers' are

The concept of peer review is based on the concept of peers – researchers with similar competences to those of the authors. However, identifying them in an increasingly complex academic ecosystem is a challenge. Maybe in the past the limits between sciences were clearer. Now the academic world is a growing mosaic of disciplines, with much more interdisciplinary work carried out. In addition to this complexity in science, think tanks researchers face the additional layer of relating to policymakers and the wider public.

So who are the peers? Are they the ones with the same academic background? Are they the ones that know the field? Or the ones that know the national policy context? Or is it other think tank researchers that know the challenge of these interactions between research and policy? Defining this might give more clarity to reviewers and authors and increase the credibility of the process.

Let us learn more about what makes a good reviewer

Although peer review is one of the pillars of the academic world it is neither a clear subject of research or of capacity development. Have we learned how to review documents?

How to analyse our own objectivity and capacity to review the work of others? I suggest that more emphasis is given to this aspect of capacity building among researchers. We shouldn't take for granted that this is something all researchers are used to doing or are good at.

To feed this objective of developing the capacity of reviewers, we might need better conceptual and psychological frameworks as well as empirical evidence on how and why peer review processes work. There is a small but growing group of researchers interested in not only evaluating the system but also updating it in the context of a globalized academic world.

Research quality beyond the peer review system

I support peer review processes. In fact, I introduced one at the think tank I worked at before. But I know its limitations, and I am convinced that they are no silver bullet to improving the quality of research in a given institution. Although I keep advocating for the system as a key component of any effort to improve the quality of research, it might not be enough. Here are some ideas on additional activities that could be carried out to support think tanks in the global south.

- Ad hoc peer review processes do not, and cannot, replace those of academic journals. As we have discussed, each journal and discipline has its own specificities. If one of the markers of 'research quality' is publishing in these journals, other strategies are needed. In this case, researchers need to be more involved in their own academic field and better understand how the journals they are aiming at work. This is almost a different knowledge from that of one's own field. Some strategies to gain this knowledge include:

  - **Events with journal editors** – What I would imagine is an event where different researchers could listen directly to journal editors discuss about what they perceive to be the value added of their particular journal. There could be, for instance, round tables with journals within a similar field. The objective is to bridge the gap between those journals and researchers. Researchers in universities, particularly in the North, are much more familiar with connecting with editors and reviewers who may have also acted as their teachers or advisors.

  - **Special Issues** – Another way to bridge this gap maybe to promote special issues within journals, aimed at a specific area of interest or region. These special issues go through an equally rigorous peer review process, but are usually focused on a specific topic or within a specific community. There is a growing interest in including more academic voices from the global south, but more incentives are needed. Special issues are an interesting approach.

- The peer review process does not have the ability to improve a research output if there were significant fallacies in the research process. In the case of younger

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research teams, it might not be enough to have a review only in the stage of the manuscript. Instead, comments throughout the research process might be of use:

- **Continuous mentoring** – One technique worth noting is that of the SIRCA programme that pairs young researchers with senior mentors to accompany the entire research process. In this case the knowledge and expertise of the senior researcher is available throughout the project. This matchmaking process is not an easy task, just as is the case of reviewers, but one where the investment might have higher returns.

- **Working groups** – As described in a previous post, we did find some common themes among researchers supported by the Think Tank Initiative. Maybe creating thematic working groups among researchers in those topics from these and other think tanks in the region could create a valuable community to find reviewers, co-authors, etc.

I am convinced that the debate over what research quality is among think tanks, how to measure it, and how to support it will continue to gain momentum. I am happy that the Think Tank Initiative was willing to experiment with this concept, and hope they will continue to innovate with some new ideas on how to support think tanks in improving research quality.

A peer review is no guarantee of the validity of the research presented; that responsibility lies with the authors.

ANDREA ORDOÑEZ
Editor, Peer Review for Think Tanks series at On Think Tanks

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